

# Daughters of Sons

Victor Chang

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## PART I: \*The Party

The revelers quiet down. People hush each other. The music player is turned off. The lights dim. Word is that her car is approaching the driveway. She could be here any minute. Drink in hand, I make my way to the living room and crouch behind the loveseat, hoping to get a good view. Sitting next to me is Mark and his girlfriend Zoe. I don't remember seeing either of them during preparation. I hear the car pulling in, its distinctive loud muffler drowning out all other noise outside and drawing giggles from the crowd. Everyone listens intently. There are footsteps, voices between daughter and parents. They sound happier than have ever been for the past 2 years. The front door lock jiggles a bit, but eventually opens. All of the revelers jump up and the lights come on full force. "*Surprise!*"

The poor girl is scared out of her wits, but is quickly overwhelmed by hugs and kisses and exclamations of joy. "Lindsay! We knew you'd come back!" "We've missed you so much!" "We never stopped believing!" Lindsay is so happy she begins to cry. I can't squeeze into the huge crowd gathering around Lindsay so I wait until when she is more available.

Everybody is taking their time sharing their stories with her, so it's not for an hour or so until she is only surrounded by a few people. I take this as my opportunity. She is chatting with Mark and her twin sister Mattie when I approach. "Welcome back, Lindsay," I say. Mattie sees me and walks away quickly. Mark acknowledges me with a nod and also leaves to presumably find Zoe. Lindsay smiles and says "Thanks." I figure it was not right to ask her too many details at the moment, so we just chatted about little things.

"Lindsay," I tell her after talking for a few minutes. "This is strange."

"Why?"

"I barely know you, and yet I feel so ... drawn to you. You've been gone for 2 years and there hasn't been a day where I've stopped thinking about you. I don't even know much about you. I mean, I know Mattie, but we've barely had a chance for a proper conversation back in high school. And here we are." I gesture to the surroundings. "You're back and we're talking like we've known each other so well."

"But we do," she said with her eyebrow raised.

“But only through association.”

Lindsay looks confused. “What are you trying to say, Pete?”

“I’m not sure. I feel this intimate connection with you, and I can’t explain it. It doesn’t make any damn sense.”

Lindsay takes a drink from her cup. “Well, are you happy now?”

“I don’t know. Yeah. I guess.”

“Then live a little.”

She takes my hand and we begin to dance as the music changes. Out of the corner of my eye I see Mattie, who looks sad and is sitting on the loveseat alone. “What’s wrong with your sister?” I ask.

“Mattie’s been down ever since I got back. It’s like she’s jealous of all the attention I’m getting,” Lindsay says with a bit of a tone and scoffs. “I mean, I’ve been missing for 2 years and I can’t get a bit of love from you guys?”

A minute passes. Lindsay rests her head on my chest. “You missed me, right? Well, there was no other choice, I suppose. You couldn’t have lived with yourself.” Suddenly she begins to cry. I hear each teardrop splash loudly on the floor like a drum.

“I want to go home,” she whispers.

## **The First Morning: Endless Summer**

It’s at this point that I woke up from the dream, with an immense sadness that filled my insides. It hurt my chest. It was like a weight that wouldn’t budge.

Ever since my return home from college, the days had been aimless. Before college, work and school days were hustle and bustle but life slowed down to a relaxing pace on Saturday and Sunday. Now, every day was like the weekend, as I had not made plans for the summer and my parents were at work for most of the week while I stayed at home and tried to make good use of my time before returning back to college for junior year. Today appeared as though it was going to be a particularly sluggish day. My thoughts were still clouded as the dream dissipated and real life set in. What was the significance?

The house was silent as always on a morning weekday. My parents always liked having a head start on the day by leaving the house as soon as possible to avoid traffic on the way to work. I groggily entered the shower and freshened up. It had been nice having the whole house

to me but the novelty was wearing off. As I ate a quick breakfast I saw a note on the counter from my dad. It read: "Check at the school. Why did this happen?" Beneath the note was an application. I flipped through it. It was a printed job application that I had sent to my high school to work for the Riverdale Summer Music Festival. After glancing through it I noticed that the last page of the application was a rejection letter, briefly noting that I had not been accepted for the counselor position.

This came as a big surprise to me. I had been very close with my music conductor, Mr. Brown, and although I had not been the most outstanding saxophone player I never missed a rehearsal and liked to think that I practiced a healthy work ethic. Mr. Brown had even recommended that I apply to the program ("Working with young kids is amazingly rewarding," he had said. "You see so much of yourself in them as you teach."), and had said he would personally vouch for me. I had decided last summer to just travel and unfortunately did not take Mr. Brown up on the offer, but decided that this summer I would actually try to actively fill my resume with activities. There was no way that Mr. Brown would've rejected my application this year just because I didn't apply last year. There had to be something else working against me, especially considering how involved I had been in the Riverdale music community. Now I understood why my dad had been concerned. Something was amiss.

## Back to Riverdale

Growing up, the high school had always been right across the street from my home. I did have to travel up Cypress Hill and across some of the school fields but compared to most students I was extremely lucky. There was no point driving, and since we only had one car and my dad usually took the car, walking would be the primary mode of transportation during the day. Walking up Cypress again brought back mostly fond memories of friends and love and Frisbee and heartbreak. As I approached the school I noticed that there were still a significant number of cars in the parking lot. Although summer had unofficially started, there were still students finishing up some late exams and teachers packing up their materials. And, of course, there was the music festival that was getting started very soon, something that I hoped to be a part of. I just needed to get this application sorted out as soon as possible.

I checked in at the front office. "Hi, my name is Peter Sansky. I'm here about the application for the music festival." The lady at the desk looked up from her computer. "The applications for the form are here..." she said, picking up a packet and handing it to me. "... but you better hurry, they're due tomorrow."

I reached into my pack and pulled out my application. "Oh, sorry, I meant I have a question about my application. I sent it in last week." I placed the papers on the desk. The lady retracted the application with a bit of a scowl and put it back in the shelf as though she had just

exerted an exorbitant amount of energy. She then glanced through the application and mumbled, “Go see Mr. Brown about this. All applications are screened by Mr. Brown first before being approved by the coordinator. He’ll know what to do.”

“Okay, thank you,” I said, taking the papers back. “Is he in his office?”

“Yes,” she said. She then took a closer look at me, as though observing a specimen. “Pardon me for asking, but aren’t you an alumnus?”

I nodded. “I graduated 2 years ago.” I had never made a point to get to know the secretaries well, but looking again this lady did look familiar. Perhaps she had recently moved to the front desk position.

“Okay,” she said. “I thought the name sounded familiar. I’m Mrs. Loren, Evanna’s mother. She was also in your graduating class.”

I vaguely remembered Evanna Loren and her mother, who I now remembered had previously worked in the principal’s office but apparently had been relocated to the front desk. As for Evanna, we had taken a few classes together but we had rarely talked. “Of course, I remember Evanna,” I said. “Sorry I didn’t recognize you, Mrs. Loren.”

She grinned. “Oh, that’s okay, Pete. If you weren’t a troublemaker, you probably wouldn’t remember me. So it’s a good thing that we weren’t familiar with each other,” she said.

“How is Evanna?”

“Oh, she’s doing great. She loves Wesleyan. She can’t stand being at home. It’s a bit annoying, if you ask me.” She rolled her eyes playfully. “I tell her to get a job here, but she wants to work at Wesleyan. It never ends.” I wanted to leave before she delved too far into the conversation. Luckily she wrapped up sooner than expected. “Anyway, I’m sorry, it’s just that it’s so hot right now and there’s just so much paperwork. Mr. Brown should be able to help you.”

I found Mr. Brown in his office at the cove, which was the nickname all the musicians gave for the semicircular stage where we used to practice. His office was off to the right side. It was a small but charming office full of musical oddities and posters for musicals, both from the school and professional works. When I knocked, he looked up and told me to come in. He hadn’t changed at all since I had graduated. Short and fit, he seemed more like an athlete than a musician, though he always insisted that he didn’t place as much emphasis on fitness as he did on music.

“Mr. Brown!” I greeted warmly. “What’s up?”

“Pete Sansky, I thought you’d never visit.” He said, though visibly less excited than I thought he would be after seeing me. He got up from his seat and we embraced. “What brings you back to Riverdale? Please, have a seat.” He gestured to the chair.

We both took a seat. "I was in the neighborhood and I thought I'd say hi. How is everything in the band?"

He nodded thoughtfully. "Oh, it's mostly been the same. The junior band is full of bright, young students that are very excited to be learning their instruments. The senior band is so full of talent. It's an exciting time." He pointed to the score he was studying. "We're doing Star Wars in the fall, and I want it to be excellent."

I smiled. "That's great, Mr. Brown."

"You're still playing the sax, right?"

"Of course," I said. Mr. Brown seemed relieved. "Actually, that's why I wanted to talk to you today. I wanted to talk about the festival."

"I know. I'm so happy that you applied this year. When I didn't see your application last summer, I was disappointed. I hoped that you would continue to play sax anyway, but this festival is something special, Pete. You get to see the kids demonstrate their chops. It's incredible. You'll be a part of something amazing."

"I'm sorry I didn't apply last year, I was traveling," I said. "But now I want to do it. It's just that," I took out my application. "I got turned down." I handed the papers to Mr. Brown, who took them. He looked shocked.

"That's impossible," he said, flipping through the application. He got to the last page and read the rejection letter. "I recommended you as one of my best students. Why would you be turned down?"

"I have no idea," I said, equally confused.

"I need to have a word," Mr. Brown started but before he could finish somebody knocked on the door. Mr. Brown didn't even have a chance to respond. The woman walked in quickly with a pile of manila folders. "Andy, the next batch of applications is here," she said, plopping the paperwork down on the desk. "We need them reviewed by tomorrow at noon." The woman, tall and slender with a strictly business appearance, then turned to face me.

"Andy, what is he doing here?" she asked. Her face looked hostile.

"Oh, Lauren, this is Peter Sansky, he was one of my brightest students a few years back. We're just talking about his application," Mr. Brown said. "Pete, you know Mrs. Sorenheim. She's coordinating the festival this year. Pete's asking about his application, Lauren. I passed him in the screening process but he got turned down. Do you know why?"

Mrs. Sorenheim, whom I remembered far too well, processed this information and then shook her head. "I can't say that I do, Jack. But we can have a word later." She then looked me

dead in the eye and said, “And you, *you stay away from my daughter.*” She then left before I even had a chance to react.

I was at a loss for words.

Mr. Brown closed the door and returned to his seat. “I’m sorry for the interruption.” He said. It was clear that he didn’t want to dwell on the sudden intrusion by Mrs. Sorenheim, but he couldn’t help himself. “Are you okay? You look a bit frazzled.”

I nodded.

“I don’t know why she was acting that way, but I will have a talk with her later. I apologize on her behalf. Normally she is the most courteous person you will ever meet but today she stepped out of line.” He looked to me for a response but I gave none. He continued. “About the application, I will have it sorted out. You were among the best and brightest of your year...” (This was not really true, but flattering nonetheless) “...and you deserve to be part of the festival. Come back to my office tomorrow morning around this time and bring your saxophone. Auditions for placement are tomorrow.” He continued to speak more about details, but I phased out of it. I could not shake Mrs. Sorenheim’s nasty tone and demeanor. *Stay away from my daughter.* It was her. She must have been the one that turned down my application. Final decisions about mentors must have gone through her and her stamp. And this rejection made sense, because she clearly still hated me. Mr. Brown’s personal recommendations clearly didn’t make as much of an impact as he thought they did.

“Pete? Are you there?”

I snapped out of my trance. I nodded mindlessly.

“Listen, Pete.” Mr. Brown folded his hands as though he were preparing to say something important. “I know what you’re thinking. And I want you to know something. I don’t understand what just went on between you two, but I assure you that nothing but merit and talent will ever play a role in our decision making.”

I agreed, but I wasn’t sure I believed it.

“Well, until tomorrow, Pete.” That was my sign to leave.

I had originally planned to visit some other teachers but this unpleasant encounter put a damper on my spirits. I instead headed straight home, the previous encounter still lingering like a bad taste in my mouth. Why had Mrs. Sorenheim talked about her daughter, who I hadn’t spoken with in two years and was studying abroad in Australia?

As I traveled down Cypress Hill, I thought about the dream and Lindsay again. I recalled one of the very few times that I had seen Lindsay by herself and not surrounded by a group of hopeless admirers. I had been walking to school when I spotted her walking in the opposite

direction, back towards the main road and away from school grounds. We acknowledged each other briefly before parting ways. In that moment, I had seen something I had never seen in her before. It was loneliness, a desire for belonging. She seemed vulnerable. And it was exactly like how she appeared during my dream, curious for a girl who was usually the center of attention.

I tried to imagine myself as Lindsay and retraced her steps. I saw Pete walk by in the other direction, shuffling to school with his head slightly down and lost in his thoughts. I reached the bottom of the hill, staring right across the street from the Sansky house. Where was I going? Where am I now? Where will I be?

## An Unexpected Return

When I got back to my house, I saw John sitting on our porch chair with his legs lounged up on the patio table. “You’re up early,” I commented.

John withdrew his feet and sprung up. “I’ve got some juicy news for you,” he said.

I took out my keys and began fitting them in the lock. “You couldn’t text me?” I asked. John Mitchell had always been the loyal friend that would do anything for you, and the fact that he was delivering news in person was not anything out of the ordinary for him.

“No. Actually, I found out a week ago, but it doesn’t apply until today,” he said with a mischievous smile. I didn’t know what the hell he was up to now. I had to jangle the keys a bit before unlocking the door. I walked in and dropped my bag with John following close behind with a grin on his face. Now my patience was beginning to wear thin.

“Are you going to tell me or not?” I asked.

“I will, I will. Where the hell did *you* go so early?” He asked, gesturing to my bag. “We graduated 2 years ago, remember?”

“I needed to double check an application for the music festival.” I felt like I could leave out my encounter with Mrs. Sorenheim for now. “There was a mistake or something.”

“Okay, whatever, man. Anyway, word on the street is that you-know-who is back. It seems as though she’s done healing… and out of the spotlight for now.”

It all made sense now. I understood why Mrs. Sorenheim was so hostile to me earlier. It was because her daughter Mattie actually *was* back in town. Word seemed to be traveling fast. “I thought she was going to stay abroad longer,” I said.

John shrugged. “Who knows? I guess she missed her parents, the hometown, the people, you know. I guess she missed you, too.” He said that last sentence with a bit of a smirk.

“She hates me. Or do you not remember?”

“Old flames die hard,” he said. “Anyway, you want to go say hello?”

I shook my head. “That’s a stupid idea. She probably wants to lay low for now. There was a lot of shit going on when she left.”

“Yeah, like you.”

I punched him in the shoulder hard. He winced. “Fuck off, John,” I said. This complicated things. She probably wouldn’t be too happy to see me at any time, but I knew I had to go talk to her.

“Just thought I should let you know,” John said, holding his shoulder. “Damn, man, where’d you learn to punch like that?”

I ignored him. “Okay, I have things to do,” I said, beckoning to the door. “Come on.”

John was surprised. “What? What do you mean you have things to do? All you’ve done since you’ve gotten back is...” I presented the exit even more clearly with my hands: *get out now*. He got the message. “Well, gee, okay man. There’s no need to say thanks, I guess,” John said as he left the house.

Mrs. Sorenheim was clearly not very fond of me but I had to find a way to get in touch with Mattie. Right before she left the United States to study abroad, she abandoned most forms of communication so she could have some peace and quiet. She discontinued her cell phone line and deactivated her social networking accounts to maintain her isolation while she was in Australia. I had learned all of this through a very brief mail correspondence shortly after she moved. I sent her a letter and she replied with a short message with all the details about her new way of life. I wrote back but never heard from her again. It had started. Now, 2 years later, she’s returned. We needed to talk. I just needed to find the right opportunity when she was just happy enough to see me and not angry enough at me to remember the past and lash out.

By the evening, I had all but forgotten about my ugly encounter with Mrs. Sorenheim. My thoughts were preoccupied with my impending reunion with Mattie and how I imagined things would go. The dream I had last night seemed more relevant than ever. She didn’t want to talk to me. She seemed lonely. But now, in the present day, where she has come back unexpectedly, now was my chance for reconciliation between the two of us.

I had been absent-mindedly jamming on the saxophone when my mom returned home. She always came home first, with the same “Hi, honey, how was your day?” that I was used to hearing since elementary school. I shrugged, neglecting to mention any important details. “Nothing too interesting,” I said.

“Well, guess who I saw today?” she asked as she put down her coat and bags. “I saw Mattie at the market! She was shopping with her mom. I didn’t even know she came back!”

I feigned an uninterested look as I played a few more notes. “Oh.”

Now my mom looked suspicious. “That’s really all you have to say? 2 years and all you have to say is ‘oh’?”

“I heard about it already, Mom.”

“Don’t think about doing anything stupid, young man,” my mom said in a condescending tone. She might as well have been pointing a finger. “Don’t go stirring up any trouble again.” I really hated when she said young man.

“There’s *nothing* to stir.” The conversation was beginning to make me angry.

“Just be careful, is all,” she said as she began to prepare dinner. I shook my head but didn’t want to pursue the conversation further. I had no more enthusiasm to play. I felt a mix of contempt and sadness. I began to disassemble the instrument.

As my mom took out some leftovers, she stopped and turned to me. She appeared to be gathering her thoughts. “It was so strange. I was just doing some inventory, nothing special, and then I see Lindsay walk in. My first instinct was -- she’s alive! I wanted to call the police – *oh fellows, you wouldn’t believe it. Lindsay’s fine! She’s fine!* Then I got a closer look. No... it was Mattie.” My mom seemed distressed. “And of course, that *was* a nice surprise. But still, it wasn’t Lindsay. And now, I can see how Mattie had it bad. Their resemblance is uncanny.”

“Yes, mom, she had it bad.” I said. It was indeed difficult to be the twin of a missing girl, I thought to myself.

My mom turned back to the food. “This might sound ridiculous, but I bet Tim and Lauren would see Mattie every day and just think, even if for a flash of a second, that Lindsay was there, and that their daughter had in fact never disappeared. It must’ve been the worst. I can’t even imagine...” Her voice began to waver. “And now Mattie’s back again, and it’s been 2 years, and I can’t even begin to think what they’re going through just *seeing* Mattie. Oh, my baby’s back! Which one?” I swear that I saw a tear go down her cheek but she maintained a steely demeanor. “Please, Pete. Just stay away from her.”

She didn’t say another word for the rest of the evening.

## The Second Morning: Connected to the Past

I didn't sleep much that night. I kept waking up and falling asleep for brief periods of time no longer than 15 minutes. I found that my thoughts kept wandering back to the dream I had the previous night. I personally did not believe in dream interpretation but it was a fact that dreams reflected recent occurrences and thoughts, both conscious and subconscious. What were the dreams saying about my current state of mind? Lindsay had not crossed my mind in a while (we had all moved on in different capacities) but now that Mattie had returned and everyone was back home, it was as though my brain was trying to tell me something that I didn't know. It couldn't all just be a coincidence.

The previous night had been a blur. My mom was quiet and my dad did not want to bring up the topic again. It had been a stressful time for my family and he in particular wanted to forget the whole incident. 2 years had been sufficient for us and the town to settle down, but now that Mattie was back and a living doppelganger of a missing girl was walking around town, old memories had resurfaced.

After refreshing myself in the bathroom and heading down to the kitchen, I noticed that my dad's belongings were still on the counter. He usually left around this time, but right now he was sitting at the table reading the newspaper, a cup of coffee in hand. The television was running through the latest headlines quietly in the background. As I lingered in the kitchen doorway, he noticed me and greeted warmly. "Good morning, Pete," he said.

I poured myself a bowl of cereal. "Aren't you late for work?" I said as I poured some milk. "It's almost 10."

My dad put the newspaper and coffee down and turned to me. "Pete, I needed to talk to you about some things." He took off his glasses and set them on the table. "Your mother, she's going through a tough time now. You know how emotional she gets. So, just do me a favor and don't open up a can of worms." He gestured to the TV, which was broadcasting a story about the 2 year anniversary of Lindsay's disappearance. *... been 2 years since Lindsay Sorenheim mysteriously disappeared from Riverdale. Police have continued to pursue tips and leads and her parents are still begging for the safe return of...* "I know that Mattie's back and I know how you feel about that, but don't do anything you might regret."

"Dad," I raised my voice unexpectedly, so much so that I almost surprised myself. "Please. Don't lecture me." I immediately felt a tinge of regret after saying it. This was something that I didn't want to talk about with my parents, as it had been the source of much chagrin and heated arguments in the past. My dad, appearing both humbled and furious, subsequently rose from the table, gathered his belongings, and walked out the door without saying a word. This was the last way that I wanted to start the morning. I had planned to finish breakfast quickly and practice for the audition but now I had to worry about my dad. When he

was upset he would not speak with me for days and it always felt like the worst kind of punishment. There had been a period back when Lindsay's disappearance blew open when my dad and I did not talk for almost a month. I had not been acting in my best judgment then, and I did not plan on acting similarly now. I had to make it up to him somehow. I figured that getting the festival application mix-up settled would be a start. I quickly finished my cereal.

After practicing scales and sight-reading for a half hour, I was about as ready as I would ever be. I had lied to Mr. Brown about still playing regularly. Although I did play in the jazz band at college I did not play nearly as frequently as I had done in high school, and I only hoped that he did not notice. I packed my saxophone and my bag and headed back to school.

When I passed by the front office, Mrs. Loren greeted me warmly. "Are you here for auditions, Pete?" she asked. "I'm glad to see that you got the application sorted out. I know Mr. Brown would love to have you aboard." She gestured to the audition schedule on the desk. "You were last minute, so I think he penciled you in last. You have..." she glanced at the clock. "...an hour before your audition. Just go to his office around then and he'll be ready for you." It was probably the first time since high school that I had been early for an audition or rehearsal. "Thanks, I'll just sit tight for now," I said.

"You can go practice in the auditorium if you like," Mrs. Loren said. "Oh, and you know what?" She pointed her finger up as though she had just made a startling revelation. "That reminds me. Evanna is here! She's working on the summer issue of the school newsletter down in the writing center." I wasn't entirely sure how the two statements were related. "She wanted to speak with you."

"Evanna wants to talk with *me*?" I said. I sounded like I had never expected anyone to want to speak with me. But it was strange nonetheless. We had barely exchanged a dozen words when we had gone to school. Why did she want to speak with me now?

"Yes, she specifically said 'Pete Sansky, the boy who was in my year.'"

"Okay, I'll go say hi," I said, and thanked her again.

On the way to the writing center, I walked by the teacher lounge where I saw two teachers chatting behind a window. Mrs. Sorenheim was talking to a guidance counselor. She didn't see me. She looked very proper and was dressed very traditionally in a stereotypical teacher getup that looked as though it were from the 1960s. She had always been a stickler for the rules, but I heard rumors that she had gotten stricter recently. She looked up and caught my eye. She didn't react, but only continued to listen to the other teacher. I didn't linger. I walked away quickly.

The rest of the school hadn't changed in the 2 years since I had left. The vending machines still served salty and fatty snacks, the pool table in the senior lounge was still missing a

leg, and the brick outside of the lunchroom still jutted out just enough that it made everyone trip slightly. The writing center, which was just a few paces from the lunchroom, was a larger classroom with separate workstations for anyone who needed writing guidance. When I got there, it was empty except for a teacher I did not recognize and Evanna. I knocked on the doorframe gently and both of them looked up from their work. “Can I help you?” The teacher started. Evanna beamed and said in a half-whisper to the teacher, “You don’t remember Pete?” Suddenly he looked embarrassed and held his head in disbelief. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe I didn’t recognize you, Pete. You’re friends with Mattie, right?” He said.

We were friends, sure. “Yes,” I said.

“It’s nice to see you again. How’s college? It’s a change in pace from high school, right?” He took on an overly friendly tone to compensate for his error earlier.

I nodded. “It’s cool,” I said simply.

There was a bit of a silence. Evanna eventually broke it. “Mr. Lin, I’m going to catch up with Pete. Is that okay?” she asked.

“Of course, yes, please,” Mr. Lin said. “It was nice to see you, Pete.”

Evanna got up from her computer and led Pete outside into the hallway. She raised her eyebrow. “That was awkward,” she said. “I wasn’t sure he’d remember you.”

It was strange to see Evanna talking to me like we had been friends in high school, because that certainly hadn’t been the case. “Yeah, I never had a class with him,” I said.

She scoffed. “The school’s so small, he should know. Hold on a second.” She took out a hairband and let her hair fall. She began to hastily rearrange it into a bun. This was the first time that I had ever seen Evanna close up. She had marked features, with a distinctive chin and outlined cheekbones. Her eyes were strikingly hazel. When she was finished with her hair, I looked to the sides to pretend that I hadn’t been looking. “Anyway,” she began, “You must be wondering why I wanted to talk with you.”

I feigned slight disinterest. “Yeah,” though I was in fact quite interested.

“Well,” she started pacing slightly so I followed. “I’m sure you’ve heard by now, but Mattie came back from Australia. And here’s the thing: I’m studying journalism and I want to be a reporter or a writer. I’ve always been really interested in the Lindsay Sorenheim disappearance and I know there was lots of emotions and drama all around Riverdale when it exploded, so I avoided the whole situation that time because the national news was all over that.” We reached the trophy case, which displayed some of the rare sports trophies that our school had achieved. She studied her reflection in the glass casing. “Naturally it blew over and things died down. When I went to college, I was still interested in the case. I kept up with updates, followed clues

and tips, checked her Facebook wall, the usual. I didn't get anywhere, and obviously neither did the police. I was sure someone was hiding something, but I couldn't prove anything."

She turned to me and folded her arms in an almost disapproving way. "I kind of forgot about the whole thing until Mattie just appeared out of the blue a few days ago. It'd been a year or so since I looked at the case, but her return sparked my interest again. Now, Mattie and I aren't as close as ... well, as close as you two had been." I didn't like her tone. "But when she got back from Australia, we did talk a bit." She stopped. Where was this conversation going? What was her interest in this?

"I knew that asking about Lindsay would be a touchy subject, but I figured it's been 2 years and that she's moved on. It turns out that I didn't even need to bring it up. One of the first things that she said was if they found Lindsay yet. I was ... surprised that she didn't know already. She kept herself off the grid in Australia and I guess she's really moved on. It was so weird that she asked about it like that, as though it was just a piece of business or something."

I was not surprised that she didn't know about any updates on her sister's whereabouts. 2 years away from Riverdale and you can forget the past, it seemed. But I still didn't see the connection to me. "Evanna, what's this got to do with me?" I pushed.

"Well, after I told her that Lindsay was still missing, she said '*I still think Pete had something to do with it.*'" Now she looked right at me. "Want to explain what that means?"

I suddenly felt my head spin. Mattie *still* thought I had something to do with Lindsay, as though implying she accused me in the past? That never happened. She would never have done something like that, nor would she do it now.

"She didn't say that. It's not like her at all," I said.

"Well, that's what she said. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

"She's lying. I had nothing to do with that at all. I made a statement to the police a long time ago..." I had been one of the first persons of interest, being the sister's boyfriend. "... and that was it. How could she accuse me of something like this? That's just not her at all." Now I sounded desperate and pathetic. I hated myself.

"Well, you two didn't part on the best of terms. Maybe she had time to reconsider the situation in Australia," Evanna said in a slightly interrogative manner.

"No." I shook my head in disbelief. "I need to talk with her. She can't just throw my name around like this."

"I don't think her parents will let you anywhere near her."

“I know!” I said in a raised voice that surprised even me. My voice echoed through the hallway. Mr. Lin appeared in the doorway of the writing center. “Is everything okay?” he said.

“Fine, Mr. Lin, things just got a little heated,” Evanna called back. Mr. Lin, clearly still concerned, told us to keep our voices down and went back inside.

Now it was my turn to be accusative. “Look, I don’t know what your angle is, bringing this up, but this is not going to happen again. I had nothing to do what that, I didn’t do anything to her, and that’s the end of that,” I said. “Are we done?”

“You didn’t do anything to whom?” She said.

I shook my head. “I have to go.”

“Wait.” Evanna started, blocking my path. She looked regretful now. “Come on, I’m just trying to find out what happened. And I’m looking out for you. I wouldn’t have told you otherwise. You think I would’ve told you if I thought you were guilty of something?”

I had enough of this conversation. “I have to go,” I repeated, and then left.

The next half hour waiting for my audition was a blur. I vaguely remember sitting down in the auditorium, halfheartedly practicing my saxophone in a daze, but my head was spinning so much that I considered postponing or even cancelling the audition. However, I didn’t want to disappoint my dad or Mr. Brown for that matter. I kept thinking about what Evanna said. I really couldn’t believe that Mattie would say something like that about me. What if she went around slandering me? All it would take was a rumor. I needed to set things straight with her as soon as I could.

I checked my watch. It was time for the audition.

When I entered the cove, I saw Mr. Brown sitting on a student’s chair and not standing at the podium. There was an empty chair next to him, the hotseat without a doubt, and a large music stand. When I came in, he smiled and gestured to the seat. “Pete, I’m glad that you could make it. Please.”

I set down my folder on the stand and sat down in a comfortable position with my instrument. I had played the solo piece in college and didn’t feel the need to practice it much, but when I actually opened to the pages themselves it suddenly seemed very foreign to me. I was preparing myself to play some scales when Mr. Brown stopped me.

“Hold on, Pete,” he said, giving me a pat on the back. I chuckled nervously. “I guess it’s been a while since you’ve auditioned. We have a new policy here: the solo comes first, before scales now. I figured that it is the meat of the audition, and that it makes sense to let out all your energy on the first go.”

Play the piece first? That wasn't going to work. I never did it that way. It was always scales-solo-sight reading, and never any other way. "Mr. Brown, I'd really feel better if I played my scales first," I said. "It's just the way I'm used to."

He nodded his head slightly. "You know what, Pete? It's fine. Let's do it the old way."

Now I felt guilty. "If you really prefer to do the piece first, then I can do that."

"No, that's quite okay. We can do whatever makes you feel more comfortable."

"Well, why is it a policy if we can just do it however we like?"

"You didn't know about the policy."

"I don't want an unfair advantage, though," I said.

Mr. Brown was unfazed. "Peter. I want you to play. Please don't waste my time."

I felt disappointed with myself. This was not like me. Why was I acting so rudely? The whole situation with Mattie was putting me on edge, no doubt, but that was no excuse for my behavior. It was even worse seeing Mr. Brown act so coolly. I wanted to get a reaction out of him. I wanted to make him angry, I wanted him to yell at me and tell me to focus and practice more and get my shit together. I needed someone to tell me what to do. Otherwise, I was lost.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Brown. I can't do this." I got up and grabbed my music. My head was throbbing violently. I could barely stand straight. "I'm not feeling well."

"Pete," Mr. Brown stood up. "You are a very talented and passionate musician. You have great potential, so much so that I will vouch for you and give the very best recommendations." Then he pointed at the door. "But if you leave this room right now without playing your piece, I can't give you a position at the festival. I have other students waiting and I know they'd love this spot as much as you would."

"I don't even play that much anymore. I'm not as good as I used to be. I never was any good. It's the truth, Mr. Brown, I was average at best. And you know that."

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On the way out of the school, I passed by administration where I saw Evanna talking to her mother quietly. I walked quickly to avoid their gaze but Evanna looked up at the moment and noticed me through the glass panes. "Pete, wait!" She was out in the hallway a second later. "Look, I'm sorry about before. I didn't want to come across as though I was accusing you. But I just want to know what happened."

"The point is that no one knows what happened," I said. "Or do you not remember that?"

“No, I mean...” She struggled to form words. “I just want to know what kind of role you played in this whole thing. I know Mattie is probably flustered and a little upset about coming back to Riverdale after all these years, and she’s most likely just throwing your name around, but she seems to be leading on that there was something else.”

“Well, I *was* the sister’s psychotic ex-boyfriend.”

“Oh, come on, Pete!” She was clearly frustrated now. “Like I said before, if I really thought you did it, I would’ve gone straight to the police. I get that you might be hesitant to talk to me because we hardly knew each other until today. But you have to believe me, because this could be bad.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” I said firmly. “I *rarely* spoke to Lindsay, and if I did it was only when I went to see Mattie and she was around. Are you happy? Did I answer all of your questions?”

She shrugged. “This is about you. I’m not the one that could be in trouble here.”

“What the fuck is your interest in this, anyway? Is it for a piece? You want to get the scoop into the infamous unsolved case of Lindsay Sorenheim or something?”

“No. I would never write about it. This is for me. I used to be really close with Lindsay, remember?”

I had completely forgotten about that. Nobody knew exactly why they stopped being friends back in the day. I didn’t want to pry further. “Right, sorry about that.”

“It’s okay, but thanks.” She said, looking over my shoulder briefly to presumably check on her mother. “Listen, I have to go. I can’t believe I’m still working on the newspaper even after I graduated. But Mr. Lin said he needed help wrapping up the final issue before summer, so I couldn’t turn that down. If you want to talk more, here’s my cell,” she said, handing me a piece of paper. And then she did something I did not expect: she stared at me with a smirk, clearly amused. “You know, I feel as though our paths should have crossed more often, Mr. Sansky. Look at all these *connections* we’re making now!”

## The Underground

“Hey, dude.”

There were sounds of sleepy mumblings on the other end. “It’s not time to wake up yet.” John uttered. “Why you do this, man?”

“This is serious, man. It’s bad,” I said.

“But it’s so *early*. Why you do this?”

“Listen!” I felt my voice rise steadily. There was no one on Cypress Hill except a small crowd of runners and bystanders on the track at the bottom of the hill. They couldn’t hear me, but still, I didn’t want to get used to raising my voice to make a point. “It’s about Lindsay.”

There was some more shuffling. I heard his dog bark loudly, probably wanting some food. “Yeah, okay, hold on!” I heard John yell at his dog. “What do you mean it’s about Lindsay? And who did you hear this from, anyway? And *why did you wake me up so early?*”

“Dude, it’s *noon*. I heard it from Evanna Loren. I talked to her today at the school.”

I heard the sound of dog food clattering on a metal bowl. “Evanna? Lynch? Why would she want to talk to you?” John said.

“We had mutual friends. Remember that she was friends with Lindsay?”

Silence on the other end, no doubt John was deep in thought. I heard a snap of fingers. “Oh yeah, I remember now. She and Lindsay and …” He caught himself. “....Rachel. They used to be best friends, back then. Jeez, that’s an unpleasant memory.”

“I know.”

“Okay, so what happened? What’s this got to do with Lindsay?”

“She told me that she wants to know more about Lindsay’s disappearance and if I had anything to do with it.” I started, but John cut me off before I could go any further. “Wait, what? Evanna thinks you played a part in that?”

“No. It was Mattie who told Evanna that she believes I ‘still’ had something to do with Lindsay. I don’t even know what to make of that. It’s like she thinks I abducted Lindsay.”

“What the fuck?” He sounded genuinely pissed. “Mattie would never accuse you of something like that. Evanna’s lying.” He snapped his fingers again. It was another revelation. “She’s that journalist chick, right? She did all that reporting in high school. Wrote for the paper. I *bet* that she’s digging for a story or something and wants to get a reaction out of you. I bet she never even talked to Mattie, am I right?”

I had considered the possibility. This girl, who I had rarely spoken to at all in high school, appears out of the blue and just happens to know I was coming to Riverdale today. Perhaps she had a secret agenda I didn’t know about. She did speak, at first, with the attitude of a reporter. But perhaps she was just trying to find out more about a lost friend. I didn’t know what to believe.

“Right, Pete? Are you there?” John said.

I had blanked out. “Um, yeah... but she says she’s doing it for personal reasons, for Lindsay. I don’t know what she honestly expects to find after 2 years. Anyways, the point is that I know that doesn’t sound like something Mattie would do, but maybe she did, and that worries me.”

“But Pete, that’s not Mattie. And besides, we hardly know Evanna! She just appears out of thin air and says Mattie is accusing you. It sounds shady to me, dude.”

I heard the bystanders in the bleachers cheering a runner who was dashing for the finish. I began to walk away from the commotion in the field to find a quieter spot. “I need to talk to Mattie and straighten this out, but I can’t. I saw her mom yesterday and she still wants my head after all these years.”

“Oh, come on, you still buy this?”

“John, what if Evanna *isn’t* lying?”

“Fuck me, then. I don’t see it.”

“Come on, I’m assuming the worst,” I insisted.

John sighed. “Well, first of all, did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Did you abduct Lindsay?”

“That’s not even funny, man.”

“Then what are you worried about?”

“I ... I just don’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

John scoffed. “People don’t change their minds about these things. I’m sure there are people who still think that you did do it. One person’s ‘supposed’ comment, even if it was from Mattie, is not going to do anything. They’ll still think it was you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“This is all pointless, anyway. It probably didn’t even happen. So tell me: why exactly did you call me?” I could sense his frustration now.

“You got some of those, ahem, insider connections, right? Can you find out what the word is? Small town like this, word can spread fast and I need to know what’s up.”

“Okay, first of all, did you just say you want me to find out what the word is? Like on the street? What is this, a drug operation? Second of all, I don’t have *insider* connections, I just

know people in the underground. And third of all, the key word is *knew*, because that shit was a few years ago. I don't even know if it still exists."

"I'm sure it does. The underclassmen must have carried on the traditions."

"Okay, Pete. We went to the same high school, right? Do you even *know* what the underground is?" John asked. I had to admit, I didn't really know. Despite all my years at the high school, the underground had always been a mystery to me, and it was supposed to be that way except to the people involved in it. John always had the connections to the underground but was not directly involved in operations, or at least that's what he had told me. He did some things here and there but he never told me what it was about and I never asked. So naturally, I said, "No. You never told me, and we're not supposed to know."

John laughed. "I know, man, but come on, traditions? I can only say this now that it's been 2 years since we graduated, but we didn't have *traditions*. It was just us fucking around and making things secretly happen to appear like we were in control of the school and the community. So..." John said, preparing to make the big statement. "I don't understand why you would want to know what's going on in the underground if it's a sham."

"How would you even know? You weren't in it," I said.

"I did enough to see what was going on," he defended. "I *observed* enough to see what it really was."

"The underground was the first to break the news about Professor Higgin's affair and when Harry Bernstein was doping on the football team. They know what's going on," I said. I had remembered these events specifically because it had been my (and everybody else in my year) first introduction to the power of the underground.

"That was sheer luck. You don't believe they have, like, magical powers and can predict what's going to happen and what's going to be the next big scandal?"

"No, but I believe that if something happens because of this, they will pick it up."

"Pete, Pete," John said. "You're overreacting to one person's comment which probably didn't happen because somebody was lying. There's no point. Here's what's going to happen: I'm going to ask around, *if* it even still exists, and then I'll find out that no one even remembers who you are, much less have heard about this rumor. It won't tell us anything and it won't accomplish anything."

"Do it for me, John. *Pretty please?*" I put on my disgusting sweet voice just for him.

There was a silence. "Fine, just don't use that tone. Ugh. What do you want me to do?"

"Can you get in touch with the ringleader? I don't know who it is."

“It’s not really a secret anymore. Everyone knew it was Mark.”

“Mark Findelay?” I asked. “When did he say?”

“Well, you don’t follow these things, I assume. A few months after Lindsay disappeared he announced himself as the leader. It was no surprise, really. I supposed that he didn’t want to appear to the cops as though he had any secrets, because he was under a lot of fire that time, remember?” I did. It had been the only time I had seen Mark Findelay actually caving under pressure, his usual demeanor abandoning him when faced with authority. “He dropped out of college last year,” John continued. “He might be back in the scene. Just saying, I didn’t leave on the best of terms and if I just reappear and start asking questions, it would look mad sketch.”

“Oh, come on,” I pushed. “You said yourself it’s not even that serious. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Don’t say that,” John said rather adamantly. “I’ll do it. But you owe me.”

## The Second Evening: The Lull, Part I

As I approached the house, a car passed by with the trademark loud muffler rumbling. I quickly stepped behind a tree, providing lousy cover. I saw the car pull into the driveway. The engine was cut and a man exited the car. It was Dr. Peter Sorenheim, local dentist of many and always-father of two. As the gate closed, he stepped out of the car and walked into the house.

Despite the tremendous wealth of the Sorenheims, their house had never particularly stood out. It was an old stucco house that looked like something out of New Mexico or the wild west, but had all the decorations of a modern house. It wasn’t even the largest house on the block, but it was certainly the best kept thanks no doubt to Mrs. Sorenheim’s attitude towards cleanliness. The Sorenheims didn’t bother with extravagant flourishes despite their socioeconomic status, and after their daughter disappeared, they certainly wanted less attention. Looking at their house now, it certainly didn’t look as pristine as it had in the past.

I looked at the second floor corner bedroom. It was Mattie’s old bedroom, vacant for 2 years. The curtains rustled. I caught a glimpse of a girl.

People always found it uncanny that a twin went missing in Riverdale. Everyone claimed they know which one was Lindsay and which one was Mattie. As for me, well, I should of all people be able to distinguish the twins. And yet at that moment, I swore that I saw Lindsay in the window. My brain was so busy trying to comprehend what was going on that I didn’t even notice Mr. Sorenheim approach and tap me on the shoulder. “Pete?” He asked.

I jumped and turned around. “Oh, Mr. Sorenheim,” I said. “I didn’t see you there.”

“Mattie said she saw you,” he said. He was a tall, lanky man that towered over me with his looming presence. Yet in the many years I had known Mr. Sorenheim I never felt truly *threatened*. He always paled in comparison to his wife. “Pete, Lauren is going to be home soon,” he said. We locked eyes for a brief moment before he turned to walk back towards the house. I turned around and made my way back home, at a loss for words.

At dinner, I didn’t mention my encounter with Mr. Sorenheim. It was probably the last thing I needed to tell my parents. However, the music festival inevitably reared its ugly head and there was no way around it. “Pete, your dad was wondering what happened with the audition? We saw that your application was turned down a few days ago. Did you get that sorted out?” My mom asked.

“I had a word with Mr. Brown,” I said, directed towards my dad but who still would not speak with me. “And apparently it was just some trouble with paperwork. So I went to audition today.”

“That’s very good,” My mom said. “How did it go?”

“I didn’t get it.”

My dad dropped his fork with a clang, promptly stood up, and left the dining room. “Tom,” my mother said, setting her utensils down as well. “Please.” She sighed and followed him into the other room. My dad only knew me too well. He could see through my lies. I could hear snippets of the conversation that my parents were having. My dad didn’t even sound particularly angry, only extremely disappointed. As I picked away at the scraps of my food, I heard the shuffling of steps upstairs. My mom then reappeared in the kitchen. She smiled. “Your father is very tired today. He needs to rest,” she said.

“I’m sorry about the audition,” I said. “I know that Dad cares about this.”

She shook her head. “You know we only want you to do your best.” She took a seat once again. “As long as you did, then there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Can I be excused?”

For the remainder of the night, I knew that I should have felt bad for lying to my parents, but truthfully I was more concerned that my reputation was at stake. I had to find a way to talk to Mattie, although now that she saw me through her window it might prove to be more difficult than I had originally imagined. I also had to hope that John would soon follow through with his promise to get in touch with Mark Findelay. I texted him to remind him but got no response. He was probably ignoring me for now.

My mom knocked on my door and peeked in. “Can I come in?” She asked. I nodded. She walked in and closed the door. That usually meant that she had something important to say that

she didn't want my dad to hear. "Pete, I wanted to talk to you." She sat down on my bed next to me. I closed the texting app on my phone and set it aside.

"Pete, I know that auditions can be challenging," she began.

I sighed. "Come on, Mom, are we seriously going to talk about this?"

"I already told you that I don't care that you didn't make the audition," she insisted. "I wanted to say that I know auditions are stressful. I also know that you want to focus on other things now that you're in college, and that your music has taken a lesser role. My point is that trying hard and failing is okay, but *not* trying at all is different. Last summer, you were traveling and you didn't take Mr. Brown's offer at the festival. I just don't see him not accepting you this year. It's really clear that he sees something in you. Not living up to your potential in front of him is a mistake, Pete."

"I don't want to be a musician," I said.

"I never said you had to be a musician," my mom said. "But I want you to put your all into whatever you are doing, whether it's video games or playing sports or doing homework."

"Fine," I said, crossing my arms. "Are you saying that I didn't today?"

"No, but maybe you did..." She kissed me on the forehead. "... and that's okay." She then got up and left the room.

## \*The House

I am approaching Mark Findelay's house. Even before we reach the front door, Mattie is pulling me away. "Come on, let's just find a nice bar and have a drink," she pleads. "It's so loud in there, Pete." And it most definitely was. The music is playing at full volume and there are voices coming from all directions, both sober and drunk.

Mattie has always been like this, and each time I always insist that we go in for a little bit and then politely leave after she begins to feel uncomfortable. But this time I have a bad feeling and I can't quite place it. I eventually shake it off as jitters, though for what reason I wasn't sure.

"Come on, Mat, it'll be fun," I say. I pull her in for a kiss. She turns away but I can tell she's just nervous about the whole situation. "Stay with me the whole time?" she says, looking up at me with her droopy eyes. I can't help but laugh. She punches me playfully. "I'm serious."

I nod. "I know. I promise," I say. I take her hand.

We don't even have to ring the doorbell when we get to the door, because a couple bursts out and run wildly down the street. They are screaming unintelligibly. I look at Mattie and roll my eyes. She smiles. "Oh," I say. "Your sister's here, right?" Mattie nods. "She got here an hour ago. She always gets to these things first," she says. "Why?"

I don't even know. I shrug. "I was just wondering. Shall we?"

When the door opens, we're greeted by a blast of loud noise. There are people occupying almost every inch of space in the house. The first person I see is actually John. He is chatting with someone I didn't recognize but when he sees me he immediately greets me with a firm handshake and hands me a beer. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Sansky. What shall the miss have?" John yells, gesturing towards Mattie.

"A beer is fine!" she screams over the music.

"All right, one beer coming up!" John says and excuses himself. I look down at the beer he handed me. It is shit but I take a sip anyway. "Let's move to the back patio!" I yell to Mattie. "I'm sure he'll find us back there."

It takes much longer than expected to squeeze our way to the back. Mark Findelay's house is laid out like the average American home, except with much narrower hallways for some reason (or it appears that way tonight). That makes traversal of the house difficult with such a high density of people occupying its interior. When we finally emerge from the house onto the patio, we take a huge breath of fresh air. I spilled most of my drink, but it was no big loss.

The patio has a minibar, clearly there for the more classy individuals at the party. It is less crowded but there is still not much room to even stand. Mattie and I carve out a space near the pool's edge and claim it as our own. We chat up some of our classmates and comment about how many people we don't recognize. Mark is well known for his extending influence in the high school and even college scene beyond Riverdale. We're deep into conversation when I suddenly hear a voice calling my name. "Peter Sansky! Peter Sansky!" I know immediately it is John. I raise my hand and wave, hoping to catch John's attention. In a matter of seconds, he appears next to me with a drink in hand. "Pete, there you are. I spent the last 10 years looking for you. Where's Mattie? I couldn't find any beer, but I have this most fantastic drink for her," he says excitedly. He's holding a dark brown drink in a martini glass.

"Dude, she's right next to me," I say, gesturing to my side.

"Um, Pete, so I know I'm pretty drunk, but even I know that Mattie is not next to you." He says. "*That's embarrassing.*"

"What are you talking about?" I say, turning to look at Mattie. But it is not Mattie that is standing next to me but Lindsay, beer in hand. I actually jump back in shock. "What the fuck? Where's Mattie?" I proclaim.

“That’s what I asked. Don’t tell me you’re still confusing your girlfriend’s twin with your girlfriend,” John says. “It happens to the best of us. Don’t worry, I shall find her and deliver this drink. Until later,” He beckons farewell and disappears in the crowd, mumbling apologies along the way as he pushes through the sea of bodies.

I forget that Lindsay is still standing next to me. I must look like a complete fool. She scoffs. “Come on, Peter, you can’t be serious,” she says with a huff of disbelief.

“I came to the patio with Mattie,” I say defiantly. I gaze over the bustling crowd. “Where is she?” Lindsay just shakes her head. She almost looks sad. Something clicks in my head but before I can react she leaves. “That was weird,” I say to no one in particular. I put my empty beer down. I’ve barely had any of it since most of it spilled. I try to collect my thoughts when suddenly someone taps me on the shoulder. “Hey, he’s asking for you,” the guy says. I don’t recognize this person, but he is motioning towards the bartender. I don’t recognize the bartender either. He is a young man with an impressive scraggly beard like an old sage. I thank the messenger and make my way to the minibar.

“Let me buy you a drink: Manhattan, on the house.” The bartender says the minute I get to the table. He then mixes some bourbon and other bitters in a large martini glass. I watch him prepare the drink. It’s strangely mesmerizing. It looks oddly familiar. When he’s done, he tops it off with a cherry. “One Manhattan for you,” he says. He notices that I look hesitant to take it. “It’s nothing. You looked like you needed a drink,” he winks and pushes the drink to me.

I pick up the Manhattan and take a sip. It’s delicious. “Thanks,” I say. “I didn’t know that Mark was so rich that he could set up a minibar and hire a bartender at a house party. Listen, I don’t know who you are, but ...”

“No time,” the bartender says. He leans in to speak. “Listen, that girl you came in with, she’s bad news. Word around town is that according to her, you’re connected to what happened to Lindsay.”

I blinked twice. “What did you say?”

“You heard what I said.”

“But I just saw Lindsay.”

The bartender shakes his head. “Peter. You don’t have much time. Word’s spreading.”

I play along for now. “Is that according to the underground?”

“What? No. I just heard whispers here and there. I don’t know. But listen, you have to set the record straight unless you want to go to court. Things aren’t looking good for you, fella. You need to act fast.”

“Who are you?” I ask. “And why do you care?” The dark brown colors in my drink are swirling quickly like a magical potion. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. He notices my attention has shifted to the drink. “Like it? I’ve spent years perfecting it. You look into it, and your heart’s deepest desires come true and materialize in front of you.” He pauses and smirks. “Nah, I’m just fucking with you.” He slaps me in the back. “But seriously, this thing is highly volatile. You think you’re seeing something in there now... just wait.” He reaches underneath the counter, pulls out a small lighter, and takes my drink. He holds up my drink and ignites the lighter underneath the glass. To my amazement, the drink begins to boil very quickly and soon a burst of flame shoots up from the glass. I jump back. Strangely, no one else notices. It must be louder than I thought, or everyone is really, really drunk. The bartender smiles amusedly and sets down the drink. “You got your vessel...” He points to the glass. “...your catalyst,” He holds up the lighter. “...and of course, the flame. You’ll need these to get closer to the truth.”

“To find out what happened to Lindsay?” My interest is suddenly aroused.

He shrugs. “You’ll find what you’re looking for. But remember that you’re not *actually* looking for those 3 things literally. It’s like a puzzle, get it? Think metaphors.” He says with his eyebrows perked, tapping his cranium with his index finger. “But seriously, you understand this is just a dream so obviously at the moment you don’t know where the answers are, or what you’re searching for, or why you’re having these dreams.... yet you’ve *known* subconsciously about certain elements for a long time, but they just haven’t, how do you say, been *realized* yet. In any case,” he pushes the drink back to me. “Take another drink. You’ll need it.”

I take a drink.

“Don’t forget the journal.” The bartender says and winks again. The wispy smoke from the drink envelops me like a blanket and puts me to sleep.

## The Third Morning: The Jog

When I came to, I had fallen off of my bed. The word ‘journal’ was floating around my head. I shook it off, briefly forgetting what its relevance was, as I gathered my blankets and tossed them back on the bed. I got up and stretched.

Although I had desperately tried to wake up, I had this morbid curiosity in seeing Lindsay alive again. I did not know what sort of manifestation of Lindsay I had created in my mind, but it was bothering me. In the many years that we had attended high school together, I had barely spoken a few sentences to her despite the fact that her sister and I had been dating. She was a completely different entity from Mattie: a self-righteous, stuck-up bitch that had always been mixed up in drama one way or the other. For that reason, I never really associated with her. On the other hand, John had fallen completely head over heels for her ever since the first time he had

set eyes on her in second grade, and despite a brief fling in 8<sup>th</sup> grade she had no interest in him. It was one-sided, though, and John's continued interest in Lindsay bordered on neurotic and obsessive to the point where I and some other friends had to intervene. He finally did move on, supposedly, when he started dating other girls from all over town that resembled Lindsay in some fashion. It seemed like a middle finger to Lindsay and was an admittedly disturbing fetish, but once her disappearance shook the town to its core, everyone forgot about it.

Regardless, it was extremely strange that in my dream Lindsay appeared to be a completely different person from she was like in real life. She seemed to be someone that had known me for a long time, where in reality we had only known each other through association since I had been dating her sister. We hadn't talked much and she had been a very different person from Mattie. It was puzzling, and perhaps I would understand once I figured out what my subconscious bartender was telling me.

This last dream itself was unsettling. It bore a striking resemblance to the very night that Lindsay had disappeared, when everything had spiraled out of control at the party. There were some parts of the night that I did not remember clearly or perhaps had chosen to not remember. In any case, I did not want to think about that now.

I turned my attention to the vessel, the catalyst, and the flame (apparently, all the components needed to discover the truth about... something related to Lindsay). And now, the journal: this had to refer to the journal that Lindsay had been rumored to keep but which nobody could find. All friends and family, including Mattie, had testified that she had kept a journal that could have provided clues as to her whereabouts. Given that people who were suspected to have known something were keeping their mouths shut, namely certain members of the underground (although they certainly could have been actually clueless), a clue like a journal would have proven beneficial. However, as the search for Lindsay died down, so did interest in the journal. Many people suspected that the Sorenheims were hiding it, but nobody knew where or for what reason.

I needed to clear my head. Typically, I would unwind by playing the saxophone but since it was early in the day and I was not in the mood for music, I decided to go for a long jog. It had been a while since I had even done any substantial amount of exercise. The last that time I had been motivated to improve myself was to impress Mattie. That was more than 2 years ago. She would jog with me, or come to my band concerts to cheer me on, or support me in some form, just to make sure I was improving myself. As a matter of fact, she was one of the reasons that I had taken up saxophone to begin with. Being of little music talent herself, she would nevertheless attend all of my underwhelming band concerts anyway, usually dragging Lindsay along. But I didn't want to play now.

I searched for my jogging shoes. I eventually found it buried in my unending pile of clothes in my closet. It hadn't been touched in years. I dusted it off and noticed a pile of music

tossed in the corner, with titles like “Pomp and Circumstance” and “The Lion King” peeking out from the darkness. I smiled and grabbed a random piece. E-flat saxophone, first part, concert band: the classic trio that I had grown used to under Mr. Brown. I would never forget how to play, but the notes still seemed a bit foreign just like when I auditioned. I put them back and pulled out my shoes. After taking a shower, I went downstairs and grabbed some fruit to eat. The house was empty as usual, although I half expected to see my father waiting to lecture me like the previous morning.

I decided that there were two routes that I would not run this morning. The first was the path that cut through the school. I decided to stay away from the school today. I had no business there for now seeing as I was not going to be in the festival. If Evanna wanted to speak to me, it would have to be through phone or text. And it was just embarrassing to be seen at the high school after having graduated a few years ago. I didn’t want to make a habit of it. The second was the path that Mattie and I had run in high school. With no particular destination in mind, I took off.

Within seconds, it was clear that my body had not been conditioned well for running ever since high school. I stumbled and cramped up within a few minutes. Eventually, I pushed through and settled into a groove. I found myself jogging towards the city limits, which given how small the town was and how close the school was to the border, was inevitable. After a half hour, I jogged past the welcome sign.

Riverdale was a small community in the middle of nowhere. When Lindsay disappeared, we suddenly saw news anchors and helicopters flooding the town to the point that it seemed as though there was not enough public parking for everyone. It was understandable why the story broke so big: rich white family’s pretty daughter goes missing, parents long for her safe return, parents send their other twin daughter away for unknown reasons. It was the making of juicy drama for the press. It even made national headlines, and Riverdale was on NBC and CBS for a few weeks as the story developed. As I jogged into the outskirts, I saw the remnants of the media frenzy. There were still some abandoned trailers that nobody bothered to remove, videotapes, camera equipment, and other miscellaneous news paraphernalia. Naturally, people lost interest, especially since Lindsay was never found.

It suddenly occurred to me how absurd the past few days had been. In addition to running into familiar faces at school (both welcome and unwelcome) that I had not seen in a long time, I lied to my parents about the music festival to their utter disappointment, I basically destroyed my relationship with my former music teacher, my ex-girlfriend suddenly returns home from a 2 year hiatus in Australia and indirectly accuses me of being associated with her twin sister’s disappearance, a classmate of mine that seems to know me better than I know her tells me this and may or may not be lying according to my friend in order to get a story, and I’d been having strange lucid dreams full of imagery where everything feel both incredibly real and incredibly distant at the same time. There was that mysterious bartender who was obviously a manifestation

of my imagination, but was somehow telling me to find 3 things to discover something about Lindsay, and to start with this mysterious journal that no one knew about. This all heavily implied I that I was somehow really fucked up in the head or I really did have this all locked away in my head subconsciously but didn't comprehend it fully yet.

I didn't hear the truck honk its horn.

“Are you okay?”

My vision slowly returned. It took me a few seconds to realize that I had blacked out for an unknown amount of time. The voice repeated itself. “Are you okay?” I was lying on my back on the side of the road in some long grass. I heard the beeping of the dashboard of the truck, which was still idling.

“Jeez, I thought you were dead. Don’t move. I’m calling an ambulance!” The panicky voice said. “No, don’t worry about it,” I insisted, although he still made the call. I sat up on the ground and took in my surroundings. There wasn’t much to see, though. The small pick-up truck was pulled over from the main road, which was empty for miles, and the driver was standing behind me, looking concerned but not overly concerned now that I had sat up and said things were okay. “What the hell happened?” I asked.

“Well, I was just driving along and you suddenly jog out into the middle of the road and I hit the brakes but you just stop dead in your tracks and I swerve and hit you with my right door. I’m sorry, man, but what were you thinking?” the man said without taking a breath. I briskly apologized without even considering how stupid my actions were and how I put both of our lives in danger. I felt a throbbing pain throughout my lower back and noticed that I was bleeding in my forehead. I probably needed a doctor, but I found myself oddly drawn to a decal on the truck’s window before anything else. It said:

*Uncover the real truth. #SaveLindsay*

My curiosity was peaked. I had not recently been following news on Lindsay. “What’s that sticker mean?” I asked. “What’s the real truth?”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” the man said. His outfit screamed blue collar worker. He had probably been in the middle of deliveries and now was facing potentially endless amounts of paperwork and insurance policies if I needed to go to a hospital, which I probably did. After thinking that, I started getting extremely lightheaded from the blood loss, but I was determined to understand the meaning of this decal. Maybe there was a connection to be made.

“Hey, did you hear me?” He asked again. He looked familiar, but I couldn’t identify him.

I plopped down on the grass again, my head spinning. “Sure. But tell me, what’s this sticker about?” I asked again. “And what’s your name?”

“Joe,” he said hesitantly. “Listen, again, I’m so sorry about what happened. Let me get you a towel for your head.” Joe ran back to his truck and grabbed some rags, which I promptly used to apply pressure to my head. I didn’t feel any better. “Those stickers, you say?” Joe said. “Well, I’ll tell you. Everyone seems to think it was her friends that aren’t spilling the beans, like that shady kid Mark and her sister’s ex, Peter, I think.” I didn’t want him to notice who I was (I was surprised he didn’t notice already), so I looked down and held the rags tighter. “But they’re wrong. It’s got to be *the parents*. You heard those stories about how she was always acting up at school and getting in with the wrong crowd, right?” I nodded. “I’m sure they wanted to reform Lindsay, you know how crazy these religious people can get. They abducted her,” he said firmly, wagging his finger disapprovingly. “And they are keeping her prisoner in the house or already killed her and are hiding her body. The police have interviewed them and searched the house for clues, but they’re not going to do a thorough job for those emotionally wrecked parents. I just know she’s in there.” Joe, who had been pacing for the last few minutes, stopped and motioned towards me. “How’s your head?” I simply shrugged, feeling about the same and hoping the ambulance would arrive sooner.

“That’s a pretty wild theory,” I said. “Do you have any proof?”

“That’s the thing,” Joe said. “For the past few years, our best lead was the journal that everyone talked about. I’m sure Lindsay wrote about her awful parents, and that would be the key. But I bet they burned it or something. So we’ve been running low on options. We were big back then, but not so much anymore. People have sort of lost interest after 2 years. I never took down the sticker because I know one day the truth will reveal itself. Are you sure you’re okay?” Joe asked again, kneeling to check my head. “Jeez, you’re bleeding a lot, man. Where the fuck is that ambulance?”

“It’s nothing. But I need to find that journal,” I said.

“What?”

“That journal… it’s the key.”

“Peter, what is wrong with you?”

I looked up with my bloody rag still pressed to my head and saw Mrs. Sorenheim. “That journal is none of your business. I’ve told you numerous times to stay away from us, and yet you insist on coming back. Stay *away* from Mattie.” She folded her arms. “Haven’t you hurt her enough?” The last thought I had before I fainted was *damn, I must be really fucked up in the head.*

## PART II: The Hospital Room

According to the hospital staff, Joe had brought me into the emergency room and then promptly left. When my parents had heard the news, they were by my bedside within a half hour. My dad had mostly forgotten our previous unpleasantness, if not solely due to my mom's overbearing concern. The doctor told me I could leave by nighttime, so I insisted that my parents wait in the lobby while I tried to make sense of everything that was happening. It was only a few minutes before I heard a knock on the door. "Mom, I'm fine..." I began before I noticed that it was not my mother who had walked in but Evanna. "You look terrible," were the first words out of her mouth. She smirked. "Jeez, he really did a number on you. I'm sorry. I brought flowers." She offered a bunch of roses.

"Thank you," I said. She set the flowers down on a small table and took off her coat. "How are you feeling?" she asked. "Is it anything serious?"

"No, I should be out of here by tonight. It was just a minor concussion, apparently." I then struggled to sit up in bed to properly address Evanna. "How did you know I was here?"

"My dad told me he hit someone this morning," she said. "He described someone, but for some reason I just knew it was you." Joe was Evanna's father? "I told him he was a scumbag for leaving you without paying your bills..." She reached into her purse. "So I insist on paying half of it. I just don't have enough money to cover all of it, but I hope that's okay."

I shook my head. "No, I can't do that to you," I began, but she didn't let me finish. "Pete, it's my responsibility and I won't take no for an answer, okay?" She pulled out a checkbook and tore out a blank check. "I trust that you'll halve the bill? I don't want to go completely broke," she said. It was clear that she was trying to protect her father's reputation by essentially paying people off.

"Evanna, this could easily be a thousand bucks."

"It's fine. I'm not that poor."

I took the check hesitantly. "I don't know what to say."

"Just feel better," she said. "I know what you're thinking. My mom is a nice secretary and I'm a wannabe journalist. Where the hell does my dad fit in? Well, there was a reason I never talked about him. He's a loon, and you wouldn't believe the kind of shit I've had to bail him out on, and we're not just talking money." She rolled her eyes. "At least he doesn't abuse me."

"He seemed like a nice guy when he wasn't hitting me with his car, albeit a little off."

“He’s crazy. He just wanders off sometimes,” she said as she took a seat. “You know, he thinks that the Sorenheims are keeping Lindsay hostage in their own house. And he’s the only one who believes it. He even puts up a stupid sticker on his car to make people believe it’s a cause.”

“It’s not?”

“You think anybody will believe that? It’s his little fantasy. The Sorenheims are untouchable and they have a spotless reputation. Only my dad is crazy enough to think they did something. Come on, Pete,” she scoffed. “If anyone would know about them, it’s you. Although, I suppose it *would* be hard to see the big picture in your situation.”

“I resent that. Plus, they hate me now.”

“I’m just saying.”

I shrugged, setting down the check on my nightstand next to the gigantic cut of flowers my mom had brought for me. I craned my head from side to side. It was awfully stiff. “Well, enough about your dad. Thank you for coming.”

“Word travels fast around here, I’m sure you know that.”

“John hasn’t visited yet. I’m surprised. He’s usually the first to check in on me.”

Evanna shook her head. “I haven’t really been in touch with John. Remember that we weren’t friends in high school?”

“I know, I wasn’t expecting you to know where he was or anything, I was just thinking aloud.”

There was a brief awkward pause before Evanna spoke up. “Nice flowers,” she said, motioning towards the ones next to me.

“Thanks. They’re from my mom,” I said.

“She really cares about you.”

“It’s a little excessive, but yes. Your mom seems nice, too,” I pointed out.

“I love her to death. It’s just my dad. Shit like this, you know. I hate it. Listen...” She reached into her purse again and brought out a notepad. Her journalistic instincts were coming in full force. “I know this isn’t the best time to ask, but have you given any thought into what we talked about yesterday?”

“Are you serious right now?” I asked.

“Perhaps a little bump in the head has made you reconsider?” she said. “I’m just kidding. But work with me here, I should be working for Mr. Lin now on the paper but I took time out of my day to see you here. And I brought you flowers. And I’m covering half your bill.”

I couldn’t deny any of that, and I certainly appreciated her visit and other gestures of kindness. But I was in no mood for any of this now. “Can we talk later?” I ask. “Just not at this moment, please.”

She clicked her pen. She pouted, but didn’t seem seriously upset, just grumpy. “Make me a promise,” she said.

“I promise. I really do.”

She grinned. “Oh, Pete, Mattie had it real lucky.” She gathered her things. “Call me.” When she left the room, my parents appeared shortly thereafter. I told them about the check and explained the situation. My dad insisted they press charges against Joe Loren, but I objected and insisted they let it go since I was fine and Evanna was being extremely generous. I finally convinced them. They just wanted to make sure I was okay.

I couldn’t explain why I but felt strangely satisfied.

That night, I walked out of the hospital with a head brace, feeling slightly giddy from the morphine but still focused on what I needed to do. My parents, wrought with worry, put me to bed and told me to sleep immediately. I obliged them but only to get privacy. I considered calling Evanna but I didn’t really feel like speaking about Mattie to someone else right now. I remembered that I definitely needed to call John, who had been a conspicuously absent presence on both the phone and online. When I called, he didn’t pick up the phone and was offline on all social networks. It wasn’t unlike John to disappear for a few days, but something seemed off this time. There was also the issue of the journal. I had nowhere to start, but if I wanted to understand what was going on and figure out what I had apparently known for many years subconsciously, it would begin there. I figured that it only made sense to ask one person first, and that person was someone I didn’t want to talk to yet desperately needed to talk to for answers. I resisted the urge to talk with Mattie. The timing had to be right. If it wasn’t, it could irreparably damage our relationship and I would be out of options.

There were many people that I needed to talk to, not including Mattie. Mark Findelay seemed like someone that would have valuable information, especially regarding Lindsay’s disappearance and the party. I didn’t know where he was nowadays, but it didn’t seem unlikely that he would still be around Riverdale. Hopefully John would get back to me with that information soon. Evann’s father, Joe Loren, appeared very versed about the subject and he probably would know more than me. In the meantime, though, I was stuck in a rut. I removed my neck brace and lay flat on my stomach, staring at my saxophone. I immediately felt a rush of disappointment with myself. Music to me was an escape, and yet it felt so restricted now. I didn’t

know why this was bothering me so much recently, but my mother's comment in addition to how I fucked up at the audition made me realize that I didn't want something else to fall by the wayside, just as so many other things had. I wasn't handling my relationships well. What exactly would I be leaving behind when I went back to college? I'm sure many people, as Evanna said, thought I really was a criminal. There had always been a cloud of disbelief around me back when the case blew open. People didn't like me. But I couldn't resign to that. I needed to prove to them, and to myself, that I wasn't just a fuckup.

That night, I didn't have a surreal dream (thank goodness, my brain probably couldn't have handled that) but I vaguely recalled having a daughter and teaching her how to play piano. She was playing at a recital. My dad looked very proud. I was very proud.

## The Fourth Afternoon: What's Done

I didn't wake up until noon the next day. My dad went to work as usual, but my mom took the day off to make sure I was okay. She refused to let me out of the house until I had some soup and honey tea. When I finally convinced her I was fine, I was allowed to go outside but was not allowed to wander too far. I ignored her and immediately walked to Mattie's house.

I didn't know exactly what drove me to go there, but it suddenly seemed like the right time and that all the elements would fall into place. I was moving in such a hurried pace that I didn't know how lightheaded I was becoming. Before I could even react, I had promptly collapsed on the sidewalk.

The entire world was spinning uncontrollably and I couldn't even orient myself until someone pulled me to the side and hid me in some bushes. "Shh," the voice said. "Wait until she's gone." The voice sounded very familiar. I didn't even know how much time had passed before I was pulled out again and sat up against a tree. "Wow, looking good, Pete," the voice said. I didn't even need to see whom it was to realize that it was Mattie. "Sorry about that, I just didn't want my mom to see you... or us, together, especially. That would be even worse."

I looked at Mattie. She appeared completely different than I had remembered her. Her blond hair was now dyed a deep brown and she was dressed in an outfit that didn't seem to fit her very well. It seemed like she had been living out in the wilderness. She was wearing a bandana and a loose fitting blouse that resembled a burlap bag, in addition to some baggy pants that seemed like they came straight from the '70s. I couldn't deny that she looked good, but she was undoubtedly different. "You look good, too, I guess," I said.

Mattie smiled. That smile. "You can say it. I look like a hippie. It wasn't exactly what I was going for, but I forgot how we used to dress here." She offered her hand. "Get up. Come

on.” She pulled me up and I stumbled to gain my balance. “What happened to your head? That bump wasn’t from just now, was it?”

I shook my head. It wasn’t hurting as bad as I thought it would. “I got into a car accident yesterday,” I said. When I noticed her alarmed look, I clarified that it wasn’t a big deal. “It’s just a minor concussion.”

“That is kind of a big deal,” Mattie said. She held my head in her hands and felt my bandages. “Why were you in a hurry?” she asked.

I didn’t answer immediately. I remembered her touch and it suddenly brought me back 2 and a half years. When she asked her question again, I snapped out of the trance. “I just felt like I needed to see you,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. “Well, what is it that you wanted to talk about?”

“I...” But I couldn’t form words. It was so surreal seeing Mattie again. I wanted to tell her that I hated her for saying I had something to do with Lindsay’s disappearance. I despised her for trying to slander me. But I also just wanted to embrace her and have all things forgotten.

“What?” Mattie asked. “What is it, Pete?”

My head throbbed again. I held my bandages. “Fuck.”

“I would invite you to come to my house, but I think we both know that’s a bad idea,” she said. “Maybe you should go home and lie down.”

“No! I need to talk to you,” I said. I sat down, leaning against the tree. Mattie sighed and then took a seat next to me. I cleared the thoughts in my head. “Listen, first of all I wanted to say that it’s nice seeing you again. Really, I mean it. I missed you,” I said, meaning every word. “And I’m glad you’re back so soon. We all thought it wasn’t going to be for a while.”

Mattie wasn’t looking at me but I noticed that she brought her legs in and wrapped her arms around them. It was something she always did when she was deep in thought. This time, I had no idea what she was thinking.

“You’re not going to say anything?” I asked.

She appeared hesitant. “Two years was enough for me. And of course I missed you too, Pete. How could I not miss you?” She said. “You were such an important part of my life. Nothing’s going to change that, for better or worse.”

“Look, I’m sorry about what happened. I know this was a long time ago, but I just wanted to get that out there. You didn’t seem particularly keen on returning my letters in Australia, so I wanted to set the record straight and make sure that we’re on the same page...”

Mattie shook her head. "Oh Peter," she mumbled. "You can't just say that and expect us to be okay. You can't just wish these things away. When I was in Australia, I learned about moving on. We forgive and forget. What's done is done. But it won't go away."

"Is that why you're spreading these rumors about me and how I did something to Lindsay? You're punishing me?"

Mattie suddenly had a cold expression on her face. It was like she was putting on a defense mechanism. "Where did you hear that? Was it the underground?" she asked, calculated.

"I knew it. So that was your purpose, to spread the word and ruin me?"

She looked offended. "No, no. I didn't want to do anything of the sort. The past... that was just a series of misunderstanding of intentions and mixups and whatnot. This... this is something different. Pete, something happened when I got back."

I didn't like where this was going. "What happened?"

"I was moving some boxes to find my old clothes, and I found Lindsay's journal."

It was starting to come together. "But I thought that your parents said that the journal was not in their house and that someone else might have had it," I said. "What does this mean?"

"Well, I left kind of in the middle of all this, so I'm not sure exactly what my parents said. I do know this: the journal was hard to find for someone not in our family, like an investigator or a police officer, because we have certain 'family' hiding spots and I found the journal in one of them. I guess they forgot about it."

This was big. It was now clear that someone was not telling the truth. "So your parents were hiding it?" I asked.

"I didn't say anything like that," Mattie said, on the defensive again. "I was just giving you facts."

"So, what happened after you found it?"

"Well, I probably should have taken it to the police."

"But you didn't," I said.

"Would you have?"

I wasn't sure. If I were in Mattie's situation, would I have followed police regulations? Or would my commitment to family and the truth have dominated?

"No," I said.

“Pete, I just want to clear something up before we go any further,” she explained. “I don’t think that you had anything to do with Lindsay’s disappearance. I know you, and I know who you are, and I know that you would never ever do something like that.”

“Is that right? Then why did Evanna say that you said I had something to do with it?” I asked.

Mattie shook her head, cursing. “She told you?”

“I thought you wanted to slander me through the underground or something.” After saying this, I realized how ridiculous and paranoid this all sounded.

“What? Why?” She folded her arms. “Pete, why would you think I wanted to do that?” I really had no reply to this. “The conversation that we had was strictly between us. I bumped into her at the supermarket. I hadn’t spoken to anyone in Riverdale for years, so I just... I don’t know. I talked to her about stuff. She used to be very close with Lindsay.”

“What did you tell her? Why is she so interested?”

Mattie looked frustrated. “Peter, I didn’t tell her anything incriminating. I mean, I dropped your name but just casually. She was probably just trying to provoke you, get a story, you know?”

“She lied to me,” I muttered. I knew something was suspicious about the whole situation. I had to deal with it later. Even worse, I had John asking around the underground about something Evanna had lied about. I hoped it wouldn’t be a problem. “That’s not so important now,” I continued. “What did you find in the journal? I need to know.”

“I can’t say much. I... I found your name.”

I was taken back. “What?” I asked.

“It was everywhere.”

This didn’t make any sense. “What do you mean?”

“It didn’t look good. As in, if I brought it to the police, they would think it was you.” She looked concerned now. I just couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It was impossible. Lindsay had rarely interacted with me, yet now it appeared as though she had been writing my name all over her journal. “I don’t get it. She wrote my name in what context?” I asked.

“I can’t say. But it doesn’t look good. I wanted to talk to you about it. And I wanted to tell you that Evanna is probably going to ask you a lot of questions, but it looks like she got to you before I did.”

“Shit, this is serious. Come on, Mat, you have to tell me what was in the journal.”

“Look, all I wanted to do was sort some things out before someone finds out that I have it.”

“Oh come on. Everyone has forgotten already,” I said.

Mattie looked at me with razor sharp eyes. “I didn’t *forget* about my sister, okay?” she said, getting up. I hated when she got angry. I didn’t want her to walk away. “Wait, I’m sorry,” I said, holding her hand. “Please. I didn’t mean it. It’s just that … who do you think is going to be that interested in this case, 2 years later?”

“Well, Evanna, for one. I didn’t tell her anything either, so there’s no need to worry,” she snapped, taking her hand back. “That’s why she’s hounding you. Anyway, her dad, too, and I bet there are a lot of people who think it was you anyway, so they won’t wait to jump on an opportunity to destroy you.” She straightened her clothing, which had been covered with some dirt and some of my caked blood.

“Like your parents,” I said.

“Like my parents.” She nodded. “Pete, this won’t go away. Things just don’t disappear.”

*Not this again, please,* I thought. “Mattie, can we not talk about that?” I felt like I was begging now. “I just want to know what to do right now. I’m extremely confused and my fucking head hurts. I keep having these weird surreal dreams and I want to figure out what the heck is going on.”

“*You* should have done something that night, but you didn’t. You just took advantage of me,” Mattie said. “Why do even bother talking about this. You’re right.” She sighed.

“What did you expect me to do?” I said as I reached for her hand again but she pulled it away before I could even grab it. “We were all intoxicated and you think that Mark was paying attention to anyone’s drinks?”

Mattie closed her eyes and turned away from me. There was a cold breeze. I shivered. She barely reacted. “What’s done is done. But Pete, this is now. What was Lindsay talking about in the journal? What was between you two?”

“No, no. You don’t get it,” I said, struggling to stand up. I used the tree as a support. I groaned as I stretched to loosen my muscles. “No. Lindsay and I didn’t talk. You know that. She was doing her own thing, we were doing our own thing, remember?” She wouldn’t look at me. I could never tell what was going through her mind.

“Mattie, I don’t know where she is,” I said. “Your sister is gone.”

Mattie shed a tear. She usually didn’t cry. “I know.”

She let me embrace her. She didn't let go for a long time. When she let go, her tears had already dried. "I'm sorry about what I said. I didn't mean it." I knew that she really did mean it, but I let it go. "I would invite you inside, but... let's not do that." She smiled. "I never told you what my parents told me a few days after I got back. She said that... this was all a punishment from God. Her children, me and Lindsay, we had not behaved as proper children should and were taken away. Lindsay was literally taken, I was sent away. But after 2 years, I said fuck them, you know? They won't really talk to me, but I deserve to be here. This is my hometown."

I had heard many things about the Sorenheims, even very recently from Joe Loren, but this had been something new. It gave me a new perspective on her situation. "I'm sorry," I said. I really could not think of anything else to say.

"It's okay. I have to go," she said. "Don't try and get in touch with me. I'll reach out to you. You'll know." She left, looking whimsical and lost, everything I had remembered her as. She didn't even turn back.

## The Aftermath

I felt oddly relieved that I finally had seen Mattie, but I knew that we had a lot of unfinished business to talk about. It still gave me relief knowing that things between us were not as bad as I had imagined. Head still bruised, I didn't want to return home to make my mother worry, so instead I walked over to John's house. I needed to talk to him anyway to clarify a few things about Mattie, the journal, and the underground.

The school was set at the top of Cypress Hill. At the bottom of the south side of the hill, there were multiple athletic fields. I lived right across the street from them so I used to always hear the cheers from various football and soccer games. Mattie lived 30 minutes by foot from the top of Cypress Hill but going north. John lived another 30 minutes north from Mattie's house. School had already been in session for half the day. It was a lazy Friday afternoon. No one was even out for a stroll. The suburban mothers were probably napping. It was one of those hot and slow summer days. And here I was, Riverdale alumnus, head buzzing, trudging to an old friend's house during the hottest part of the day. It was not a pretty sight.

I made the turn off the main road for John's house, which was set on the middle of a hill that sloped downwards. I hopped through the various sports paraphernalia lying in his driveway and made my way to the door. I knocked to see if anyone was home. When I got no response, I realized that I had no other plan but to sit on his porch and do the same that he had done to me the other day: surprise him when he came home. I also needed to rest, so I just settled myself into his dirty couch and relaxed.

Many great times were had at this house. It was all very familiar but was growing farther away. John and I had been very close in high school but drifted apart a bit in college, naturally. Last summer, I had been traveling and did not see him much at all. This summer was the first time in a while that we had spent much time together at all. Just as I was thinking about how John was doing, the door creaked open and someone's head peeked out. "Hello?" the voice said. It was a woman's voice.

I got up from the couch. "Hello, Mrs. Mitchell. Is John home?" I asked.

"Hello, Peter. John is downstairs. He's not feeling too well, though," Mrs. Mitchell said. She was a small, frail lady that usually didn't mind any of the parties that John threw, but had surprising authority when she wanted it quieter. Mr. Mitchell always worked the overnight shift at a hospital and remained a sort of legend in our social circle, as no one had ever seen him. John admitted himself that he rarely saw him except on Sundays. "He's probably just resting. I'm sure he wouldn't mind some company. It's been a few days. Please." She opened the screen door for me. I thanked her and slipped into the house. To my surprise, Mr. Mitchell was sitting in the kitchen having a cup of coffee. When he saw me, he stood up and greeted me with a handshake. He didn't even know who I was, even though I had been to the house so many times. "Hello, I'm John's dad. You are?" He asked. "I'm Pete, sir." I said.

"Ah, you must be Pete Sansky. This place must be very familiar to you then," he said with a smile.

"I've been here a few times," I said. "It's nice to finally meet you, sir."

"Well, I had to come home to watch over John. He's not feeling too well. The patients can wait for my son." He said.

John was so sick that his father had to come home? "Can I see him?" I asked.

Mr. Mitchell looked towards his wife. They came to some kind of agreement. "Sure, but not too long," he said.

I went downstairs into the basement. It was surprisingly clean, given the various unkempt states it had been in the past. I saw John lying in his bed, wrapped in blankets, curled in a fetus-like position. I suppressed the urge to laugh at how bizarre it looked, but the situation was probably very serious so I kept a straight face as I stepped onto the floor. "John?" I called.

He suddenly perked up and his head appeared from under the covers. I was taken aback by how he looked. He had many bruises on various parts of his head and was wearing a brace on his shoulder that was bent strangely out of shape because he had been lying down. He quickly straightened it and covered it with a blanket. "Pete! You can't just walk in like that. Jeez, what were my parents thinking?" He said. I felt as though I had walked in on an even more heinous act, although given his current state, I did understand his need for privacy.

“Sorry, man. What happened to you? I thought *I* had it bad these past few days. I got hit by a car and just collapsed on the sidewalk,” I said.

“Get the fuck out of here. Not now, okay?” He threw himself back under the covers.

I was surprised by how hostile he was. “Hey, man, I’m just asking what happened. There’s no need to be so rude,” I said. “I wanted to tell you that you don’t need to ask Mark about anything. It was a miscommunication between Evanna and Mattie and me. Don’t worry.”

“You’re telling me now?” he said. “Fuck you. That’s the last time I ever do anything stupid like that for you.”

“Whoa. What is that supposed to mean?” I asked. “You already asked?”

“It means exactly what I said,” he said. “It’s the last time I ever do any favor for you.”

I did not know what he was talking about. “Wait, what?” I said, confused.

“Forget it,” he said. “It was my fault too.”

“What happened to you, dude? Even your dad came home. Were you in the hospital?”

“What do you think? Was I...” he threw his cast in the air, which looked like it hurt, “... in a hospital?” He then pointed exaggeratedly to his bruises and cuts on his head. “You tell me.”

“Who did this to you?” I felt like I already knew the answer, though. But he didn’t answer. “This had to do with the underground? Did you talk to Mark in person?”

“Thanks to me being a fucking obedient dog, I tried to find out more info about your stupid ex-girlfriend and I *had* to go meet him in person. He wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Hold on, hold on. You’re saying that he’s still running it? After 2 years?”

“Yes.”

I was missing something. “I get that Mark is still the ringleader, but what are you telling me? That he beat you up? Why would he do that?”

John seemed to suddenly remember that he was still angry at me. “Fuck you, Pete.”

I was getting angry now. “What is your problem, John?” I asked. “Give me some perspective. Start by telling me what you said and why he did this. I’ll settle this with him.”

“No, you won’t,” John said. “I made some mistakes, recently and in the past, but I’m not making any more mistakes for anyone else.”

I resisted rolling my eyes. "Come on. If you're talking about Lindsay, you're not still hung up over her? That was 8<sup>th</sup> grade. That was so long ago."

He seemed to hesitate before he continued. "I'm not talking about just her. I'm talking about you, and Mark, and everyone else that wanted something from me," he said bitterly. "Look where it's gotten me."

"Why are you blaming me for what happened to you?" I asked.

"None of this would've happened if I just didn't listen to you, if I just never took shit from anybody," John said, muffled. "That's why."

"All I wanted you to do was ask around," I said.

"Mark and I didn't exactly leave on the best of terms. That's why I didn't want to do you this favor. And you owe me, still."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It's none of your business."

"You can't blame me, then, if you don't tell me!"

"I don't blame you, okay? Now get out. I need to rest," he said. I wanted to push further, but this was not the best time. His parents greeted me on the way out and I did the same, but the conversation with John had been less than satisfactory and left a bad taste in my mouth. Clearly he was angry at me but there was something else that he wasn't telling me. Why did Mark have a beef with him? It had to do with the underground, and maybe even Lindsay, but I couldn't be sure. I had to settle things with him, but first I wanted to find out what was going on with Mark. I didn't even know where he lived, so I was stuck already. As I left the Mitchell porch, I immediately heard commotion in the house. It sounded like someone was yelling. I left quickly.

## The Beginning

I found myself calling Evanna. I didn't know why. She had lied to me and clearly had some ulterior motive to her curiosity, but I didn't know who else to talk to. When she picked up, it sounded like she was asleep. "Hello?" I heard something knock over, a cup of water perhaps.

"It's Pete," I said.

"Pete. Oh, you caught me at a bad time," she said, fumbling for some unknown object. "I don't have to work on the paper today, I slept in. I didn't expect you to call me right now. But I am glad you called," she added playfully.

“Can you give me a ride? I need to speak with Mark Findelay.”

She seemed surprised by the question. “What? Why? You think it was him?”

“No.”

“Okay...” She sounded confused.

“Can you pick me up? I’m at John Mitchell’s house. We can talk then.”

“Sure thing,” She said. “Don’t you have a car, though?”

“Not right now.”

After giving her directions, I sat down on the large stone rock on the corner of the street and the main road. It was only a few minutes before a car honked its horn and I heard Evanna’s voice calling. She pulled into the side street and waved me over. I got into the car, where Evanna was beaming at me. “Hi, Pete, I got here as fast as I could,” she said.

“No kidding,” I said. “Wow, you either live really close or you drive really fast.”

“Both. I live only a few streets down,” she said. “So, tell me, what did you find out?”

“Do you mean related to me or in general?”

“In general,” she said eagerly.

“Not right now. I need to talk to Mark first. Also...” I added. “...we need to talk about this whole thing. I don’t like it.”

She frowned. “Um, okay, sure,” she said. “Don’t tell me you got hurt again? It hasn’t even been a day!” she said.

“Not right now! Now come on, can you take me to his place?”

“Not yet. Come to my house first, my dad wants to apologize. Let’s chat first and then we’ll do what you want.”

I sighed. “All right, fine,” I complied.

She couldn’t help but smile. “Great!”

Within 2 minutes we were at her house. It was small but cozy inside. It had a warm atmosphere and was decorated with many trinkets and souvenirs from around the world. I spotted a music stand in the corner.

"I remember you played saxophone? I play flute. I sort of stopped playing at Wesleyan to focus on journalism. I still pick it up every now and then," Evanna pointed out. She picked up a flute concerto, the quintessential Mozart flute concerto. "You were really good. I remember playing in band and envying how good you were."

"It was a group effort," I said. In honesty, I didn't really remember that she was even in the band.

"Mr. Brown was the best, wasn't he?" she said. She set down the music. "We still talk all the time at school. He really liked you." I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. "Well, anyway, let me get my dad," she said. I continued to look around the house. It looks like most of the pictures showed Evanna and her mother, who I assumed was at work now. They had traveled to many places, but I only saw her father in a handful. I heard footsteps descending the staircase. Evanna appeared with her dad, who had a beer in his hand. "Hello, Pete. I'm sorry about what happened. I hope that the check will help," Joe said rather mechanically. "Do you want anything?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you. I appreciate the help."

"How do you feel?" he asked.

I rubbed my head. "Okay, I guess. I bumped it again, this morning. Nothing's happened so far." Joe nodded, seemingly relieved. "Okay, Dad, you can go back upstairs," Evanna said with a smile. "Come on."

"Wait a second, honey. I just want to make sure your friend's okay," he said. "I hit the poor boy with my truck. And he's not even pressing charges, right?" I didn't like his tone. "Hey Peter, do you remember the conversation we had? Evanna told me that you are *the* Peter Sansky! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't remember the conversation," I lied.

"Dad, let's go," Evanna pushed, but Joe wouldn't have it. "Evanna, hold on. So you were in on the case and all that?"

"I was interviewed, yes," I said.

"Tell me, did you have to do any joint interviews with the Sorenheims? How did they seem? Aloof? Strict? I've heard conflicting reports about them. And you were in a relationship with her sister, right? Did you hear anything about the parents from her?"

"Dad!" Evanna exclaimed. "Peter doesn't need this right now. Let's go." She pulled him by the arm. "Another time, perhaps... and don't you have to prep for deliveries?"

“Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m just very passionate about the case,” he said, more to me than to his daughter. “Pete, you have the connections. Make sure she’s found!” Evanna insisted that her father leave, so the two of them eventually went back upstairs. It was not a surprising conversation, but was still rather unnerving. There was something strange about Joe Loren, but I couldn’t pinpoint it. When Evanna returned, she looked sheepish. “I’m sorry, I only told him to say the first few things, but he just can’t help himself whenever he gets a chance to talk about Lindsay,” she said.

“Is your dad a private investigator?” I asked.

“No, he just makes deliveries. He said he left you at the hospital because he was late for a delivery. He’s just like that. I’m sorry.” She took a seat at the kitchen table, where I joined her. “I know it seems like he knows what he’s talking about, but he doesn’t. I think he took after me. I was very interested in the disappearance but then he formed his own theories and the rest is history.”

“He seems nice enough,” I said truthfully.

“I guess. Anyway, tell me what’s going on.” She procured a notepad.

“I ran into Mattie. She told me you were lying,” I said.

Evanna didn’t say anything. She averted my eyes.

“Why are you so interested that you would lie about this? Why did you want to talk to me? Why didn’t you talk to Mark or John?”

She shifted in her seat slightly. “The lesser truth is that my mom told me she saw you at school. It was a perfect opportunity. The greater truth is that you seem like the most genuine person out of all the parties interviewed by the police. You were unfazed.” I had been legitimately terrified but I miraculously held my own. “It was both suspicious and insightful.”

“It doesn’t matter. By provoking me with your lies about Mattie’s accusations, you’re showing me that I can’t really trust you.”

Evanna shook her head. “No, no, don’t say that. Look, I had so much respect for you. I only waited until now because things were too hot a year ago and now it’s 2 years later and everyone is back from college, and coincidentally so is Mattie. I ran into her in the supermarket, for crying out loud. It’s all happening now for a reason. I think something’s about to blow open,” she said. “Don’t you? You told me you had things to say. I just needed to get you talking. Maybe I took it a little bit too far. I’m sorry.”

I held up a hand. “Why should I listen to you or believe you? You still haven’t told me anything about why you’re doing this at all.”

"It's my habit to investigate. Also, I used to be friends with Lindsay. It's personal to me," she said. "It used to be me and Rachel and Lindsay."

"I remember. I told John, too. She died of a fever, right?"

Evanna seemed reluctant to talk about this. "Yes, this was back in elementary school. I barely remember what happened, but I do know that one day Lindsay and Rachel and I were on a playdate and then the next thing Rachel was gone and Lindsay was grounded. We weren't even 7 and her parents were already like that! I see where my dad is coming from, I suppose." She twiddled her thumbs. "I'll make some tea, do you want some?"

"Sure," I said. Evanna got up and filled a kettle to put on the stove. I knew she was telling the truth about Rachel but I still didn't know what to think about all this. "It was sad. It was really sad," she continued as she filled a tea kettle. "I just feel so bad for Lindsay. I hope she's still out there somewhere. I feel obligated to look into it. That's why I'm asking you. I was just trying to get a response from you."

"Yeah, well, don't do that. Just ask next time, okay?" I said. "If we want to work together, we need to be on the same page. Trust each other."

She nodded. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't apologize." I said. We didn't say anything as she set the kettle on the stove and turned the heat up. She turned around and looked at me with a curious expression. "Can we... talk some more?"

I sighed. "You're just relentless," I said.

"Look, I promise I won't do anything like that anymore." She set down some cups and looked for some tea bags. "I want to do this right." She pulled out some bags and set them in the cups. She then sat back down with a big grin on her face.

"Why are you smiling?"

"Because I think we'll make a great team." I just nodded. "You know, back to what we were talking about before... after the whole incident with Rachel, Lindsay just suddenly became really extroverted. I don't know why. She became the popular girl. The thing is, everybody kind of remembers Rachel and how sad it was, but as we grew up we only remembered people from a certain point on in our childhood, and most of us only remember Lindsay as that girl, not as the girl before Rachel died."

"What was she like before that?" I asked.

"I can't remember much, obviously, but she and I and Rachel would always have playdates and we always got along. I imagine she was kind of like me," she said. "I can't say for

sure. All I can say is that something happened to her that night. By the way, we only have English Breakfast. Is that okay?"

"That's fine," I said. "I'm sorry about that."

She looked sad, especially given her usual cheery manner. "It's all in the past. I just hope she's okay." When the kettle boiled, she got up and filled two cups, passing one to me. When she once again took a seat, she reached for her notepad but I swiftly took it away. "Before we start," I started. "You have to promise that we're not going to manipulate each other. We're going to be truthful and honorable. Deal?"

She nodded excitedly. "It's a deal," she said. I handed her notepad back.

"So what did you find out?" She clicked her pen.

"First of all, Mattie wasn't trying to slander me."

"I know, okay?" She rolled her eyes. "I'm sorry. I was just excited and all. But you're saying that you talked to Mattie? How did you meet her?" She was overzealous to actually be talking about all of this.

I just gave her a stern look but continued. "I was going to talk to her, somehow, but then I collapsed and then Mattie saw me and we talked. She told me that she found her sister's journal and that it ..." I hesitated. I didn't know how to say this without it appearing like I did something very wrong. "... it had many things referencing my name."

"What?" she asked, wide-eyed. "So Lindsay was naming you? That can't be good."

"I wouldn't say she was naming me, but you're right. It looks bad."

"Mattie isn't going to bring that to the police, is she?"

"She said no."

"You trust her?"

I did, for the most part. "Sure."

"That doesn't inspire confidence, but I'll take it," she said. "So what does this journal mean? How was your name used in context?"

"I don't know," I said. "Mattie wouldn't tell me."

"That's a bummer," she said, putting down her notes and sipping some tea. "Well, at least we know that her parents were lying."

“Not necessarily true,” I said. I did think that was the case, but I couldn’t prove it. “We don’t know if they forgot about it or someone planted it. Who knows?”

“Oh, come on, Pete!” she said, frustrated. “Don’t be naïve. Why else would the journal be in the house? Unless Mattie was hiding it herself, or someone gave it to her and she’s making up stories, which I don’t think is true, since she has no reason to do so.” She raised her eyebrows. “I mean, Mattie was the one that told you Lindsay mentioned your name, so if she had some other agenda, why would she even tell you? It has to be that the Sorenheims are up to something. I just don’t know what it is.”

“What could possibly be in that journal that is so damning that Mattie won’t tell me and her parents won’t release it to the public?” I said.

“I think Mattie is trying to protect you,” Evanna said. “Or she is trying to protect her parents. Or the parents are trying to protect themselves. It’s one of the above.”

“Or it’s all of the above,” I said.

“I know everyone thinks the Sorenheims are a bit off, but what could they possibly be hiding?” Evanna asked. By this point, she wasn’t even taking notes anymore. “I mean, the only reason they would ever hide it would be to conceal incriminating information. Maybe they *did* do it!” she pondered. “Maybe my dad is right.”

“No, I don’t think so. Mattie told me that her parents saw Lindsay’s disappearance as retribution or something. Maybe they thought she deserved it because she was a bad kid or something. We’ll never know. You said they grounded her after Rachel died, right?”

Evanna nodded. “I don’t know why, though.”

“I wonder if that has something to do with it.”

“This is so exciting!” Evanna burst out. “It’s like we’re solving a mystery.” I gave her a look and she cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, I get excited sometimes. This is very serious, you’re right.” She picked up her notepad. “What else did you find out?”

“I was visiting John when you picked me up,” I said.

Evanna nodded. When I didn’t continue, she looked up from her notes. “And?”

“When you told me about Mattie and what she said about me, I asked John to talk to Mark and the underground and see if the news had spread. I was paranoid at the time, I couldn’t help it,” I added when she raised her eyebrow. “And then I didn’t hear from him for a few days. It turns out he got beat up bad. I think it was Mark.”

“I didn’t know,” she said. “What do you think that means?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know what John said that could have pissed him off.”

“Maybe Mark just doesn’t like him?” she suggested.

“He did say that they weren’t on the best of terms.”

“Something’s going on there,” Evanna said. “Maybe John did something in the past and fucked up, and Mark is still angry with him. I can’t believe he actually went through with it when you asked him to do it. He’s a good friend.”

I imagined his broken body and face and I cringed. I felt horrible. “Well, I want to find out what happened, for his sake,” I affirmed.

“Okay, let’s do it. Do you know where he lives?” she asked, putting down her notes. “Maybe he hasn’t moved since high school.”

“Only one way to find out,” I said, getting up from the table.

“Actually, is this a good idea? I barely know him and you barely know him,” she said. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I don’t know what else to do. He probably knows more than he told the police. And he deserves to pay for what he did to John,” I said. “You don’t have to come if you don’t want to.”

Evanna shook her head. “No, I’ll come.”

## The House, Again

Mark Findelay had one of the largest homes in Riverdale. It had been the site for most of the infamous parties that had taken place in high school. Although Mark’s house was not a mansion, what it lacked in glamour it more than made up for in space and accessories. The last time I had been to his house was the day of the party and Lindsay’s disappearance. It brought back unpleasant feelings in the stomach and felt even more surreal given that I had just visited this place in my dreams not too long ago.

When I rang the doorbell, Evanna standing behind me, clearly intimidated, a young girl that I didn’t recognize opened the door. “Hello,” she said.

“Hello. I’m trying to find Mark, is he around?” I asked politely.

“Mark is in his room. Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m an old friend of his,” I said. “From high school. This is Evanna,” I said, introducing her. She smiled and waved. “We both went to Riverdale.”

“I go to Riverdale!” the girl said. “I’m in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Today I learned how to multiply. Do you want to hear my multiplication tables?” She put her hands behind her back and began to recite. I stopped her before she got too far. “No, that’s okay, what’s your name?” I asked.

“Lizzy.”

“Lizzy, can we see Mark? It’s very important!” I said.

“Okay,” Lizzy said. “He’s upstairs.”

“Thank you!” Evanna said.

Lizzy showed us to the stairs. She then said goodbye and went into the den where the TV was playing some children’s show. Evanna nudged me. “Where are the parents?” she whispered. I shrugged. When we got to the top of the landing, I heard noise coming from a bedroom. I called out his name to make sure we weren’t sneaking up on him. “Mark? It’s Pete,” I said. “Are you there?”

The noise stopped. “Lizzy, did you let someone in again without asking me?” he called. I heard footsteps and the bedroom door opened. “Can I help you?” He said as he stumbled out. He didn’t look sober, and amazingly he looked even worse than he did in high school. He had bags under his eyes and his face was very thin. He looked exhausted. “Ah, Peter. And Evanna Loren, what a nice surprise.” He said with a smirk. “What can I do for, fellow alumni?”

I turned to Evanna. She gestured to me: *go on*. “I didn’t know you still lived here, man,” I said, trying to make small talk. “The place looks great. Was that your sister?”

“That’s Lizzy, yes. I like the house. Get to the point.” He sniffed very loudly. “I’m a bit busy.” He leaned against the doorframe.

“Have you seen John Mitchell lately?” I asked.

He looked behind me briefly and then down the hallway behind him. “Who?” he asked.

“John Mitchell,” Evanna chipped in.

“Oh, yeah, John… sure, I ran into him the other day,” he said. “What about him?”

“What did you guys talk about?” I asked.

“We caught up. Nothing too fancy,” he said. “Is that all?” He glanced back into his room briefly before looking back at me.

“John looked pretty battered when I last saw him,” I noted. “Do you know anything about that?”

He nodded quickly. "Hold on," he said, holding up a finger. He disappeared back into his room and reappeared with a joint. "Helps me remember, you know?" He said as he took a drag. "Yes, I do remember. He got a lot of balls showing up on my doorstep and asking about the underground, so I roughed him up. You got a problem with that?"

I made a move but Evanna grabbed my hand and held me back. "You're a piece of shit, you know that?" I said.

Mark took another drag and then squinted. "You'd best be careful what you say," he said, getting in close to my face. The smell was very strong, almost sickening. "I was doing you a favor, you shit." He set his joint aside. The smell lingered.

"What are you talking about?" Evanna asked.

"He deserved it. He did some things back in high school and I didn't like it. Then he comes back and asks a favor. Who does he think he is?" He smiled. "Plus, it wasn't just me. There were other guys that did the job. You going to arrest us, is that it?"

I contained my anger, but it was difficult. "You're going to pay for this," I said through my teeth. I had no idea what I was going to do.

"Okay," Mark said, relaxed. "Trust me, you and I both know we've been through worse. Those fucking feds and those reporters, you remember that, Pete?" He patted me on the back. "It's not going to get worse than that. We can handle anything, am I right?"

I hated him. I hated him so much at that moment. "I didn't cave, like you. I wouldn't have let my personal relationships interfere," I said in a moment of contempt.

Without warning he grabbed me by my shirt collar. It felt like he almost lifted me in the air by the collar, but I think I was just lightheaded from my head injury and the outrageousness of the situation. He stared straight at me, his eyes surprisingly calm. "I would fucking kill you if it weren't for my little sister downstairs; she hates dead things," he said. "Now, is there anything else I can help you with?"

I stared right back. "Apologize," I gasped.

He released his grip on me. "You idiot, do you even know who's on your side?"

"Clearly not you," I said, adjusting my shirt. "I'm leaving. Come on Evanna, let's go."

"I know what you're doing," he said, addressing both Evanna and me. "Don't look into it any further. Look what happened to John." I wanted to punch him right in the face, but I resisted. It would not make things any easier in the future. Mark could be a valuable resource, and I needed to preserve the relationship. I looked at the 20-year old frail druggie standing before me. It was only a few years ago that he had been one of the most powerful kids in Riverdale, and to

see him like this was rather pathetic. He still talked like it was high school. “It’s not worth it,” Mark continued. “Lindsay is a complicated person. She had a different side to her. You won’t hear about it from anyone. I was just trying to protect her.”

“So you beat the shit out of John?” I said. “Brilliant. He wasn’t even asking about her.”

“You don’t get it, you nitwit...” he said, pointing a finger at me. “He was out of place to even come to me to ask me anything. That’s how it is. And especially if he’s snooping around about her sister, I know something’s up. And clearly you put him up to it.”

“It’s not your business,” Evanna chimed in.

“Well, you come in here and accuse me of roughing up your friend. I’d say it’s a little bit of my business.”

“You’re an asshole, and you’re not going to get away with what you did to John,” I said, pointing a figure at his face. “This isn’t over.” I took Evanna’s hand and turned to go.

“Wait,” Mark said, grabbing my shoulder. I flinched. “Look, you don’t know who Lindsay really is. So don’t make any assumptions, okay?” He said, letting go of my shoulder. I saw that his eyes were surprisingly somber, which was something that I had not expected. And then I felt something I had truly not expected: pity. “How do you know so much about her?” I asked. This looked like an opportunity to discover more about Lindsay that I didn’t already know. And looking at Mark, it suddenly looked like the Mark that had crumbled 2 years ago to the onslaught of questions.

“She would come to the underground and talk. We knew everything about her,” Mark said. “I hate when people can’t even respect her when she’s missing. I still hear people talking shit about her. I mean, she’s fucking missing. Have some respect.”

I knew what he meant. “What side did we not see of Lindsay?” I asked.

“You wouldn’t understand. Her childhood was difficult. So was Mattie’s.”

“How?” I asked. Mattie had never shared too many details about her childhood and her upbringing, although I imagined that being raised by wealthy, strict, religious parents was not going to be pleasant.

“I think you should go,” Mark said. “She really liked you, you know?”

“No, that was Mattie,” corrected Evanna.

“I’m talking about Lindsay.”

I was taken back. “What? What do you mean?”

“You fucking nitwit, what do you think it means? So think twice about what you’re doing.” Mark then pushed us away from his door. “Until later, Mr. Sansky, Mrs. Loren.” He closed the door. I wanted to push him further, but I figured that enough had been said for today. Evanna was talking to me, asking questions, but all I could think about was what Mark had said.

On the ground floor, we passed by a large portrait of a portly man holding a glass of brandy. Behind him was an exquisite collection of empty martini glasses and bottles. I was strangely attracted to it. It reminded me of something, but I was snapped out of my trance when Evanna shook me. “Hello? Pete? Are you okay? We’re still in the house. Let’s go,” she insisted. “Before his parents come home.”

When we stepped outside, Evanna spoke up. “Okay, so there’s something really suspicious about Mark. He’s such an asshole, but then suddenly he’s so soft about Lindsay. I don’t see his angle. I think he’s trying to get us on his side and then destroy us,” she said, bringing her fist down upon her left palm dramatically.

I shook my head. “This isn’t a game, Evanna. There’s something wrong here. Somebody is not telling us something. And I don’t like it.” We walked out the gates and entered Evanna’s car. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a plan on where to go next. The more I thought, though, the more I agreed that Mark was suspicious and almost seemed psychopathic. I didn’t remember him like this back in high school, but something must have changed in the past 2 years. That much was clear, given how he dealt with John. The thought alone made me seethe with rage.

“What did you mean when you said you wouldn’t let personal relationships interfere?” Evanna suddenly asked. “He seemed really riled up when you said that.”

“Do you remember Zoe?” I asked. “His old girlfriend?”

“Didn’t they break up a long time ago?”

“Yes, but do you know why?”

“No.”

“Well, you remember how Mark wouldn’t say anything to the investigators? He would never betray anyone in the underground. He also had a good lawyer. However, rumor has it that ...” I wasn’t sure about this, actually, but my little quip had clearly made an impact so it was most likely true. “... they found Zoe and broke her. And that broke Mark. And I’m sure you know the rest after that.”

“Oh my God, I can’t believe that’s what happened,” Evanna said. “There was always a hole in my notes. I never knew who told the police about the underground, the party, and the other events that went on that night. So it was Mark. He gave in.”

“No one knew, only me. I was under a lot of fire, too, so I saw it all.”

“But *you* did good,” Evanna said.

“Well, I didn’t do anything. I had nothing to worry about.”

“You know,” Evanna said. “No one was even arrested because of Mark.”

“There was not enough evidence to support anything,” I said. “It was useless.”

“Do we know where Zoe is now? Maybe she’ll know something,” Evanna suggested.

“I don’t think we should ask Mark,” I said. “But I don’t know if she even lives here.”

“I’ll look into it,” Evanna said. “So where do we go next, Sherlock?”

“Home,” I said. “It’s getting dark. I’m tired.” Evanna seemed disappointed. “Oh man, I was just starting to enjoy myself.” I smiled and punched her playfully in the shoulder. “It’s not over yet, Ms. Loren. There’s much more to discover,” I said.

“At least come by my house again. Let’s go over everything so it’s all written down.” Evanna said. I agreed to stop by her house.

When we got back to Evanna’s home, her father had left to make deliveries and Mrs. Loren had just returned from the high school. When we walked in the door, she was just starting to prepare dinner. When she saw that it was me, she greeted me warmly. “Hi, Pete. How are you?” she asked. “I haven’t seen you at the school recently.”

“That was just for the audition,” I said. Evanna squeezed past me and went to the refrigerator. “Hi Mom,” she said.

“Hi dear. Pete, how did it go?” She turned back to the counter to continue preparing food. “Also, would you like to stay for dinner? It’ll just be Evanna and myself tonight.”

“I didn’t get it,” I said. “Dinner would be lovely, though.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mrs. Loren said. “It’s very competitive. Actually, that reminds me!” She said, pointing her finger up as she had done the other time we had met. “Mr. Brown wanted to talk to you. Yes, that’s right.” She turned around. “He says whenever you are free. I suggest going on Monday.”

What more could he possibly want to talk about? Regardless, I remembered to pay a visit to the school again on Monday. “Thank you, Mrs. Loren,” I said.

“Of course, Pete. What were you and Evanna up to today?” she asked.

Evanna and I looked at each other. “Just visiting old friends,” Evanna said. I nodded in agreement. “You wouldn’t believe how people have changed.”

“Oh, I know,” Mrs. Loren said. “It’s amazing what 2 years can do.”

## The Fourth Night: The Lull, Part II

Sitting down for dinner with Mrs. Loren and Evanna was not what I had been used to. Their attitude towards dinner was unexpectedly different from what it was like in the Sansky house. They talked, shared stories, enjoyed each other’s company, and ate freely. Dinner at my house was a more formal event, where I had to be excused to leave the table and grace had to be said before a bite was taken. Mrs. Loren casually brought up the fact that her husband was a bit of a bore and that she was very sorry he had hit me. “I hope the check will help you and your family,” she said. I thanked her. Later on in the evening, both Mrs. Loren and Evanna laughed when I asked to be excused to go the bathroom. “You don’t need to ask something like that,” Evanna said, smirking. “But yes, I suppose you can use the bathroom. It’s down the hall, third door on the left.”

On the way to the bathroom, I noticed that there were many photos of Evanna on the wall, from school portraits to family photos. The family definitely liked to travel. The souvenirs I had seen earlier were from a variety of places that were well documented on this wall. I noticed one particular picture of the Loren family in Poland. A much younger Evanna had a big smile on her face, as always, Mrs. Loren was holding tightly onto her daughter, and Mr. Loren was crouching as though expecting Evanna to run into her arms. It was amazing what a camera could capture in a single moment of true happiness. I must have stared at the photo for a long time, because I jumped a bit when Evanna tapped me on the shoulder. “Lost?” she asked.

“You got a nice wall of photos here.”

“It was back when my dad was normal. I’m just kidding, but only kind of,” she said. “I love my dad. He’s just a handful.”

“It’s the same with my dad,” I said. “By the way, dinner was lovely. I should probably get going home, though.” At that point, I realized that I hadn’t even used the bathroom. “Let me just use the bathroom, though.” I said. I proceeded to the bathroom, but Evanna held my hand before I could move. “Wait, Pete,” she said. “I just wanted to say...”

I nodded. I squeezed her hand and said, “Let’s talk about this later. I have to use the bathroom.” Evanna smiled. “Okay,” she said.

When I returned to the dinner table, Evanna was clearing the dishes with her mother. I helped to move some plates before I said I had to go. Her mother gave me a hug. “See you on Monday, I won’t forget,” she said. “Mr. Brown won’t forget, either.” Evanna offered to give me

a ride, which I accepted graciously. Once I had gathered my belongings, we left the house and walked to the car. We didn't say a word to each other during the short ride back home. When the car pulled up to my house, Evanna leaned over and gave me a hug, followed by a quick peck on the cheek. "Keep in touch," she said. I got out of the car, and she promptly speeded away.

Both of my parents were in the living room watching television when I came in. "Pete, how was dinner at the Lorens?" My mother asked. "And how's your head? Does it feel better?"

In truth, it had been throbbing painfully the entire day but I chose to ignore it. That fall this afternoon must have done something bad. "It was good, and I feel fine," I said. "I'm going to head to bed, I'm very tired."

"Okay," my mother said. "By the way, your father and I cashed the Lorens' check tonight. I just thought you should know. Good night, honey." When I went upstairs, my dad didn't even give me a second glance.

I told myself I wouldn't get distracted from figuring out what was going on with my dreams and Lindsay's disappearance, but I found myself thinking about Evanna regardless. I fell asleep soon after, fully clothed and exhausted, not knowing what to expect from the weekend.

## \*The Restaurant

I am approaching the Sorenheim house. When I ring the doorbell, no one answers. I hear voices coming from the windows. Someone is yelling. It sounds like a woman's voice, mostly likely her mother. The front porch light switches on and the door swings open. It is Mr. Sorenheim. "Hello, Pete. Mattie is getting ready. Would you like to come in?" he asks with an apologetic smile.

I shake my head. "We should probably get going. But thank you, sir."

"She'll be right down," he says. "Would you like something to drink?"

"A glass of water would be nice."

As I wait, nobody is yelling anymore but I hear doors slamming violently. Somebody is descending the stairs. It is Lindsay. "She'll be out in a minute," she says before turning to walk to the kitchen. I thank her but she is gone before she can even hear me. Mr. Sorenheim returns with a glass of water. "So where are you two going tonight? Mattie won't tell me," he asks.

"We're just spending time with each other," I say as I take the glass of water. I actually sound convincing.

"Okay, but have her back before midnight," he says. "Or else. Oh, here she is now."

I see Mattie at the top of the staircase. She descends quickly and loudly. I can hear each step she makes on the wooden steps. It's clear she had thrown some clothes on at a whim. "Pete, let's go. See you, Dad," she says and takes my arm. She takes the glass from my hand and shoves it at her dad, who almost drops it. "Love you."

When we get into my car, she sighs exasperatedly. "Fuck," she says.

"What is it?" I ask as I turn over the engine.

"It's my mom. She says she has a bad feeling again. I told her that God isn't always looking for ways to put Lindsay and me in danger."

I don't follow. "What do you mean?"

"Tonight she doesn't want us to go out because she's worried we're in danger. It's just another religious excuse for her to control us. I can't stand it. It's because of them that this has all gone to shit."

"At least your dad is okay," I offer.

"Can we go? I can't stand it here."

The diner is packed. It's not usually this crowded but it looks like somebody is celebrating a birthday. We barely squeeze into a booth. When we're settled, Mattie holds my hand again and says, "I'm sorry I've been acting like this. It's just that college is so close and I can't wait to leave Riverdale."

"I understand. I think we're all itching to get out of here," I say. "Speaking of which, did Lindsay hear back from any of those schools?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know what she's going to do. She didn't even apply to any safeties. She was reckless, I know, but it still sucks for her. Everyone else has gotten into college and she still hasn't. She has to go to community college and be stuck at home now or something. I feel so bad for her," she says. She looks upset but clearly wants to stay upbeat for the party. She changes the subject. "So, are John and the others coming later tonight?" She takes a menu and glances at the choices. "I feel like a milkshake today."

"I think everyone in Riverdale is going to Mark's tonight." That is not an exaggeration. "So I presume he will be there."

"Good." She hums to herself as she makes a selection. "I'll get the berry milkshake and a cheeseburger with fries. You can't go wrong with that. What are you getting?"

"Oh, I'm just getting some tea. I ate at home."

"Why? I thought we agreed that we were getting dinner here."

“Yeah, but I got hungry.”

Mattie sets the menu down and glares at me harshly. “Pete, come on. You drag me out to this party and you don’t even eat with me beforehand? At least get something. You’re just going to watch me eat?”

“No, I told you I’m getting something to drink.”

Mattie scoffs. “Fine, you know what? I’m not even hungry anymore. Let’s just go straight to Mark’s.” She stands up and gets ready to leave.

“Mat, come on!” I say desperately. “Sit down, please.”

She folds her arms. Eventually, she gives in and sits back down with a grumpy expression on her face. “Mat, I’m sorry,” I apologize.

“You’re always like this,” she says, not looking at me.

“It’s just... I have a lot on my mind,” I say. I could not even explain to myself what I meant by that.

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Like your sister.”

This catches Mattie’s attention. “...my sister?” she says. “What about her? Is this what this is about?”

“Yes.”

“So is this it? That’s how it’s going to be?” She had tears in her eyes.

“What? No! Not like that,” I say. What did I mean by that?

“Then what do you mean?”

“I mean...” I struggle to form words. Why was this so difficult? “.... I’ve been thinking about her a lot. I’m beginning to think that we shared a connection or something and I may have been responsible for her disappearance somehow.”

Mattie looks back at me in a state of utter confusion. The tears have dried. “But it wasn’t your fault,” she says.

“I think it might have been.”

She leans in close. “Pete... it’s not under your control. What’s past is past. Right now, we’re sitting in a restaurant.” She looks around. “It’s crowded on a Friday night. Focus on me.”

“Okay,” I say, in a daze.

“No, you’re still not listening,” Mattie exclaims. She gets up and gathers her things.

“Wait, what are we arguing about? Why are we angry?”

“It’s useless,” she says. This time, she actually leaves. I have no idea what is happening because I am still in a daze. It’s as though numerous parts of my psyche are feeding into another and causing a jumble in my brain. The world turns a bit blurry. I don’t know how much time passes until somebody taps me on the shoulder. “Hey. You should probably go after her,” he says, gesturing towards the door. I immediately jump up and sprint outside, almost bumping into our waiter who gives me a disapproving look.

“Mattie!” I yell when I get outside. The night is cold. She couldn’t have ventured far. “Mattie!” I look towards my car and there she is, leaning on the hood. I approach deliberately and join her side by side on the hood. She is gazing at the sky, contemplating.

“Pete, can you promise me one thing?”

“Sure.”

“Promise me that you’ll look after me, that you won’t let anything bad happen.”

“Of course,” I say.

“Good.”

We sit there for a minute.

“I break that promise later tonight,” I say.

“I know,” Mattie says quietly. She is crying now. She usually doesn’t cry so this takes me by surprise. “It wasn’t in your control. I always try to convince myself. It wasn’t your fault.” She wipes her tears away and slides off the hood. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

“Don’t you want to eat first?”

“Oh, right. I’m starving,” she says.

We go back inside and sit back down at the table. The waiter comes by and gives me another stern look before asking what we want to order. Mattie just orders a cheeseburger. I decide to get the same thing, except with fries. We eat in silence.

I am approaching Mark Findelay’s house. Even before we reach the front door, Mattie is pulling me away. “Come on, let’s just find a nice bar and have a drink,” she pleads. “It’s so loud in there, Pete.” Mattie has always been like this, and each time I always insist that we go in for a

little bit and then politely leave after she begins to feel uncomfortable. But this time I have a bad feeling and I can't quite place it. I eventually shake it off as jitters, though for what reason I wasn't sure. "Come on, Mat, it'll be fun," I say. I pull her in for a kiss. She turns away but I can tell she's just nervous about the whole situation. "Stay with me the whole time?" she says, looking up at me with her droopy eyes. I can't help but laugh. She punches me playfully. "I'm serious."

I nod. "I know. I promise," I say. I take her hand.

## The Fifth Morning: In Motion

When I came to, I was lying on my bedroom floor. The strange thing was that I was not in any pain. I felt as though I had been lying there the whole night and it felt right to me. I gathered my sheets and threw them back on the bed. I got up and stretched. It was not even 10AM. It was overcast, and the first time that I hadn't seen the sun in the morning since I had gotten back from college. My phone had a new message from Evanna.

*I know where Zoe is. But it's a bit of a drive. You down?*

I set the phone aside. The bandages around my head were dried with blood, but it didn't hurt. I plopped down on the bed again to think about what was going to happen next. At the moment, almost everyone hated or didn't care for me and I had yet to make any headway on what the vessel, the catalyst, and the flame were. I still didn't see any connection to Lindsay, other than that she might have liked me, whatever that meant, and my lucid dreams seemed to reinforce the fact that I had made many mistakes in the past. There were many things that were out of my control but I was determined to make the best of what I could influence. I would not continue to sit back and passively observe. I was going to get to the bottom of the situation, no matter what the cost.

And it was then that I suddenly remembered something that I had seen at Mark's house. It was the painting. The portly man with the empty glasses and bottles sparked something in my brain and I just realized what it meant. The martini glass, the drinks... the vessel had to be a person. It had to be Mark. This was so obvious that I couldn't believe I missed it. Mark provided the mixing glass to set things in motion. He hosted the parties, he ran the underground, he took in people like Lindsay under his wing, and he controlled people like John. What did this tell me? If anything, it just told me again that there was something Mark was not telling me about the night that Lindsay disappeared. I doubted that Mark knew where Lindsay was, but he was definitely a person of interest.

As for the catalyst and the flame, I hadn't a clue about what to make of that. If I were following the logic correctly, the catalyst would be the spark. The flame would be the result of

the vessel and the catalyst working together to create a reaction. What would come about as a result of all this? What catalyst could have directly led to the events of that evening, during which Lindsay disappeared? It could be anything, anyone, even me.

The thought entered my mind and immediately didn't sit well. Was I the reason that Lindsay disappeared? But how could that possibly be? I didn't interact with her except when I saw her at the door that evening to take Mattie out. But Mark mentioned that she liked me. What did that actually mean?

*Yes. Let's meet later this afternoon.*

I heard a knocking on the door. "Pete?" It was my dad. I mumbled something incoherently. My dad came in and took a seat at my desk. "I figured you should be up by now. It's almost noon." I checked the clock. I didn't even know I had fallen asleep again. I checked my phone. Evanna had replied back.

*I'll be at your house at 2.*

"Pete, I realize that I've been a little harsh on you," my dad said.

I set my phone down and rubbed my eyes. I didn't say anything.

"Your mother and I differ on many things, but there is one thing that we always agree on. It's that you try your best," he said. "I was disappointed because I know you hadn't."

I sat up and leaned against the bed's backboard. "How would you possibly know, Dad?"

"Because I'm your father," he said simply. "Because I know that you have lost interest in things. You seem distracted. And I understand. Mattie is back, and it's opening old wounds. But you can't lose sight of what's important."

"But this is important to me," I said.

"What is?"

"I can't explain. I've been having these weird dreams about Lindsay and now I feel obligated to find out what happened. It can't be coincidence that Mattie has come back now."

"I don't understand, Peter. What are you trying to tell me?"

"Dad, this is all very personal and I don't feel like discussing this."

"Okay, Pete." My dad cleared his throat. "I'm not mad at you, Pete. But I do want you to know that I want you to settle things with Mr. Brown on Monday. I want you to reaudition, explain the situation and get on the same page."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "I can't!" I said. I sounded pathetic whining. "I have too many things to do."

"Do it for me, Peter," my dad said. It was done. I would have to do it. "Peter, I just want you to think about your future. I don't know what you do all day but you can't just mope around all summer. We've been through tough times in the past, but it's behind us and we can't let it influence how we move forward in the future."

"All I'm doing is just tying up some loose ends," I said, almost convincing myself. "I'm fine, and I know what I'm doing."

"Pete, like I said, we've had some unpleasantness with the Sorenheims and I don't want to see that again. I want you to be on your best now that Mattie is home and certain... things are bound to be brought to life again. You're a good kid, you're my son, and I want you to be the best to everyone. It's not 2011 anymore."

I lay back down. "Can you go now?" I asked.

"Sure. Your mother and I will be doing some shopping. We'll be back soon," he said. "Let us know if you're going anywhere. There are leftovers from dinner last night on the counter if you're hungry." He then left the room, quietly closing the door, leaving me to my thoughts once again. Great, this meant I had to practice again. I had been so wrapped up in everything that had just transpired that I felt lost. I decided to freshen up and then practice a little bit, if just to make my dad happy.

After taking a shower, I assembled my saxophone once more but I could barely make a sound. I checked my reeds. They were fine. All the joints were working properly. I fiddled around with the instrument but I could not get it to produce a sound. I angrily tossed the instrument aside onto the bed. I grunted in frustration. I knew it had to be a psychological thing. I had too many other things to worry about at the moment.

I heard my phone ring. It was John. "Peter. Can we talk?" he asked.

I was a bit surprised by how different he seemed from yesterday. "Sure. What's up?"

"Look, I'm sorry about how I was yesterday. What happened was no one's fault except Mark's."

I wasn't sure how to react to this. "Okay."

"Yesterday, you mentioned that there was a miscommunication between Evanna and Mattie? So Mattie never said anything about you then?"

"No."

“Good. Then what is Evanna’s role in all of this?”

“She’s doing this for personal reasons. I mean... she’s got that journalistic instinct but that is definitely not the main reason,” I insisted.

“Are you sure? She just came out of nowhere. You’re sure she’s not looking for a story?”

“Trust me, okay? She’s cool. She’s helping out. Why do you have to distrust everyone?”

“Because I have a right to and I’ve rarely been wrong. And what’s the problem? You like her or something?” I didn’t say anything. “That was quick. Anyway, it’s not my business. I won’t pry.”

“I talked to Mark yesterday, after I stopped by,” I said.

“Why would you do that?” he said. “Dude, what the hell is the matter with you?”

I thought about how to phrase this appropriately. “He said that he was ‘doing me a favor’ for what he did to you, and that you deserved it. He said that you were out of place for asking questions. What did you do that made him so pissed?”

There was silence on his end. “It’s not important. I just want to know if he felt any remorse. So I deserved it? What an asshole.”

“Don’t ignore my question.” I was starting to get angry. “He said you were out of line. What did you do? He also seemed awfully protective of Lindsay. I don’t like Mark either, but he was never the type to just randomly beat up people.”

“I don’t like your attitude, Peter. You know who I am. I’m your best friend.”

“What did you do? Was it about Lindsay? I swear, dude, if it was about them...”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” John said.

“I don’t? How is this connected to me? Mark said he’s doing me a favor.”

“Mark is full of shit. And you know that.” I couldn’t deny it. “Listen to yourself, dude. Don’t talk to me like that. And you still owe me, remember.”

There it was again. “Look, let’s just stop, okay? I don’t want to argue,” I said. “Let’s talk again later. I’m just really confused about everything. This has all been a mess.”

“Fine,” he said. He then hung up. I set my phone aside. John seemed to be lying about something. And it was bothering me that he wasn’t telling me the truth. This clearly wasn’t over, but I needed to sort out other things first.

I looked at my saxophone. I always remembered that Mattie would love to try and play it despite how bad she knew she sounded. It was rather endearing. She knew she had little music talent, and few people would let her try an instrument, so she was always appreciative when I would let her try. Now I couldn't even play it. I was about to give it another try when I received a text message. It was Evanna. She was at my door already.

## From the Past

The ride was an hour and a half north from my house. We had to leave Riverdale and drive a few towns over to reach Zoe's home. She could definitely answer some interesting questions but I wasn't sure how much headway we were going to make, assuming we could even reach her.

"I did a lot of digging around last night, asked a lot of questions, befriended some alumni that we didn't talk with much, and finally got some answers." she had said. "I'm 80% sure she's there."

I smiled. "Okay, that's good enough, I guess."

"So, did you discover anything new last night?"

"No, but John did call me. He tried to apologize, but then I brought up what Mark had said and he got really defensive. We're not on good terms right now."

"You have a tendency to do that," Evanna teased.

We chatted for a long time, but my mind kept drifting to what we would say to Zoe. It seemed as though she moved just far enough away from Riverdale to be accessible if someone should try to reach her, but not completely off the grid if someone needed to reach her. I fell asleep and didn't even remember because the next thing I knew I was being shaken awake by Evanna. "We're here," she said.

We were parked next to a small house. There were no other houses that could be seen from here. The lights were off, and no car was parked in the driveway.

"Are you sure this is it?" I asked.

"Yes," she pulled out a printout. "I was told she'd be home."

"Well, let's try and knock," I said, getting out of the car. "I need to stretch."

We approached the front door and I knocked loudly. There was no response. We turned to leave when we heard someone descending the staircase inside very quickly. The door swung

open and a girl appeared. “Who are you?” She said. It was Zoe. She looked pale and fragile but it was undoubtedly still her. She looked emaciated, almost similar to how Mark looked.

“Hi Zoe, remember me? I’m Pete. This is Evanna,” I said. “We went to Riverdale.”

“Oh, God...” she said and slammed the door.

I turned to Evanna. “Now what?”

Evanna yelled, “Zoe, please! We need your help.”

The door swung open again. “Why are you here? Did the feds send you? I already told them everything,” she said, sweeping her gaze around suspiciously.

“No, Zoe. That was 2 years ago! It’s over, we promise. This is just for personal reasons, right, Evanna?” I nudged her. She nodded and said, “Yes, no one’s here besides us.”

Zoe stood on her tiptoes and looked behind us into the distance. Satisfied, she folded her arms. “What do you want? I’m sorry I can’t let you come in. It’s too dirty.”

“That’s fine. We just wanted to talk about Mark,” Evanna said. “And other things...”

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, what happened between you two?”

“Why is this any of your business?”

I decided to come clean immediately. “This is going to sound crazy, but I’ve been having these bizarre lucid dreams about Lindsay. See, I barely knew her, but in this dream I feel this strange guilt. I feel like I owe her something. There’s a missing part somewhere. I’ve been asking around, and I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Mattie came back from Australia. I think we’re on the verge of some discovery that will make all of this understandable to me.”

Evanna looked at me strangely. I realized I hadn’t actually told her about that part. “Well, I guess that explains your interest in all of this,” she said.

Zoe looked baffled. “Are ... you on some meds or something? You must be insane.”

“As crazy as this all sounds,” Evanna said. “I think Pete’s right. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that I also began looking into this case now. We really are close to something. You have to believe us.”

“Okay, guys. That’s cool and all, but I have some stuff to take care of,” she said, ready to close the door, but I put my hand on the door before she could close it. “Please, we need your help,” I begged.

Zoe looked at us with forlorn eyes, a damaged and reluctant soul. She blinked a few times. She hadn't moved far from Riverdale because she knew she could become an asset at some point, I conjectured. This was her chance. "I can't believe I'm doing this. Okay, fine." She walked out and pulled the door closed behind her. She stepped out onto the stoop. "Let's sit down." We took a seat on the steps.

"So, Mark. What happened?" I asked. "He said something about the police..."

"It wasn't the police," Zoe corrected me. "It was the investigators, those fucking PIs that really snooped way too much into people's businesses. They wanted to know everything. They wanted to know everyone in our social circle. They wanted to know who was in with the right crowd, who was not, who was shunned, and who was loved. It's not too often that a girl just disappears in Riverdale."

"But why did they pick on you?" Evanna asked.

Zoe threw her hair aside. Underneath the tired persona was a beautiful girl, ripped apart by time. She had very soft, round features on her face and sharp blue eyes. But she just looked so tired. "They didn't start with me. They started with Mark," she said. "They couldn't get to him. But they all knew he was the ringleader of the underground. They knew he had something to do with Lindsay. But he wouldn't talk."

"Did he have anything to do with Lindsay?" Evanna pushed. I looked at her and shook my head. *Not right now.*

"Honestly, I couldn't tell you. We felt so powerful, like we could do anything, and I just... I don't know. I'm pretty sure he's not involved in any way, but I couldn't tell you for sure. We did some pretty messed up shit."

"So what happened next?" I asked.

"Well, they knew they couldn't get to Mark. So then they came after me, and they were relentless. They didn't torture me or anything..." Zoe pointed out when she saw Evanna's eyes widen. "... but they might as well have. They threatened my family. They threatened my friends. I'm not a lawyer, but I'm pretty sure what they were doing was unconstitutional. But no one cared because everyone just wanted to know what happened to Lindsay. In the end, I had a breakdown." She didn't cry, but I could tell this was the difficult part of the story. "I wanted to protect my friends in the underground. I didn't know who was doing what, so I just protected all of them. But I couldn't in the end." She started to play with her hair casually. "It was all a setup. I think they already knew what I told them. But when Mark found out about my breakdown, he couldn't handle it. He spilled."

"The ringleader knows all," I said. "And then?"

Zoe laughed. "Those PIs couldn't arrest anyone. They still had nothing. Then they just gave up after a while. They were all full of shit." The whole time she had been staring straight into the dirt road. Now she turned to look at me. "You did good, though, Peter. You were cool."

"Hey, I had nothing to tell," I said. "So then you two were done?"

She nodded. "I couldn't look at him anymore. Not because of what he said, it was just because it was too painful." She closed her eyes, as though remembering something. "I remember when everyone thought that you did it. It was the sister's boyfriend. Oh, I remember the conspiracy theorists."

"I don't think that lasted long. But I'm sure some people still think I did it." Hopefully there weren't many of those.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" Zoe asked, folding her arms. "I don't like talking about this."

I turned to Evanna. She shrugged. "What have you been up to?" I asked.

"I'm just staying here, taking a break. My parents are out for now, so I just spend the days reading, trying to get into college. It's good to be far from Riverdale," she said.

"But still pretty close," I noted.

"Sure, Peter. By the way, tell me about these crazy dreams you're having. I'm interested."

"I've been having lucid dreams where Lindsay keeps appearing in my dreams as though we've known each other very well. And I can't help but think it's my subconscious guilt finally coming to light after all these years," I explained, not even sure what I was really saying.

"What do you have to be guilty about?" Zoe asked.

"I don't know. That's what I'm wondering. It has something to do with Lindsay."

"So you're telling me your subconscious is telling you that you killed Lindsay?"

"No! I'm saying maybe it's telling me I'm responsible in some way. I also met this bartender in my dream that's telling me I have to find a flame, a catalyst, and a vessel. It's all symbolic, I know, but it's supposed to help me get closer to the truth."

Zoe couldn't help but smile. I saw Evanna also suppress a laugh. "You're really fucked in the head, you know that? Did you, like, bump it?" Zoe said, amused. "Also, I'm just joking. Don't be so serious. They're just dreams, Peter. I mean, Lindsay was a nice girl. Maybe you're just suddenly realizing that she was not a bitch like everybody said but a normal human being."

“Mark said the same thing about Lindsay,” Evanna chipped in. “He was trying to convince us that Lindsay was actually a different person.”

“Lindsay was a confused girl. We had our girl-to-girl bonding time. The underground really helped her to open up. She’s not like that. You know...” Zoe raised her eyebrows. “Oh, maybe I shouldn’t say this.”

“Say what?” I asked. “Now you have to say it.”

“Well, she really had a thing for you. I thought it was messed up because you were dating her sister at the time, but she liked you.” There it was again. What was the significance of Lindsay’s affections for me? Why would she name me in the journal? “We all joked about setting her up with you that night.” She looked at both of us. “Okay, you know what, never mind, this is not a good time to talk about this. That night was fucked up, anyway.” She started tapping her toes to break the awkward silence. “Who needs a cigarette? I do!” She got up and dashed into the house.

Evanna looked at me. “What is she talking about?” She asked.

This was certainly neither the right time nor place to discuss the issue at hand. “Nothing, we’ll talk about it later.” She looked at me strangely and pouted. Zoe returned with the lit cigarette in her hand. “Whew!” she said, plopping down on the steps. She took a drag. “Anyway, Lindsay was all right. She had a pretty fucked up childhood. You know about that, right?”

“Yes, I was friends with her,” Evanna pointed out.

“No shit! I forgot. You were tight with Rachel and Lindsay. So you knew what she was like. You’d know best,” Zoe said.

“Not really, we were so young,” Evanna said. “We were maybe 7 at the time.”

“I see... by the way, I’m sorry about Rachel,” she said, trying to sound sympathetic.

“It’s okay. Like I said, I barely remember. I just feel worse for Lindsay. She got grounded for a long time,” Evanna said.

“Yeah, apparently it was her fault. That’s why the parents got so angry.”

“Wait, what?” I asked. “How was it her fault?”

“Oh, you don’t know? Mattie never told you?”

“No.”

“Well, you can tell me if this is true, Evanna...” Zoe said. “...but according to Lindsay, when Rachel was having her fever symptoms, Lindsay was acting up. And I mean she was

having a real fit for the ages. The babysitter had to take care of her and give her toys and then meanwhile, Rachel was burning up, dying. It must've been like a half hour before the babysitter found Rachel, in dire need of an ambulance, and you, Evanna, doing something else. Maybe you had seen Rachel motionless, maybe you thought she was sleeping, I don't know. But the only thing that matters is that Rachel died. I guess the Sorenheims really blamed Lindsay for her antics and letting her friend die. It was really fucked up”

Evanna nodded. She looked really upset. “I only remember the ambulances. I was just playing with my toys and hearing the babysitter talk to Lindsay. I didn't know any of that. How did the Sorenheims find out?”

“I assume that the babysitter told the police that Lindsay was being difficult, and that was why she couldn't get help sooner for Rachel. So that's why they grounded Lindsay. Lindsay had all this pent up anger against her parents for how they disciplined her afterwards... for years, actually. She told me all this one night and it was overwhelming. But I do know what it's like to be under the spotlight,” Zoe said, taking another drag. “I don't get how they could blame her. She was so young!”

“I guess she really changed after that,” I said. “That's what Mark was saying.”

“Clearly...” Zoe said. She looked to the distance again. I noticed there was a car approaching. “I'm sorry, but my parents are home. I have to help with some stuff. Are you guys okay? You know how to get back to Riverdale?”

I stood up and walked over to Evanna, who still seemed upset. I took her hand. She accepted and I pulled her up. “Yeah, we'll be fine. Thank you, Zoe,” I said.

Zoe tossed the cigarette away. “You guys are all right,” she said.

The car ride back was silent. Evanna clearly had a lot on her mind. I didn't want to pry, but I knew she was thinking that she too was partly responsible for her friend's death. I knew I had to say something, but before I could open my mouth, she said, “What was she saying about setting you up with Lindsay? Why did things get so awkward?”

Shit. “I think we should talk about if you're okay. Are you okay?” I asked.

“Don't change the topic, Pete,” she said. “What happened that night? Does it have to do with the fact that the Sanskys and the Sorenheims have never gotten along? I always wondered about that. In all my research, there were some holes, but this one always bothered me for no reason. Why did you two hate each other?”

“I don't know what you want me to say.”

“What did Zoe mean when she said that they were trying to set you and Lindsay up? Were you in on it, too? Did you see her that night? Tell me!” She raised her voice to a very uncomfortable volume. I didn’t know how to react.

I took a deep breath. “If you’re implying that I had something to do with Lindsay’s disappearance, you’re mistaken,” I said.

“Why didn’t you tell me about those dreams? Is it because you feel guilty about having those dreams, or maybe because you conspired to kill her?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said, trying to keep calm. “I didn’t think it was that important. I just wanted to help you. Evanna, are you listening to yourself now? You sound completely ridiculous.” A flash of lightning lit up the sky. A steady rain soon followed.

“Am I? Then tell me the truth. Tell me the truth about that night and I won’t throw around accusations anymore!” She was crying now. Her hands were trembling, so she had to slow the car down as the rain fell even harder.

“I did some stupid things that night,” I said quietly. “I’m not proud of them.”

Evanna didn’t say a word. I knew what she was really upset about, but she deserved to know the truth anyway. “Mattie and I broke up that night, the night Lindsay disappeared.”

“Okay, so what?” she said. “Who cares?”

“I don’t remember much that night, but we definitely had a nasty breakup. Things hadn’t been going too well the whole night. She walked out on me in a diner, we had a fight out by the pool, it was nuts. I vaguely remember going into someone’s room with her. It was all a blur after that. I woke up the next morning and I was still at Mark’s house. I was on a guest bed. And when I went downstairs, I saw Mattie. She had been here the night too. And she was crying. She saw me and she ran outside. She didn’t even look at me.” I shook my head. “I later found out that she accused me of raping her. And that’s when it all began. Her mom wanted me dead, and still does. My parents defended me. But then it got overshadowed when Lindsay went missing. Everyone started focusing on where Lindsay went, and this whole incident got pushed aside. But Mattie didn’t forget. When I was being grilled about that night by the police, I could barely remember anything, but I was only thinking about how to apologize to Mattie. I didn’t mean for it to happen. I guess I had forgotten in my drunken stupor that we had broken up. I don’t know. I’ll never know exactly what happened.”

Evanna was silent. The car kept moving at a brisk 70 miles per hour on the highway.

“Say something,” I said.

“Shame on you,” Evanna said. “You took advantage of her. No wonder they hate you. No wonder everyone hates you.”

“Evanna, please don’t. I don’t even know...” But she didn’t say another word for the entire trip.

I was left to my own guilty thoughts.

### PART III: An Unexpected Guest

Somewhere on the return trip, I had passed out. The next thing I remembered was lying on my bed with my mom looking over me, a worried expression on her face. “Pete, I told you not to stress yourself out too much,” she said.

I rubbed my forehead. “What happened?” I asked groggily.

“A friend of yours knocked on our door. She said you had fainted in her car. I don’t know what you two were doing, but you shouldn’t have been going on any trips. You should’ve told us. It’s not good for you to be doing too many things right now.” She brought me a cup of tea from my nightstand. “Here, drink this. It’ll make you feel better.”

I took the tea. “Thanks, Mom,” I said. I felt exhausted.

Unexpectedly my mom began to cry. I quietly drank my tea during my mother’s emotional episode. “I’m sorry, Pete,” she said with a sniffle. She took a tissue from my bedside and blew her nose. “I’m just happy to see you okay. I know how hard things have been the past few days.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Mattie is back, this whole festival issue with your father and Mr. Brown, and you got into that car accident. I don’t care what the doctors say. You shouldn’t be up and about after anything like that.” She gestured for me to drink my tea. I took a sip. “I know how difficult it must be dealing with these remnants of the past. It’s not easy for me, either.”

I nodded. “I hope you’re still on my side,” I said.

“Of course I am.”

“You know I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know, honey. Just get some rest.” She smiled and got up from the bed. “Tomorrow should be a resting day.” She closed the door.

I set my tea aside. I immediately texted Evanna letting her know I was okay. I didn’t expect a response. I was wearing myself out and I really did need to take a break. However, I found myself thinking again about what had just happened. In particular, I was worried about

Evanna. In addition to finding out how her friend had died, she now saw me as a monster for what happened that night 2 years ago. I couldn't keep a straight head. I was no closer to finding out what happened to Lindsay, I still didn't know who or what the catalyst or flame were, and I was still on bad terms with almost everybody I knew. I understood that Lindsay was a different person from who we had expected, due in part to what had happened with Rachel, but did this help in any way? There was definitely one person who I needed to talk to again, and that was Mattie, but I couldn't achieve this without running into the Sorenheims. Mattie had said she would contact me if she wanted to meet. I would have to wait.

I heard my phone ring. It was Evanna.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," she said.

"Thanks for taking me back home."

"No problem."

There was silence.

"Look," I started. "I just wanted to tell you that it wasn't my fault."

"Pete," she said. "Don't."

"But it's true."

"It's not important. What is important is that we finish what we're doing. There are too many loose ends. What we learned from Zoe was a good start."

She was either pretending or meant what she was saying. "Right," I said cautiously.

"Pete," she said.

"What?"

"My dad is acting weird."

"How?" I said.

She lowered her voice. "I told him we were asking around about the case, and he said something like: *You kids don't fucking know what you're doing. I already told you it was the parents. Why do you keep looking?* He wouldn't talk to me for the rest of the day. Something weird is going on."

"Hasn't he always been like this?"

“No. Well, it was only a few days ago that I started doing research on the topic.”

“You don’t think...”

“No. Also, he has no idea what he’s doing most of the time besides making deliveries.”

“Okay,” I said. “So why are you telling me?”

“Because I feel like what we’re doing is making some people uncomfortable. I think we need to get down to the bottom of this as soon as possible.” She sounded very serious now. “Can I come over tomorrow? You should probably rest after what happened today.”

“You sound exactly like my mom,” I said. I heard her laugh. “But I also need to talk to Mattie tomorrow. It depends on her schedule, though. She said that she would contact me.”

“Let me know when you’re free,” she said. “I have to go, good night.”

The minute I hung up my phone, I heard the front doorbell ring. I heard some shuffling downstairs and the front door open. I got up and peeked out my door into the foyer. My dad was shaking the hand of Mrs. Sorenheim. I quickly went back into my room and closed the door. My heart was beating fast. Who invited *her* over? I heard my mom walk out of the master bedroom and heard her greet Mrs. Sorenheim. Before I could even hide in cowardice, my door swung open. It was my mom. “Pete, I didn’t want to tell you, but I invited Mrs. Sorenheim over for a cup of tea,” she said nonchalantly. “I want to discuss some things. They’ve been bothering me for a long time.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“That’s because this won’t involve you, Pete. I want you to rest. This is a discussion for adults,” she said.

“I want to hear what she has to say!”

“No, Pete, that’s not a good idea.”

“Pete? Hello,” I heard a voice say. It was Mrs. Sorenheim. “Molly, if he wants to sit in, that’s perfectly fine.”

“Lauren, I don’t think he should,” I heard my dad say.

“Nonsense, he deserves to hear all of this.”

My mom turned to me again. After a bit of hesitation, she said, “Okay, but if you feel sick, promise me you will go back to your room and rest.”

“You have my word,” I said.

We gathered around our small kitchen table. Mrs. Sorenheim looked very proper, dressed again as though she went to a boarding school instead of a public school. Mattie didn't look anything like her mother, but she looked identical to her father. When she took a seat, she flattened her dress and sat down elegantly. My dad offered her a cup of tea. "Thank you, Ken," she said. "And thank you, Molly, for having me over today."

"Of course," my mom said. "Pete, we ran into Mrs. Sorenheim at the store today. We thought this would be a good idea."

I didn't say a word.

After a brief awkward silence, Mrs. Sorenheim began to speak. "There are a few orders of business I would like to discuss," she said, folding her hands on the table. "First of all, I want to preface by saying that Mr. Brown would like you to come back on Monday to reaudition."

"I know, thank you," I said. "What else?"

My mom nudged me. "Pete, stop," she said underneath her breath.

"What? Are we going to pretend here? Do we not remember what happened?"

I felt the air go out in the room. My dad awkwardly looked around the kitchen, shaking his head, while my mom stared down into her cup of tea. Mrs. Sorenheim, however, looked directly at me. "That is something we plan to discuss later. Please let me continue."

I folded my arms.

"Thank you," she said. "The second order of business is that I do not know what happened to your application. I understand that you might believe I had something to do with it, but I did not. I am an honest individual, and I do not see any personal gain I could achieve from it."

"That's bullshit!" I said, getting to my feet. My dad glared at me. "Peter!" he said. "Watch yourself, young man!" Mrs. Sorenheim had a stone-cold expression on her face. I was getting very heated, but I had to control my temper. I stared right at Mrs. Sorenheim. "There's no way anybody could have turned down that application with that recommendation."

"What recommendation?" she asked.

"Mr. Brown wrote me one."

"Did he now? Are you sure?"

"Of course he did!" I exclaimed.

"Okay. I didn't know that."

“Mr. Brown likes me. I am a good musician,” I said. “I was his best student.”

“I … wasn’t aware that was being discussed,” she said.

Now I was having my doubts. Mr. Brown did seem very disappointed in me. But what reason would he have to lie about something like that? I noticed that everybody at the table was looking at me now. I sat back down.

“Can I continue?” she asked. “Point of business number three is something that we have wished to talk about for a long time. I’m sorry Tim cannot make it, by the way. He is not feeling well.” I shrugged. *Get on with it.* “Now that Mattie unexpectedly returned from Australia, we felt the need to have this conversation. Our families have not had a good history together. We have yelled, we have screamed, we have fought. It has led nowhere. We cannot continue to be like this,” she said.

“What is it exactly that you are trying to say, Lauren?” My dad asked.

“I think that we should set aside our differences. I think that Peter should also not be allowed near Mattie, ever. I think that with these two things, we can slowly heal under God’s light. Only time can heal.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Mattie should be able to make this decision,” I said. “Not you.”

“She told me this,” she said.

“I don’t believe you,” I said angrily. “I know you lost your daughter, but that doesn’t mean you can lose another daughter by doing this.”

“Peter!” my mom exclaimed.

“That’s okay, Molly,” Mrs. Sorenheim said. “Peter, I understand that you’re upset. But for obvious reasons, my daughter and I both agree that this is the best course of action.”

“Lauren, is this a legal issue?” my dad asked.

“No, but it could be,” she said.

“This is ridiculous,” I said. “I’m done here.” I stormed from the table and clambered upstairs. I threw myself onto my bed. How was I going to work around this?

I heard my phone vibrate.

*We need to talk.*

I gathered that it was Mattie. No one else would be that secretive.

*Okay. When?*

It wasn't until midnight when Mattie arrived at my window. She almost fell on top of me as she climbed through into my room, tossing her bag onto my bed. "Pete. Are you impressed that I found your number?"

I shrugged. "You were always resourceful."

"Same room," she said simply.

"Yes."

"I heard my mom barged in to your house today."

"My parents didn't even bother to tell me," I said.

"Yeah, well, try having her as your mom. I bet she mentioned something about a restraining order,"

I nodded. "She might as well have."

"That wasn't my idea."

I shrugged again. "I figured as much."

"But it doesn't mean I forgive you."

I felt a lump form in my throat. "I'm surprised you've even talked to me, then."

She didn't say anything for a second, as though pondering what I had just said very deeply. "I've ... reconsidered many things in the past few years. I know it was not your fault, entirely," she said. "It's time to be mature about it." I noticed her observing the walls. "Oh my God, you have the same movie posters here from high school. You are such a fucking loser."

"What can I say? I like those films," I said.

She managed a smile. "I also wanted to give you this." She reached over into her bag and procured a small book. "This is Lindsay's journal."

I shook my head. "No, no. I don't think you should be giving me this," I said, despite my fascination.

"Don't worry about it. I read through it. I felt like I had the right. There's nothing incriminating in it. Well... there is, but not related to the case. I feel like you should read it. You had mentioned those dreams. Maybe this will help you."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

“I’ve been talking to Evanna and some of the guys, and they said you were doing some research on the case. I don’t exactly know what you’re doing, but I want to know what happened to my sister, and I don’t trust the police. Maybe you can make some headway.”

“Mat, I...”

“Don’t make me change my mind, Pete. I know this is stupid and I know I could get arrested for this, but I just want you to have it. Don’t do anything dumb with this.” She finally handed me the book. It was surprisingly dull and lacking in decoration on the outside. “Thank you,” I said. “But I really can’t take this.”

“Peter, do this for Lindsay. Do this for me. We’ve suffered enough.” She looked at me solemnly. “I don’t know what happened that night. I was shocked then, and I had a right to be.” She looked at me as though looking for my approval. “But deep down, I always knew that something else was up. I think you’re close. I hope you find out. I have to go,” she said as she closed her bag. “I’ll see you around, I guess.” She slipped out the window.

“I guess,” I said. I stared at the journal.

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- *2000: Mom said it was enough. Dad said he wasn’t done. I cried for a long time. ... Mattie cried the whole night last night. We have the play tomorrow. She stopped crying when she woke up...*
- *2001: I am grounded. I miss Rachel. I wish she could come play with me. I miss her... Mom told me today Rachel left for New York. She didn’t even say goodbye. I am very sad.*
- *2005: This has to stop, Mom says. How can she let this happen? Dad is still doing it. Mattie cried herself to sleep again, like back then. “Do you want this family to fall apart?” She likes to say. I don’t like Dad anymore. I cannot forgive him.*
- *2006: Mom is looking out for the family, she says. She is just a gigantic meanie and not helping me or Mattie. I hate her.*
- *2011: Peter Sansky is a bitch. I hate him. Why does Mattie get him? He doesn’t understand. We’ve both suffered through hardships. We are both vulnerable people. Why does he choose one over the other? I shouldn’t have told Mark and Zoe about my feelings for him. It makes me look weak.*

## \*The House, Again

She is walking away. It is so loud that I can barely hear myself talking to this girl that is standing next to me. Yet out of the commotion, I hear a honking noise. It’s a car horn. I

instinctively make my way to the front of the house and peek through a window. A black Mercedes is parked out front, and a man emerges from the car. It's Mr. Sorenheim. Some drunken revelers start to approach the car and begin prodding him. He doesn't look bothered though. When they begin to push him around, he takes out a bat from his car and they back off. Other people who are watching from the window start whispering to each other. "Holy shit, that's Lindsay's dad. Uh-oh," I hear. I've seen him before but never this angry. The others back off and leave him. Where is Lindsay? Where is Mattie? I hear a scream at the pool. It stands out very distinctively, cutting through the noise.

There's a small crowd surrounding Mattie and another guy I did not recognize. I don't know what happened, but she seems upset at the guy. When she sees me get closer, she gives me a dirty look but approaches me. Everyone is staring. "Pete. This fucker just molested me. What do you have to say?" she asks angrily.

"Dude, I didn't do anything like that," the guy pleads. "She just freaked out!"

"What happened?" I ask.

"It's not important. What are you going to do?" Mattie says. She's slurring her words. People are looking curiously. I put my arm around Mattie's shoulders. "Hey, Mat, can we go talk privately?" I ask.

"No! If you have *ssssomething* to say, then say it."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I try to say calmly.

"What's your problem?" she says.

"Your dad is outside!" I urge her. "Let's go!"

"Fuck you, Pete. You never cared about me. We're done." She spits in my face and storms off, stumbling into people in the process. As I wipe my face, I see John in the crowd. He has a sympathetic look on his face, as does everyone else. He leaves to follow Mattie and bring her back, I presume. I stand there like a fool as the other people turn back to their own business. The guy pats me on the shoulder. "I didn't do anything, I promise," he says.

I shake my head and wave him off. I know that Mattie is volatile but tonight is different. Was her dad's arrival related to this? Did she know that she was going to get into trouble? As I contemplate, I notice somebody approaching from the back of the crowd, rushing towards me. It is Lindsay. She is panicking. She runs up to me and says, "Pete. It's my dad. He's come for us."

I was taken off guard. "What? What do you mean?"

"Help me," she pleads.

Suddenly, John emerges from the crowd behind Lindsay, dragging Mattie like a prisoner. She has an empty martini glass in her hand. “What is up with this one tonight?” he says jokingly. Lindsay notices her inebriated sister and her eyes widen. “Lindsay,” John says, nodding. “Your sister is out of it.”

“What the... we need to get out of here, Mat!” Lindsay exclaims. I notice that Mattie refuses to even look in my direction. “This drink you gave me is *terrible!*” she slurs to John.

“She should rest, not run around!” John says to Lindsay and hands Mattie over. “Don’t do anything silly, like give her to Pete. I don’t think she wants to talk to him anymore.” Lindsay shakes her head, taking Mattie by the arm. Mattie fights her off but slumps down into Lindsay’s arms. Lindsay quickly takes the glass before it slips out of Mattie’s hands, handing it to me. She is clearly panicking. “Oh my God, you’re so drunk, Mat. Dad is here and he’s going to flip. We have to get you out of here. John,” she looks at him. “Thanks.”

“I’ll take her,” I offer. John shakes his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. You’re very drunk, too, Pete.” It’s not true. But I wasn’t sure. “Why don’t you stick with Lindsay for now?”

“She’s not well, just let me,” I insist, but I am cut off by Mattie’s screams. “No! NO!” The music from the party is loud but her screams pierce through the noise. “Get away from me. You were *supposed* to stay by my side, but you leave me. And I know it wasn’t your fault, but you still leave me. You *promised!*”

“What are you talking about?” I say.

“You didn’t take care of me. You left me to my parents and you didn’t stay with me. You’re not going to save me tonight,” she says. She is crying now. “You caused all of this.”

The music suddenly stops, as though a record skipped. I see Mr. Sorenheim walking towards us from the back. His towering presence is looming over the drunken revelers. I turn towards Lindsay, but she is gone. John is taking Mattie’s arm. “Come on, Mattie, we have to go,” he says, dragging her off. Mattie is fine, but I am worried about Lindsay. I don’t see her anywhere. She must have slipped off quickly to save herself, leaving her sister in John’s care. I have established an okay relationship with her father, but I’d rather not let him see me here in this state. I slip into the crowd to avoid attention. I spot Lindsay through a window, trying to make her way upstairs. “Lindsay!” I call. She doesn’t hear me. I rush towards the patio door and make my way to the staircase, but before I do, I hear commotion behind me.

I see Mark and Mr. Sorenheim engaged in a heated argument. Mark is clearly inebriated, and he has a smug expression on his face. It was generally well known that Mr. Sorenheim, the timid dentist, lived under the shadow of his wife but a tall man with a baseball bat was still a scary sight. He isn’t acting aggressively, but I can’t hear the conversation so I don’t know what

is being said. Everybody knows that the father won't do anything stupid, but I still watch on edge. Eventually, he turns around and leaves as everyone boos and throws drinks at him. He doesn't react but I can tell he is seething.

Somebody taps me on the shoulder from behind. "Don't go up there."

## The Sixth Morning: Is This It?

I heard the church bells ringing. The first thing I noticed when my eyes opened was a journal. I had skimmed most of it before I fell asleep. My mouth was very dry. I took the journal, placed it on my nightstand, and freshened up in the bathroom.

This dream that I had woken from was different from the others. It felt real. I didn't feel like I was in it. I felt like an observer. The other dreams had a more surreal quality to them, yet this one I felt like I was actually viewing events as they happened. What was the significance?

My head hurt. It was a combination of yelling at Mrs. Sorenheim and from reading the journal. What I had found in there regarding the sexual abuse was shocking and sickening, yet not unsurprising. It explained why Mattie and Lindsay were who they were, and it showed how differently they reacted to their situation. It showed that their mother was a monster, who would turn a blind eye to the atrocities of their father, trying desperately to preserve the Sorenheim reputation. It showed how badly Lindsay wanted to get out, especially after the incident with Rachel. I could only imagine how Lindsay had been punished when they found out that Lindsay had something to do with Rachel's death. It explained Lindsay's character, and how differently Mattie had handled it. I now understood what people like Mark, Zoe, and Evanna meant when they said she had had a different side. I had to talk to Mattie about this revelation as soon as possible. Why hadn't she told me about this earlier?

As I brushed my teeth, I also thought about other things that I had read last night. Mattie had mentioned many times that Lindsay had named me in her journal. That was, in fact, the reason that we had reconnected recently. I had always assumed it was incriminating, which is what made me uncomfortable, but it looked like it had actually been romantic, which surprised me. Zoe had mentioned something about how the underground had joked about setting the two of us up. Now according to her journal it seemed as though she had liked me for a while, at least since Mattie and I had begun dating. I couldn't see the connection.

When I walked out the bathroom, I noticed I had 5 missed calls on my phone. 3 of them were from Evanna, 1 was from Mattie, and 1 was from John. Those 3 missed calls reminded me about Evanna and how her father had been acting strangely. Before I could make the call, though, I heard my parents begin to have a conversation downstairs. It didn't sound very

friendly. I walked out the door and heard them having an argument. It was too early in the morning for this. My parents didn't argue much, but when they did it was usually very hostile.

“... not good for him, and you know it!” I heard my mother say.

I decided to not intervene this time and let them settle it. After I had passed out last night, my parents and Mrs. Sorenheim must have had an interesting conversation. The thought of her now sickened me. What a monster. Her proper attitude now disgusted me given who she really was. Their daughters were lucky to have made it out the way they were. I wanted to tell my parents, but it was probably not the right decision at this juncture. I had other things to deal with first. Before I could call Evanna, though, Mattie was calling me again.

“I know what happened,” was the first thing she said.

“What?”

“I know what happened. It was a set up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about that night.”

“Look, Mattie, I don’t know if you’re feeling well...” I pleaded. She sometimes went into these catatonic rants. “It was a long time ago...”

“It wasn’t your fault. I blamed you. And I’m sorry.”

I desperately tried to change subjects. “I read through the journal. Why didn’t you tell me about what happened with your parents...”

“It was them. It was the underground.”

Now I was very confused. “Mattie, I don’t understand.”

The phone went dead. “Mattie? Mattie?” I said. But she had hung up. What had just happened? I tried calling back but the phone kept going to voicemail.

*It was the underground.* Mark, Zoe, John, and the others: where did they fit into the picture? *We all joked about setting her up with you*, said Zoe. The last thing I remember from the dream was getting ready to follow Lindsay up the stairs after she had been scared off by her father’s appearance. *Don’t go up there.* Who was that?

*And I know it wasn’t your fault, but you still leave me. You promised!* It wasn’t my fault. I left her alone. I promised in the diner that I’d stay by her. But Mr. Sorenheim’s untimely appearance changed things. I left Mattie with John. But she was freaking out. She didn’t want to be with me. She had just broken up with me. How did I end up with her that night? Something

didn't add up. I tried calling back a few more times but there was no response. I also called back John and Evanna but I had little luck reaching out to them. I made a mental note to try Evanna again soon, but I didn't particularly want to speak to John.

For the rest of the morning, I avoided my parents. It was clear they didn't want to talk to me either. It looked like they had been arguing with one another about me. I quickly ate breakfast, put on my headphones, and went for a jog.

I ran past an adjoining church crowd on their way out. We had many memorial services for Lindsay. At the time, I had envisioned her as a completely different person. But now, with new details emerging from different sources, I saw her as a victim of circumstance. I thought again of that one time she had passed me on Cypress Hill on the way to school. Was she looking for an escape? Was she looking for me? Something else crossed my mind. Mattie had always attended my school concerts, but Lindsay had always been right there as well. At the time, it didn't seem like something she would be interested in. I began to feel guilty about judging Lindsay just as everyone else had.

I ran past the place where Joe Loren, unbeknownst to me at the time, had hit me with his car. It seemed an eternity ago. There was definitely something suspicious about Evanna's father, but I couldn't quite pinpoint it. His wife seemed kind enough, being a school administrator, but his fascination with Lindsay's disappearance seemed suspect to me. I reminded myself once again to call Evanna when I got back.

And then there was John. Once best friends, he now seemed more distant than ever. A miscommunication and a beating had made things turn sour between us. No one was to blame except Mark. Although he appeared to be a very impulsive person, Mark didn't appear to be a person who would have John beaten up for no reason. They had history. John had been a loyal dog, begging for attention, and he just so happened to be my friend and once under the control of Mark Findelay.

*We jokingly tried to set you up.* Zoe's words echoed through my mind. Who would want this to happen? She had mentioned that Lindsay was almost taken in by the underground. Mark had said he joined to get closer to Mattie after still being bitter about the junior high breakup. While I was thinking about all this, I ran by the local pub, which was populated only by a few older men who had nothing to do in the middle of the day. Through the window, I saw the bartender serving a beer to an old man who was sitting by himself at the counter. Behind the bar, I saw rows and rows of liquor. In a small town like Riverdale, sometimes there wasn't much else to do besides go to a bar and drink. I remembered in my dream that I was served a Manhattan in a martini glass. I was fascinated by the swirling colors. I then also remembered that Mattie had a martini glass in her hand as well. It seemed as though John had given her the drink. She didn't like it very much, apparently. The bartender saw me observing in the window. Embarrassed, I continued on my run.

When I returned home, I saw somebody sitting on my porch. It was John. He was sitting in a similar pose to when we had met a few days ago, with his legs lounged up. This time, though, he looked dead serious. “So, is this it?” he asked simply.

I took out my headphones. “What are you talking about?” I asked.

“It’s going to be like this?” I noticed he didn’t have his casts anymore. He had recovered quickly.

“You’re not making any sense.”

“Look, I made some mistakes in the past. I’m moving on. College has been great, but now all this is coming back and I don’t like it.” He got up from the chair. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. You’re my best friend.”

“Who did you hurt?” I asked.

“I came here to say I’m sorry. And you know I’d do anything for you. You’re my pal. We’ve been through so much together. You have to understand that.”

*You’d do anything for anyone*, I thought. “Why are you telling me this now?”

“I don’t want you to get hurt. Mattie’s return is screwing things up around here. It brings back memories, you know?” John scratched his head. “Zoe called me the other day and says you were asking around. I think you should stop.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know that you were concerned that Mattie was slandering you, but I don’t know why you’re insistent on doing all this research, man. It’s done. Just let this all go, dude. You have no reason to worry or anything.” It was then that I realized that I had never actually told John about my dreams. “You’re my best friend. We don’t joke around anymore, you’re so serious all the time, I don’t know what happened but it’s time to move on. Lindsay’s gone. She’s definitely in a better place now. But it was *two years ago*, man.”

I said, “It’s going to sound crazy, but I’d been having these dreams.” I then proceeded to tell John about my dreams and Lindsay and the bartender and the catalyst, vessel, and flame. He listened intently but I could tell he was trying to suppress his laughter at points. I hit him in the arm. “Dude, this is serious!” I said. But in my mind, I knew it was ridiculous as well.

“Come on, Pete, it’s all just so bizarre. Well, anyway, I think I sort of get why you’re doing this. You really listened to Mr. Johnson’s lectures after all,” he said, smiling. “I didn’t think you even paid attention in Psychology.”

“I don’t even know what to think of it,” I said.

John took on the mannerisms of a psychiatrist. “Well, it’s clear that your fixation on Lindsay means you inherently feel guilty for her disappearance, although it is possible that your previous romantic relationship with her twin sister is complicating things because of their uncanny resemblance, which could lead to...” But I then cut him off. “You almost sound like you know what you’re talking about,” I said, impressed. “But shut the hell up.”

“Listen, Peter,” he said, serious now. “Just know that I’ll always be here for you. I’ve got your back. The underground is behind me. That was the past. I’m sorry I yelled at you the other day. It just brought back bad memories.” He offered his hand. “Can we have a truce?”

I thought for a second. I considered telling him about the journal, but somehow it all seemed too soon for that. I needed to speak to Mattie first. I also remembered how angry Mark had been with John, so much so that it had led to violence. I then recalled how John kept reminding me that I owed him. But in the end it all kept coming back to the fact that this was John Mitchell. This was my best friend from my childhood. He was the most loyal friend I ever had. We had been arguing over a series of misunderstandings. And what was it coming down to?

I accepted the handshake. “Okay.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “You know, I was thinking about how Lindsay would have hated it here even if she was still around. She would have commuted to a shitty community college, she would have lived at home, and it just would have sucked.”

*I want to go home.* Lindsay wanted to go home. But what home did she have?

## The Second Time Around

After chatting with John, I returned home. My mom was preparing lunch in the kitchen. My dad was watching television in the den. Things seemed normal, but I was careful not to cause a scene. After taking another quick shower, my mom called me over to have a talk. She was making a salad but she took a few minutes to sit down at the table with me.

“I know it’s been tough these past few days,” she started. *You have no idea.* “But I just want you to know that everything we’ve been doing is for the best.” She held my hand tenderly. “Your father is very upset. It was tough for us back then with the Sorenheims, it’s still tough now. I’m amazed we even had a civil conversation last night.” It was strange seeing my mother acting rationally while my father, seemingly cooped up in the den, was not quite himself. “These kinds of times really bring out who we are. Yesterday, Lauren was talking about things. They were just things. I don’t see it going anywhere.”

I nodded.

“You don’t have anything to say?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I just want you guys to be happy.”

“Oh honey, we are. I’m sorry if we acted rashly. We know you love Mattie. And Lindsay’s disappearance was hard on everyone. It’s just... we know this family. They’re tough as nails. You know how they were after Lindsay disappeared.”

“About that, Mom...”

“You don’t need to say anything else. I believe you. I know you. You wouldn’t harm a fly, much less your girlfriend.” *You have no idea.* “We always had your back.” She gave a warm smile. “We wouldn’t let some nasty parents destroy our son’s reputation.”

“But Dad...”

“He’s a tough cookie. But he always stood by your side too. He just showed it differently.” She looked towards the den. My dad looked defeated and tired. Mrs. Sorenheim must’ve worn him out last night. “Why don’t you say something to cheer him up? Tell him that you’re going to do something about that audition.”

I nodded. It seemed like the only decent thing to do. I got up and walked over to the den. He didn’t react as I sat down on the couch next to him. “Hi, Dad,” I said. No response.

“Mrs. Loren told me I should go and get the audition thing settled,” I said. “Mr. Brown wanted to give me a second chance.”

He nodded without saying a word. My dad looked tired. “Good. You deserve it,” he said. He switched off the television. “Pete, I want you to know something. About Lauren, we didn’t agree to anything. I think that she was just trying to put on a show but she didn’t really mean anything. I pity her.” He folded his hands in his lap. “We knew that the minute Mattie stepped back in Riverdale, this was bound to happen. I always tried to support your mother through all of this, but it hasn’t been easy.” He turned to look at me. “Pete, I know we’ve been through this many times, but I need you to look me in the eyes and tell me that you had nothing to do with it.”

I looked right into his eyes. “I didn’t do it, Dad.”

He nodded, shutting his eyes. “Then we have nothing else to discuss.” *It wasn’t all for nothing*, my dad probably wanted to say. “Mattie is a nice girl.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Also,” he opened his eyes again. “You really think she turned down that application?” he asked, looking slightly mischievous. “Are we ever going to solve this mystery? I know my son doesn’t get turned down by anyone in music.”

“There is no doubt in my mind, Dad,” I said.

“Good, good,” he said. I felt a buzz in my pocket. “Sorry, Dad, I have to take this call,” I said, getting up. He had closed his eyes, contently nodding off to sleep. I put a blanket on him.

I went outside to take the call. It was Evanna. “Pete, why the hell didn’t you return my calls?” She said, sounding out of breath. “I left a bunch of messages.”

“Sorry, I had other things to take care of,” I said.

“My dad’s been gone since yesterday afternoon. I don’t know where he could have gone. And it’s really worrying me.”

“Are you sure he didn’t just wander off?”

“This is the longest he’s ever been away. He said something about getting close to solving the case, and I’m worried he’s going to do something stupid.”

“Solving the case?”

“It’s about Lindsay disappearance.” This couldn’t be good.

“Okay, I’ll be right over. Do you want...?”

“Wait. There’s something else.” There was silence on the other end. It sounded like she was wrestling to say something. “I think Mark is following me,” she eventually uttered. Mark Findelay, the vessel? “What? Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think it started a few days ago. I didn’t want to make you worry. This was after we went to his house. Maybe I’m paranoid or something, but I think I’ve seen him wandering around my house,” she said. “Boy, this is not fun anymore. I hope we didn’t make him angry. We know how violently ... inclined he is. Can I stop by?”

“No, stay put, I’ll come to you,” I said. There was so much I wanted to talk to her about, especially regarding the journal as it had essentially been the reason why she had gone to see me in the first place, but it didn’t seem like the best time now. “Don’t go anywhere,” I urged.

When I arrived at Evanna’s house in the car, I noticed there was a lone car parked on the side of the road opposite of her house. There was no one inside. I got out of the car cautiously and looked around. The street was empty except for the two cars. I approached the house. There were no cars in the driveway. Joe Loren must have taken one car and Mrs. Loren was probably out. I knocked on the door. There was no response. I peeked around the corner into the backyard. The gate was locked. “Hello?” I called. “No one’s home...” I heard a voice whisper. I turned around and was immediately struck by a baseball bat right in the abdomen. I felt blinding pain

that I hadn't felt since I got hit by Joe Loren. I collapsed to the ground, groaning in pain. I looked up and knew whose face I was about to see.

"How did I know I'd find you here?" Mark sneered. His tall lanky figure suddenly looked very dominating from the sidewalk. He gripped the baseball bat tighter. "You'd best watch yourself, buddy," he said, pointing at me.

"I don't know... what you're talking about." I wheezed.

He kicked me in the abdomen again. This pain was unbearable. "You know..." he said, wiping off his forehead. He took a look around. "I kind of liked you in high school. We didn't talk much or anything, but I let you come to my parties, you know? But now I see you're dealing with this fucking loser, and you're STILL asking around. I just want to know what the hell you're doing, huh?"

He must have been referring to John. "What the hell did John do?"

Mark laughed. "Isn't he your best friend? I guess even best friends don't say those kinds of things. Look, like I said, I kind of like you, Petey-boy, but just so you know, I run shit around here," he said, gesturing around the neighborhood. "The underground is mine and always will be, and that piece of garbage will never be part of us again. So stop what you're doing, and let this be a warning."

I wanted to get up but I was afraid he'd hit me again. "Look, I promise I'm not trying to ruin anyone's reputation." I held my hands up in surrender. "All I'm doing is asking some people about Lindsay. Is that really so offensive to you?"

"Why?" He asked. "Zoe told me that you were asking around. She called me, crying. What the hell did you say to her?" He was about to kick me again but restrained himself. He took a deep breath. "This is getting us nowhere."

"Well, if you just told me..." I offered. He shushed me. "Do you realize how many people that you are hurting right now? Zoe was upset. You made me kick the crap out of John, now Evanna too..."

"What about Evanna?" I said urgently. "Have you been following her?"

He shook his head. "The point is, I don't want anyone else to be hurt. Lindsay was a good girl. You're bringing back some bad memories for me, you know? And I don't like getting those feelings, you feel me? We did some pretty shitty things, but Lindsay was a good part of high school, no matter what people say. I don't want to hear nobody else telling me that Pete Sansky is asking around and shit. The past is the past. Let her resting memory be a good one."

"Shut your mouth," I said with surprising anger.

“Watch yourself, Pete. I have a bat,” he said, not feeling threatened at all. “I’ll be seeing you.” He walked back towards the other car on the street. So it was his car after all. I didn’t want to instigate further, so I stayed on the ground until his car had pulled away.

I cringed getting up, but I had to make sure Evanna was okay. “Evanna!” I yelled. “Evanna!” I limped towards the door. I pounded, but there was still no answer. I dialed her phone. I could hear the phone ringing inside. “Evanna! Pick up your damn phone!” I had to get into the house. I climbed clumsily over the gate and dropped to the patio. I searched for the back door, which was unlocked. I dialed the phone again and heard the phone ringing. It was coming from upstairs. I ran past the hallway of portraits and turned around to ascend the stairs. “Evanna!” The ring was coming from the bathroom. Her cell phone was lying on the bathroom sink, ringing loudly.

Evanna was nowhere to be found. Where could she be? There were no signs of any struggle. Maybe her dad had taken her. Maybe Mark had kidnapped her. I couldn’t think straight. I picked up her phone. There was nothing out of the ordinary with regards to recent calls or texts. I was sure that Mark had something to do with it.

Quickly, I stumbled down the stairs and to my car. I took the quickest route to his house and amazingly, I caught up in a few minutes. However, he made a wrong turn and was going in another direction. I kept on him, staying close but not close enough for suspicion.

Mark pulled into the local strip mall. I followed but parked far enough to not be seen. I kept an eye on him as he got out of his car and then, surprisingly, made his way to me. “Look, I know you’re following me. What do you want?” I heard him say. “You want another beating?”

I lowered my window. “Where the hell did you take Evanna?!” I exclaimed.

He looked at me strangely and smirked. “You just never quit.”

“She’s not in her house, and her cell phone was left behind. Where is she?”

He leaned closer into my car. “Maybe you should be more careful about what you do around Riverdale, friend.” I forced open my car door and hit him with full force. “Ow, man, what the fuck?” He said, backing away while I stormed out of the car. “Where... *is she?*” I asked again.

“You got balls, Petey. I didn’t take her, if that’s what you think.” He held his shoulder, wincing in pain. “*I didn’t abduct your girlfriend, okay?*”

“You’re lying.”

He shook his head. “Why would I want to take her?”

“I don’t know,” I said, not really able to come up with anything in particular. I leaned on the car and took another deep breath. “She said that you’d been following her.”

“And you believe her?” He shook his head with an amused expression and pulled out a cigarette from his pocket. “Listen, I have nothing to gain from kidnapping her. But if you’re really worried about her, I suggest you ask your ex-girlfriend.” He lit up the cigarette.

“What? Why?”

“She’s acting all weird.” He took another drag.

“You… talk to her?” I said, perplexed.

“I keep tabs on everyone,” he said. “She called me today, really upset. I don’t know.”

“And why exactly do you think she knows where Evanna is?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You’re a piece of shit. If I find out you had something to do with this…” I threatened.

He held his hands out. “Bring it on, hombre. Sooner or later, the shit that you’re pulling, getting all up in people’s business, it’s going to get you in trouble. You’ll regret it.” He flicked the cigarette away. “Let me know how that all goes.”

## The Catalyst, Part I

When I pulled up to the Sorenheim house, it was evident that they were hosting a party, as there were dozens of cars parked along the side of the road for many blocks. I pulled up behind the last car on the opposite side of the road and looked on. There were many people in suits and dresses attending the event. How was I supposed to find Mattie now? I kept an eye out at the second floor corner bedroom. There was no sign of any activity. Maybe she wasn’t even there at all. I was sitting in the car, deciding what to do next, when I hear a tap on the passenger door side. I jumped. It was Mattie. I unlocked the doors. “Jeez, you scared me!” I said.

She got into the car. “Sorry about that,” she said, closing the door behind her.

“Why didn’t you just call me?”

She shrugged. “I wanted to surprise you.”

I sighed. “Well, you got me. What was that phone call about?” I asked.

“I can explain. Just drive please,” she said, rather urgently. “Come on.”

We were driving. We had no destination in mind. Back in high school, we would do the same thing. Sometimes we didn't particularly feel like going back home after school, so we would drive around Riverdale. It was a small town, so the sights grew familiar very quickly. Sometimes we would take short road trips to nearby attractions, just to escape for a little while.

"What's going on back at your house?" I asked Mattie as we drove. I made sure not to drive by the Sorenheim house again.

"Some stupid fundraiser, I don't really know. I've only been back a few days, so I'm not sure. They didn't do this before I came back from Australia," she said. "It's so stupid." I didn't say a word. I wanted to find a way to bring up the topic of the journal smoothly, but the opportunity didn't seem right. "Being a twin really sucks," she added. "Especially being the twin of a missing girl. Everyone looks at you kind of weird. Like... *oh, there's Lindsay after all!* I can't stand being in that house." She looked out the window, leaning her head against the glass. "I should never have come back."

"Don't say that," I said. "I'm sure your parents were happy to see you."

She chuckled. "Did you read Mattie's journal?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want to see it ever again. Don't show it to anyone, okay?" she said. I nodded. She remained steely in her resolve and was determined not to show her emotions, but I knew she was obviously hurting inside.

"You're brave for staying with your parents, and for coming back to this town. I would have gone to the police," I said.

"Would you?" she said, turning to me. "If you knew what would happen to your family's reputation, your whole way of life? My mom would lose her job. My dad would lose his practice. We would be heckled, dismissed, threatened, run out of town. It wouldn't be pretty." I thought about how my family had gone through similar treatment when the Sorenheims had accused me of raping Mattie. If it all hadn't been overshadowed by Lindsay's disappearance, we would have suffered a similar fate in Riverdale.

I made myself clear. "What they did to you is inexcusable," I said.

"You don't think I know that? You think I'm stupid, Pete?" She sounded angry now. "My whole life has been a tough decision waiting to be made." She was shaking in frustration. "There's no way you can understand."

"So why didn't you tell me earlier?"

She started to calm down. A tear fell from her cheek. She wiped it away and leaned her head against the window. “Because I knew you would react this way. *You have to tell the police, what are you waiting for, they’re monsters, put them in prison.* But it’s not that simple. I have so many other things to consider. And it’s been different recently.”

Now I was frustrated. I didn’t think she really understood the gravitas of the situation. “It doesn’t matter how it is now. Your parents committed crimes against you and your sister. You can’t just let this go!” I exclaimed.

“You sound exactly like my sister,” she said rather calmly. “Look, we handled the situation differently throughout the years. She branched out more socially to deal with the pains, and I wanted to keep things more conservative… and rational. But we did agree upon one thing. It was too risky to tell anyone.”

I understood but didn’t necessarily agree. “I’m going to tell the police if you don’t. Mattie, this is serious,” I said.

“You wouldn’t, because you care about me and my family, even after all this.”

“But I can’t sit by and just…”

“Peter!” She exclaimed. I jumped in my seat in surprise, jolting the car slightly. “Get with the program, okay? This is not going to change anything. What happened has happened, and there’s nothing we can do to change it. But there *are* other things that we can change. I thought that was why you’re conducting your little investigation.”

I hadn’t been surprised by an outburst from Mattie in many years. This reminded me of the fights that we used to have. They were always ugly. “Fine, okay? Then why did you give the journal to me?” I asked. “Why did you decide to tell me now?”

“I wanted to give you some perspective. You’re close to something, I know it. I wanted to help. I don’t want all of this shit to be for nothing.” I didn’t know exactly what she meant, but I went with it. She continued, “I also heard you were snooping around about my sister. It showed you cared about my sister. I know she cared about you. It was the least I could do.”

We didn’t exchange another word for a while. I let the emotions settle down before I started talking again. I asked the obvious question that I hadn’t really articulated before. “Why are you helping me?”

She made that strange sound she used to always make when she was frustrated. It sounded like an animal growl. When I heard it, I knew she was upset about something very complicated or things beyond her control. “Look, I’m not proud of what I was doing that night, and I know we were going through a rough patch, but that still didn’t give you a right to do what you did, especially considering.” She remained firm in her voice. “But I know there were other

factors involved. And then, after seeing how my parents went on a rampage against yours, it left a bitter taste in my mouth. I didn't want it to explode like that. I couldn't help but feel responsible too."

"You weren't responsible for anything." I insisted.

"I was reckless. I feel obligated to help." She tapped against the glass methodically. "I don't understand. Nothing's going to change the past. You hurt me, you left me, but why do I keep coming back to you? I'm such a loser." She sighed again, frustrated, growling. "I saw you a few days ago and I hated you. It brought back everything I hated about you. But it was so good to see you, too, you know? I don't know why I feel so conflicted. It's like one part of me is saying you've changed, but another part of me is saying you haven't, and then another part of me is saying that it's all been a big misunderstanding. And my sister's involved somehow. No one really knows what happened, right?" She sat up and rolled down the window. "If only my parents didn't just make everything worse, maybe we could have resolved this differently."

"Well, I'm glad you don't completely hate me," I said.

I couldn't see clearly, but I thought I saw her smirk. "So, you never told me why you started all of this, Pete. What made you so interested all of a sudden?"

"I've been having these weird dreams," I explained. "Oddly surreal, and strangely enough some memories are coming back to me, about that night. And I don't know what to make of it. Why is it coming back now?"

"Maybe I *am* being punished, like my parents said," she pondered aimlessly. "Look at all this confusing shit..." She didn't appear to take in a word I had just said.

"Don't say that, Mattie," I said. "These last few fucking days have been crazy as hell. You sure as hell know your parents have no right to say anything about God, considering who they are. They should both be in prison."

"Who knows how many other rich families have dark secrets like this?" she said. "Damn it." She seemed frustrated again. "I feel like I'm ... bound to you. Why am I telling you all this? It's like we have unfinished business or something. What is it?"

"I don't know," I said.

We didn't say anything for a long time. She just leaned against the door, hair blowing in the wind. After about 10 minutes, she propped up her head and said, "I never told you what I meant about that phone call." There was a beat, as though she wanted me to guess. "Well, you sounded like you were in a trance or something," I offered.

"I was sleepalking," she said.

“What?” I was taken back.

“I’ve also been having dreams. It’s like coming back to Riverdale triggered something. I think they’re similar to yours. When I wake up I keep remembering ‘the underground.’ When I woke up this morning, I saw that I had called you. I didn’t call you back because I was embarrassed and wanted to tell you in person. It just so happened that you were at my door this morning.”

“I guess we really are connected,” I said. “This can’t be a coincidence. This is weird. You said it was a set up or something.”

She shook her head and went back to leaning against the window. “I don’t remember much, sorry. I just want to forget that night, but it keeps coming back. Again, maybe it’s unfinished business.”

“What *do* you remember from your dreams?” I asked.

“Again, I don’t recall much of it at all.”

“Does it happen every night?”

“No.”

“Me neither,” I said. “Do you feel in control?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you just watching or are you participating?”

“I’m usually just observing. Listen, I don’t want to talk about this anymore. It’s uncomfortable, okay? Just drive. Drive to the outskirts or something. Drive anywhere.” We eventually made it past the abandoned trailers (“1 year later: where is she now?” was written on a banner that was never torn down) and down to the main highway. “Hey, can I ask you something?” I said as we drove farther. She nodded. It looked like she was about to pass out. “Sorry, don’t mind me. I didn’t get any sleep last night,” she explained.

“Did you know Rachel?”

She groaned and stretched. “I thought everyone forgot about her. I guess I did... she was Lindsay’s friend, not mine. I saw her a few times. She was also close with your best friend Evanna.” I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, it’s pretty sad what happened to her. The scary thing is that nobody really remembers who she is because it was so long ago.”

“That must’ve wrecked Lindsay,” I said.

“You have no idea. She was a sweet girl who suddenly transformed into a rebel. It was the only natural outcome. It was terrible how long she was grounded. She couldn’t do anything. And more importantly, I don’t think it was...” she yawned. “...her fault. I don’t know what happened but they were all fucking kids, like 7 or something. I bet she didn’t even know why she was grounded. And actually, I think that was about the time when our parents started to take advantage of us. This all messed her up. You know just a few years ago, she turned a gun on our dad? There were a lot of emotions for her there.”

I was shocked to hear that. “How did your parents take that?”

“They took it surprisingly well. I mean, they knew she wouldn’t actually fire the gun. So they grounded her again. But Lindsay was already turned. It just stirred the pot some more.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter how anybody tries to twist it. If my parents weren’t who they were, if they didn’t initiate, things would be a lot different for us. You think you caused shit?” She scoffed. “It all began with them.”

It was so clear that I was surprised I hadn’t picked up on it before. The Sorenheims were the catalyst. I remembered the bartending taking the lighter to the martini glass. *The martini glass*. Wasn’t Mattie holding a drink that night, the one that John gave to her? She hated the drink. Mark, the vessel, provided the foundation for the drink; the conflict with the parents had been broiling deep down for many years, igniting the drink; the flame rises. But what was the result? And how was it connected to my dreams, to everything else? I became so engrossed in my thoughts that I had to swerve out of the way of a car in front of me, as I had been accelerating too quickly. Mattie didn’t even notice the jolt of the car.

“Mattie, I have to ask you one more thing,” I said. She mumbled incoherently. It looked like she was actually trying to sleep now. I struggled to articulate exactly what I was about to say. “Do you somehow think that I didn’t do it? It’s just because you’re trying to help me and...”

“That’s a stupid question, Pete. Don’t be stupid.”

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“It’s time to go back, Mat.”

Mattie had been napping in the backseat for over two hours now. She had just told me to drive, but I was running out of gas. I knew she had to unwind (as did I) so this little diversion was good for us. I was quite surprised, considering our history, that we were still close. I felt a little guilty for it, even. I knew Mattie felt similarly, albeit in a different manner. But I knew it couldn’t be like this forever, and we couldn’t stay on the road any longer. Her parents would get suspicious. “We have to go back,” I said.

“No, I don’t want to...” she whined. I smiled. I realized that except when I’d been around Evanna, during those random moments in between when her bubbly personality would just make

me chuckle, I hadn't really been enjoying myself much lately. It was then that I remembered that I still had to find Evanna. That was the whole reason why I sought Mattie in the first place. "Wait... did you talk to Evanna today?" I asked.

She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. "Fine... let's go back."

"But Mark said you called him and he said something about Evanna."

She adjusted her seat. "No, I didn't talk to anyone but you today."

"Are you sure?" I was panicking. Was Mark trying to throw me off?

"Yes, I would remember," she said. "What's wrong?"

"She called me this morning and said she wanted me to come over. She said her dad's been missing and she said something about him solving the case... I don't remember. I went over and she wasn't there. Mark was there," I omitted the details about our encounter then. "I found her phone inside. No one was home."

"Maybe she just forgot her phone at home and she's at church," Mattie offered.

I didn't buy it. "But she wanted me to come over. She also said she thought Mark was following her or something. Shit. We have to get back into town." I immediately took the first exit to turn back towards Riverdale.

As we drove, many thoughts raced through my mind. What interest did Mark have in Evanna, so much that he would spy on her? She had been with me when we had visited his house and when we had talked to Zoe. Did Zoe say something? And Joe Loren was missing. He had "solved" the case, according to Evanna. What was the connection between all of these events?

When we were approaching the Sorenheim house, Mattie said that she wanted to come along with me while I looked for Evanna. I insisted on dropping her at home. "I don't want you to get involved with this," I said. "Plus, you need to get home before your parents get worried."

"*You* don't want me to get involved?" Mattie said. She scoffed. "Well, I'm sure she's fine and I think you're overreacting. But you're close. You're really close." She punched me lightly on the shoulder. "I can *feel* it."

I shook my head amusingly. "I cannot believe that you still want to talk to me," I said.

"I don't forgive you, Pete," she said rather seriously. "But this world is a mess." She told me to stop a few blocks away from the house before letting her out. "Thanks for that. And go find your girl."

## The Sixth Night: The Calm

I instinctively made my way back to the Loren household. I noticed that a car was now parked in the driveway. I pulled up behind it and raced to the door, knocking loudly. Mrs. Loren immediately appeared at the door. "Pete! I thought it was Evanna," she said.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"I don't know. I got back from church about a half hour ago and she wasn't here. She didn't leave a note or anything." She looked like she was about to collapse out of exhaustion. "I've called everyone that knows her and nobody knows where she is. Oh goodness," she leaned against the door and slid to the ground. "First Joe, and now Evanna." I offered a hand but she refused help. "I'm used to Joe leaving, but this is not like Evanna." She sighed. She looked very tired, a far cry from her more cheerful mood back at the high school. "I'm sorry, where are my manners? Please, come inside." She tried getting up, but had trouble. I offered a hand. She accepted this time.

As we sat around the dining table, I remembered that it had only been a few nights ago when I was here having dinner with the Lorens.

"Did you call the police?" I asked.

"No, because I keep thinking she'll call me. But I'm getting worried, Pete. I really am." She was twiddling her thumbs. I had to tell her about Mark. "Mrs. Loren," I began. She interrupted me. "Please, call me Joanna." I nodded. "Joanna... Evanna called me earlier today. She said that Mark Findelay was following her."

"She told me about that," Joanna said. "I don't think he had anything to do with it, though. He made trouble here and there at school, he might be a peeping tom, maybe, but he wouldn't kidnap a girl. No, I know who it is. I know who has her," she said.

"It isn't Mark? Are you sure?"

She shook her head. "It's my husband."

Evanna had mentioned that he had been acting weird and had been missing as well. "Are you sure? Has this happened before?"

"He kept talking about having some 'one-on-one' time with Evanna and kept mentioning that poor girl's disappearance. And then he just disappeared. I don't know who else would have taken her." A tear fell down her cheek but she quickly regained composure. "At least I know it is Joe, and I know he won't do anything to our daughter. But what is he doing? Has he gone mad?"

I shrugged. There had always been something off about Joe Loren. His obsession with Lindsay's disappearance had always rubbed me the wrong way. In the meantime, we just sat there without saying a word, as though waiting for the phone to ring. After a while, she said, "Listen, Peter, there's nothing you can do right now. Just go home." I began to say something but she hushed me. "This is between my husband and me," she said simply. I nodded. I knew I was helpless in this situation, but I still wanted to do something. I remembered I had Evanna's phone. "I found this in your bathroom. I sort of snuck in earlier because I was worried," I said, taking out the phone and handing it to her. "There's nothing suspicious on there, I looked."

Joanna managed a smile. "Thank you for caring, Peter," she said. She took the phone and looked over it before setting it down. "This whole town is upside down," she mused. "Ever since Lindsay went missing, nothing has been the same. I saw you poor kids under the spotlight of those investigators, and it really changed the way kids act now. Everyone's acting a bit more guarded, like they don't want to be caught for something they didn't do. And look what it did to my husband. It made him a loon. You know that he thinks that her parents are keeping her in the basement?" I shook my head. "How could he say such a thing about those poor, suffering parents? Imagine what they must have been through." I didn't say a word. "It's disrespectful." She sighed. "And your poor parents. I heard about how the Sorenheims threw a fit against you and your family. Nobody ever knew what for. I don't blame anyone. Everybody was on high alert." Another tear streamed down her face. "I'm going to give my husband another call. Please, Pete, you don't have to stay any longer." I nodded.

I ended up staying for a few more hours with Joanna. She finally convinced me that I needed to go. "Oh, and one more thing, Peter: don't forget to see Mr. Brown tomorrow." In all the emotions and angst she had not forgotten this. "Thank you," I said. "Will I see you there?"

She shook her head. "I have some unfinished business with my husband," she said.

The rest of the night was a blur. I had dinner with my parents, but I kept thinking about Evanna. I had enjoyed my time with Mattie, but when I realized that I had forgotten about Evanna, I felt guilty. My dreams had taken a backseat to finding Evanna. I was concerned that my steadfastness to discover what my dreams meant had led to a friend being hurt. Now I just wanted to know if she was okay. As I went to bed, all I could think about was Evanna.

*Don't go up there.*

I turn around. She is looking at me strangely. "Jeez, Peter, you are really drunk."

I am slurring my words. "Do I know you?"

The girl rolls her eyes. "I'm Evanna. You don't remember me? Global studies? Calculus?"

Evanna? The name doesn't register. "Nnnnnope," I say.

She looks disgusted. “Anyway, don’t go upstairs. The underground is setting up some weird shit there. I don’t even know. They’re messing around with couples, I heard. I saw Mattie go up there. Don’t follow her.”

“That wasn’t Mattie, you idiot! That was Lindsay. I think.”

“Are you sure?” she says. “That looked like Mattie. Ugh, don’t be stupid. I’ve been hanging out here and I’ve seen people come and go and emotions fly *everywhere*.” This girl just will not quit bothering me. She looks like a reporter scouting the area. I chuckle to myself.

“Move aside,” I say with confidence.

## The Seventh Morning: From the Future

I heard the patter of rain as I woke up.

I actually had a decent sleep for the first time in a while. I remained under the covers for a while, where it was peaceful and separate from the bustling world around them. I noticed that Lindsay’s journal was tucked underneath all the blankets, where it had unknowingly spent the night with me. I grabbed it and flipped through once more.

When the girls were younger, nobody could tell them apart. (“*Robbie keeps calling me Mattie. She thinks I am Mattie!*”) It didn’t seem to bother Mattie. In fact, it seemed to please her very much. Just based on the few journal entries from when she was younger, she seemed like a playful and energetic girl, definitely the more outgoing of the two. I couldn’t pinpoint an exact time when the abuse started, but it seemed that around 1999 the entries became more concise and more deliberate, as though somebody had been looking over her shoulder. (“*Mattie cried a lot today. But she was so good in the play. I’m proud of her.*”) In fact, there was no mention of anything suspicious until 2000, which was where I had begun to read more intently the first time I had looked through the journal. The last time I could not read to the end, but this time, I found myself flipping through until the very last entry.

*Everyone’s going to this stupid party tomorrow. I guess I should go. Pete and Mattie will be there. I don’t like what I’m hearing from Mark. I hear they are planning something, but I don’t know what. Fuck, I shouldn’t have gotten so involved. This is probably going to be another stupid surprise.*

It read as though the next entry was to be written the day after the party, explaining what had transpired that night. I closed the journal and placed it in a drawer. I didn’t need to look at it again.

The next thing I did was call Evanna's phone, hoping to hear some news. There was no answer. I still left a message, remaining hopeful. How strange that I had actually seen her at the party without even recalling it until last night's dream. Slowly things were coming back together in my mind, and yet the significance was still unclear.

The house was empty once again. It was another slow weekday morning. Everything seemed familiar, yet oddly different. It was the same world, but with different meaning. I didn't waste any time freshening up and preparing to leave. I felt motivated to get things done today. I grabbed an umbrella and headed back to the high school.

The trek up Cypress Hill was a sloppy one. I avoided the puddles on the track with ease. Apparently, the areas that were susceptible to ponding back then were still flooding today, so not much had changed in terms of landscaping around the area. As I approached the high school, I noticed a few people rushing for cover with flimsy umbrellas. The rain had intensified. When I made it to the front office, I noticed that Joanna was, understandably, absent. "Joanna won't be back until tomorrow, dear," a kind woman said. "Do you need help?" I shook my head. "I was just looking for Mr. Brown," I said. "Is he around?"

"Yes, he should be in the cove setting up for the first day of the festival. Are you helping out?" the lady asked.

"No. I just wanted to say hi. Thank you."

I found Mr. Brown setting up chairs in the auditorium, away from his desk at the cove. He looked up when he saw me and gave me a warm smile. "Peter. You're back."

"Hi, Mr. Brown," I said. "Did you have a good weekend?"

"I composed for a little bit but it was mostly quiet," he said. "Let's talk in the cove."

We chatted for a little bit before the inevitable topic was brought up. "Pete, I wanted to talk to you about the audition," Mr. Brown said. "I was disappointed." I nodded. "I'm sorry," I said. He continued, "And I wanted to let you know that it was me that turned down your application. Unfortunately, everything happened the way I thought it would."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "What are you talking about? It was Mrs. Sorenheim who turned it down. All the applications went through her, right?"

"No. I write the recommendations and she reviews the entire package, but ultimately I make the final decision," he said, rather calmly.

"So you lied to me!" I exclaimed. "You didn't write a good recommendation at all!"

“Peter, I know that it is not my responsibility or my business,” he began. “But throughout high school I saw you develop and mature into a wonderful musician. You never missed a rehearsal and you always did your best. You worked even harder than some of the most talented players. But then Lindsay disappeared. Yes, it was the end of senior year, but after that point you were just not the same. You didn’t seem particularly enthusiastic at the farewell concert or the graduation concert, and you barely kept in touch.” If he knew what I had gone through that time, he would understand. “I don’t see where you’re going with this,” I interrupted. Mr. Brown held up his hand. “I didn’t see your application last summer, even though I told you to apply. As I told you, I was disappointed. You said that you were traveling.”

“I was!” I exclaimed.

“What were you doing last summer?”

“I was traveling in Europe, trying to figure out my life and other things,” I said. I couldn’t believe Mr. Brown was doubtful of what I did last summer.

Mr. Brown nodded. “Okay, Peter, but tell me one thing. Did you come back wiser?”

Last summer had been exciting but ultimately I had felt unsatisfied when I returned home. My other friends had been working at high profile companies doing internships, and while I certainly enjoyed myself, I still felt empty and unfulfilled. I couldn’t explain it.

Mr. Brown said, “Peter, this festival is an opportunity to make a difference in children’s lives.” I recalled the dream where I was watching my daughter play the piano. Music could have been my legacy, but I was fucking this one up as well. “I saw your application come in this year and I wasn’t sure what to think. Did you suddenly have a change in heart? Was it your parents that made you apply?”

“Were you testing me?” I said, trying to dodge the subject at hand.

“In a manner of speaking,” he said. “I wanted to see if you cared enough to come in and react to the rejection, because you know I would never turn you down. So what is it, Pete? Why did you really come in to see me?”

I could not answer this question. Yes, it had been my dad who initially told me to ask about the application, but I had also been wrestling with my motivations and my passion. I had been trudging along rather aimlessly these past few summers since Lindsay had disappeared. However, despite the hardships and drama with my new and old friends, I had recently never felt more alive. I felt as though I owed it to myself to figure out what was going on in my dreams and piece together what happened that night, and it was fascinating and painful and revelatory. Traveling in Europe had never been as satisfying or interesting as the past few days.

Music had become something of an obligation once Mr. Brown made me his star pupil and set his expectations higher. However, I was one who cherished the casual side of music. I did it for other people. I enjoyed playing for Mattie, playing at community concerts, or just jamming whenever I felt like it. It all became less fulfilling once it turned serious. I didn't want to play in auditions or be an amateur. I wanted to define the music for me, not for the music to define me. And it was the same with this bizarre quest to find out what happened to Lindsay and what my dreams meant. I was discovering things at my own pace and I was not letting anyone dictate the rules. It was my world. And I was determining what legacy I was leaving behind. My children would not remember their father as the bum from Riverdale who destroyed his relationships with his friends and family, his enemies, and his acquaintances, but as the man who straightened things out and bettered himself.

"So, are you going to make music a part of your life again, Pete?" Mr. Brown continued.

"Mr. Brown, you said yourself that I wasn't the best musician. I was never meant to be your star pupil. I played because you wanted me to. I played for others. But recently, I've discovered something that's driving me towards a goal. It's been a tough ride. I picked up the saxophone the other day, and I couldn't play it. I think that my time with music has passed. I tried. I really did. But my interests change and I am becoming a different person. My impact on the world is not going to be through music, Mr. Brown. It will be through something else."

"So what you're saying is no?" Mr. Brown said.

"I'm saying I came in because I wanted some closure. In fact, I'm anticipating closure in many things in my life now. But I've come to realize that this is not for me."

He nodded slowly. "I understand, Pete. Thank you for telling me," he said. He was deep in thought for a minute before standing up and straightening his tie. "Would you like to at least help me with these chairs? We have many of them to set up."

I smiled. "Of course, Mr. Brown," I said. "You have to tell me about what you're playing for this year's festival."

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It was still raining by the time I walked out of the school, but it was only drizzling now. Some cars started to pull into the front turnaround, where parents were dropping their kids off for the festival. *Don't lose that umbrella! See you at 3!* One boy was lugging a large tuba, but most of the other kids were carrying small instrument cases. I imagined myself, 10 years younger, carrying an alto saxophone case, ready to play in the Riverdale Music Festival. Then I remembered that I had to find Evanna. I called her phone once more, only to be disappointed when Joanna picked up. She was expecting to hear from Evanna as well.

“Did you call Joe yet?” I asked.

“He won’t pick up his phone,” she said.

“Did you call the police yet?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Why haven’t you done that yet?”

She sighed. “I can’t. It gets too complicated, Peter. It becomes parental child abduction. It’s complicated. I know that he hasn’t done anything.”

“But you can’t assume!” I said. “How do you know he hasn’t done something stupid?”

“But he wouldn’t do anything to hurt his child!”

I was about to yell back into the phone when I received an incoming call. “Hold on,” I said and accepted the other call. “Hello?” I asked.

“Peter,” the voice said. The sound was distorted.

“Hello? Who is this?” I asked.

A distorted voice spoke. “If you want to know where Evanna is, meet me at Cypress Hill in 15 minutes. Come alone.”

My heart was beating quickly. “Who is this? What do you want?” I exclaimed. But the line had already disconnected. Flustered, I switched back to Joanna Loren. Now I wasn’t sure if getting the police involved was a smart idea. “Hi, Mrs. Loren, sorry, that was just a telemarketer. I have to go, but please let me know what happens,” I said.

“Okay. Thanks for checking in, Peter,” she said.

Who was this person? And why did they want to meet at Cypress Hill? If it was Joe Loren, why did he want to meet there? Regardless, I left the high school as quickly as possible and made my way back to Cypress Hill, questions racing through my mind. I considered everything else that had happened this week and where it was leading to now. I knew that Mark Findelay was the vessel and provided the opportunity for the party to happen. I knew that the catalyst was Mr. and Mrs. Sorenheim. The father’s appearance at the party, as well as the parents’ religious fanaticism and unforgivable abuse against their daughters, drove the events of the night to their conclusion. Lindsay was certainly not the lady that everyone, including myself, had painted her to be, and I knew that she had secretly loved me as well, but it did not explain my intimate relationship with her in my dreams. Mark and John both didn’t want me to pursue

the issue anymore, and yet I had never felt more motivated or passionate on discovering exactly what was going on. Evanna's father's obsession with Lindsay's case obviously raised eyebrows, and I couldn't help but think there was a connection between Evanna's disappearance and Lindsay's disappearance somehow. Piecing together the puzzle from my fragmented dreams and various interviews was fascinatingly terrifying, and in my mind I was dreading what I would finally discover. Maybe this was what Mark and John had been referring to. But I couldn't stop at this point.

As I approached the top of Cypress Hill, the rain picked up once more. I pulled out my umbrella and noticed a shadowy figure at the bottom of the hill. Before I even had a chance to react, I felt somebody wrap a cloth over my mouth. I immediately passed out.

## PART IV: The Vessel

I woke to a little girl staring right into my eyes. I jumped back in surprise. I was slumped against a cold brick wall and my head was throbbing again. My vision was blurry. I could barely register where I was. The girl jumped up and down excitedly. "You're awake!" She exclaimed. I recognized her as Lizzy Findelay, Mark's little sister. "Mark, he's awake!" She called again and ran up the stairs.

As my eyes adjusted, I realized I was in his basement. His house party had occupied all levels of his home, and the basement was a particularly popular spot. The basement looked different now. All the furnishings had been removed and the walls were empty. The floor was a hard concrete. What was striking was how big the basement was, and given the emptiness of the room, the place felt even emptier than it actually was. I also noticed a large wooden stick leaning against the staircase. I tried to move but my hands were bound behind me and tied to a pipe. It was then that I noticed there was somebody else on the other side of the basement. Since the room was so large, I couldn't tell if the person was being kept here or was watching me. "Hey!" I called. The person shifted slightly. He seemed to be sleeping or was unconscious.

I heard somebody descending the staircase. It actually sounded like two people. "Let go of me!" A voice said. It sounded like Evanna. "Evanna!" I said. As I expected, Mark and Evanna emerged from the stairwell. Evanna's hands were bound and Mark was dragging her like a prisoner. He picked up the wooden stick and played with it casually. "Pete, I'm sorry that I had to get you here like this. It's the only thing that could have worked, I think," Mark said. "And don't worry. Evanna's fine. I didn't hurt her." Evanna spat in his face angrily. Mark wiped the saliva off. "You do realize that I am not the bad guy here, right?"

"You kidnapped me and Evanna, and I don't know about that guy over there. I'd say you're the bad guy," I said. "What the hell is going on?"

“You mean Joe? Oh, I had fun with him. He’s okay, though. He got to experience what I did.” Evanna struggled again but Mark held on more tightly. That was Evanna’s father? “And he broke, just like me.” I had forgotten how skinny Mark was. He still looked like a recovering drug addict, but this guy used to be the ringleader of the Underground. With the right tools, it seemed, even Mark could be a daunting force.

“What are you doing with him?” I asked.

“Fucking let him go!” Evanna screamed. She tried to run towards her father but Mark held her back. She even tried landing some punches but Mark threatened her with the stick and that was that. He shook his head. “This... this is what happens when you don’t listen to me,” he said. “I have a reputation to uphold here. I can’t let people poke around sensitive issues.”

“What the hell are you trying to prove, Mark? Okay, you win. Now let us go,” I said.

“No, because last time we had this conversation, word is you kept on being nosy. And we can’t have that. Look what happened when he got nosy,” Mark said, indicating Joe Loren. Evanna struggled again. Mark promptly struck her across the face. “Stop it,” he said. Evanna’s face was bright red now. I screamed, “I thought you said you didn’t hurt her!”

“You call that hurting her?” He chuckled. “I need some help here!” He called upstairs. In a matter of seconds, a person came down the stairs. I was surprised and somewhat relieved to see that it was John. “John! Help me out here, man!” I exclaimed. “Mark’s gone crazy!”

John, looking determined yet slightly remorseful, shook his head. “I’m sorry, Pete. I can’t do that,” he said. Mark had an amused expression on his face. “Petey, you know that this guy is the one that brought you here, right?” While he was speaking, he handed Evanna over to John, who took her and brought her over to a pipe where he secured her. “He’s not going to help you.”

“Is that true?” I asked John.

“It’s for the greater good, Pete. Just play along,” John said. He tightened the straps on Evanna’s binds. She welched in pain.

“Johnny, what did I say about saying things like that?” Mark said, folding his arms.

John looked down. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Mark played with the wooden stick. “Grab Joe for me, would you?” He asked. While John went to untie Joe Loren in the back, Mark turned to speak with me. “You like the stick? I call it the dealer. It doesn’t ask questions, it does its job, and it works for the house. It works for me.” He took the dealer and tapped it on the concrete ground twice. At this point, John had brought Joe over to Mark. Joe looked exhausted and had multiple open wounds, as though he had been beaten multiple times. It also looked as though he hadn’t slept in days.

“Do your parents know that their son has a torture dungeon in their basement?” I asked. My hands were starting to get sore.

“Nobody ever comes down here. Plus, it’s not like they’re ever home. It’s just me and Lizzy, like it is now,” he said. He made a hand motion to Joe, who responded by sitting cross-legged on the floor. “And it’s not a torture dungeon, Pete. It’s just a large empty space. I don’t know where you got that idea from.”

“Fuck you, Mark,” I said. “You’re a spoiled piece of shit.”

Mark took the dealer and struck me right in the pit of my stomach. The pain was so intense that I almost passed out. I saw stars for several seconds and bent over in pain. Evanna screamed and tried to escape her binds. “That was just the beginning,” Mark said. Saliva was streaming out of my mouth. I struggled to form words. “Just let them go,” I uttered.

“Do you know why I have Evanna here?” Mark said.

“No,” I said, struggling to make out even that word. I coughed up some blood.

“Go to hell, Mark,” Evanna spat.

Mark ignored Evanna. “Because I wanted you to see what it’s like when somebody you care about is tortured right in front of you,” Mark said. “And especially when you’ve done nothing wrong. And I know you care about your little girlfriend here. Don’t deny it. I’ve seen you two around all the time recently.” I didn’t say a word, and neither did Evanna. “You obviously don’t care about her father here,” he said, patting Joe like a pet. “But I needed him to get access to the house security codes. And I needed my boy John here to take her, and you.”

“Just so you can torture me? You want to convince me to stop looking around? Well, I won’t. This has gone on far enough. You’re not going to stop me!” I said with surprising resolve. I didn’t realize how frustrated I was with the whole situation. Now I was just angry at Mark.

“I’m not going to torture you, Pete. I’m going to torture Evanna,” Mark said. “Watch him, John,” he added, motioning to Joe. He walked over with the dealer and immediately struck Evanna right in the stomach as he had done to me. “Stop!” I yelled over Evanna’s screams of pain. Joe flinched but remained complacent. “Joe, that’s your daughter there!” He barely reacted. He wasn’t even looking in that direction. Evanna was sobbing now. Mark smiled smugly. “Do you see what happens when you can’t leave the past be, Petey? You forced me to do this. I didn’t want to, but you did it. I told you to stop, and you didn’t, and you left me no choice!” He said and then struck Evanna again, this time squarely on the side of her shoulder. I had never felt more helpless in my life. John just stood there, watching. “Stop it!” I yelled as Mark lay down another beating. “John, do something!” I screamed. John shook his head.

As I watched the scene unfold, I remembered a party that Mattie and I had attended during junior year. At one point in the night, a group of members from the Underground was using peer pressure to force a freshman into drinking an uncomfortable amount of beer in front of a crowd. Everybody was cheering and having a good time, but the freshman clearly was not. Mattie and I watched from the side and I wanted to do something to stop them. I knew what would happen if I did though. I'd be labeled as a freshman sympathizer, and that only meant bad things for the rest of the year. So I watched as the freshman drank himself nearly to death, had to be rushed to a hospital, and had his stomach pumped. The worst part of it was that nobody remembered because everyone was so drunk. As I watched the poor kid drink, I had never felt more helpless, at least not until this very moment. And yet at this point I could physically do nothing more, unlike the night of the party where I had a chance to step in.

Mark had stopped using the dealer at this point. He was spinning it in his hands like a baton now. Evanna was crying in pain. She looked like she was about to pass out. John was faithfully standing by. Joe was stoic. I wanted to attack Mark with all my remaining strength, for what he did to Evanna, for what he did to Joe, for what he did to my best friend, for what he did to Riverdale. Mark spoke deliberately. "Do you get the message, Peter? This is *my* town." He tapped the dealer. "By the end of the day, I want you to leave..."

Before he could finish his sentence, John had suddenly grabbed the dealer and, using it like a baseball bat, struck John's legs with tremendous force. There was an audible *crack* as John screamed in pain. John sprung up and quickly grabbed Mark before he could react and put him in a headlock with the dealer. He held the length of the stick across Mark's neck like a knife. John, screaming in pain, had collapsed to the ground. It happened so fast that the next thing I remember, Mark was desperately bargaining with Joe, who had the dealer so tight on Mark's neck that Mark had trouble speaking. "Please, Joe, I'll let you show me, just please..." He gasped. Joe didn't say a word the entire time. He was jittery. He kept looking around the room, turning his attention first to the handicapped Joe, then to me, and then to his daughter, who looked even more terrified now. "Baby," he said. Evanna was silent. She looked a mess. "This will all be over soon." He then released Mark and struck him sharply in the back of his head with the dealer. Mark collapsed to the floor. Joe dropped the stick as though shocked with what he had just done. He looked at Evanna. "This will make sense," he said, almost imploring his daughter, and then ran upstairs. I heard some glass shatter. What the hell was that?

Evanna was left speechless. "Get back here, Dad!" she screamed. I knew he was not going to come back. "Evanna!" I said. She turned to me. Her eyes looked extremely sad. Just a few days ago, she had been excited about doing some investigative research into Lindsay's disappearance. Now, she was tied to a pipe in Mark Findelay's basement, beaten by Mark, and abandoned by her father. "Evanna," I said again. She was not crying. She was determined to get out of here. I continued, "Evanna, we have to get out of her ourselves. And we have to stop your father before he does something stupid."

“What are you talking about?” She said. She coughed and spat out some blood.

“He’s going to the Sorenheim house. We have to stop him,” I said. “John!”

John was still writhing in pain on the floor, holding his legs. “Fuck you both,” John muttered under his breath. “Your dad packs a wallop, Evanna. Where the hell did that come from?” I remembered that just recently Mark had put John in a brace. His bruises were still visible from their scuffle earlier.

“What the hell were you thinking, doing this to us?” I exclaimed. “What did you do?”

John dragged himself to the wall and struggled to sit himself up straight. “It’s about time you did something for me. You owe *me* now,” he said, pointing his figure at his chest. “I’ve done enough favors for everyone! I don’t owe any of you!” He let out a long sigh. “Fuck this town.”

“John, you have to let us go,” Evanna said slowly. “Please.”

“Mark is going to wake up and...” I started, but I was interrupted by Mark’s mumblings. Miraculously, he had recovered from his head injury and was grasping his head in pain. “Fuck...” he mumbled. Nobody said a word. “Fuck. Where did he go?” he asked. He looked around. “John, where are you?” John made a sound indicating his presence. “John, watch these guys. I’m going after Joe,” Mark said, getting on his feet very slowly. He stumbled around a bit and had to hold on to the wall for support. He didn’t look to be in very good shape.

“Let us go first,” I said. “You’ll need help. This guy is dangerous.”

“This is business. I don’t need your fucking help. I’ve been doing this for a long time, okay Petey?” He said. “John, watch them. I’ll be back.”

“Are you sure you should be driving?” John asked. Mark scoffed as he ascended the staircase. “It was a legitimate concern...” John said under his breath.

“John, untie us now,” I said. “Mattie’s life may be in danger.”

“What about my life, John? I always put myself before other people and I always end up like this,” John said. “I keep falling back into these cycles and it’s time that I thought about myself for a change. I don’t want to be everybody’s bitch for...”

“*John!*” Evanna screamed. John and I both perked up at the shrill sound of Evanna’s voice. “Stop being a pussy and fucking untie us.”

John looked at me. This was John, my best friend, my worst enemy, and my captor. He looked even sadder than Evanna did. I saw something in his eyes.

He pulled out a switchblade from his pocket. He got on his feet and slowly made his way over to me. He struggled to cut the binds on my hands but eventually they came free. I wiggled

my hands. "Thanks," I uttered. When John cut Evanna's binds, she pushed John out of the way angrily without thanking him. She then walked over to me and gave me a hug. "I missed you, Pete," she said, giving me a kiss on the cheek afterwards. "Come on, we have to stop my dad."

John cleared his throat.

"I want to go with you."

## The Flame, Part I

I hadn't driven John's car before. Making it worse was the fact that the rain had intensified and I could barely make out the road. However, John couldn't drive with his legs probably broken (we had painstakingly carried him to the car in the pouring rain). Evanna still refused to talk to John. It was fine because John didn't want to talk to anyone else at the moment.

My mind was racing as we sped towards the Sorenheim residence. What was Joe going to do when he got there? Was he going to threaten Mattie? What if her parents happened to be home today? Were the cops already there? What about Mark? Did he manage to stop Joe before things got out of hand?

When we pulled up to the house, it looked like the gate had been rammed open by Mark's car. He had been desperate. I parked the car on the street, away from the house and Mark's car. Evanna and I helped John out of the car as quickly as we could to avoid getting caught for too long in the torrential downpour. I provided walking support for him as the three of us managed to squeeze through the gates without attracting too much unwarranted attention.

The front door was ajar. There were no cars in the driveway. "No parents," I said.

"Let's just get inside so no one gets too suspicious," Evanna said.

"You mean besides the wrecked gate and two cars parked not so covertly outside?" John quipped. "I bet the cops are on the way right now. Why don't you just let them take care of it?" It was a solid point. But before I could answer, Evanna replied. "They won't understand, okay? It's my dad they're dealing with here. He's had history with them. We need to get him out of there before something bad happens," she said rather urgently. "And settle this whole thing."

I nodded. "Come on," I said, pushing the door open.

Once we were all in the foyer, we shut the door behind us. The patter of the rain was substantially quieter now. "Well, lead the way, Pete. I mean, you do know this place better than the rest of us..." John said.

“That doesn’t mean I know where they are,” I pointed out. I looked around the foyer. It was dark and musty. I realized I hadn’t been inside the Sorenheim house since Lindsay’s disappearance. The last time I had been here was when I had come to pick up Mattie to go to Mark’s party. Back then the room had been well lit and lavishly furnished. Now, it looked sparse and empty. I didn’t know if it was just the lighting, or lack thereof. I heard voices coming from somewhere nearby, followed by a thunderous crash. It was coming from somewhere below us.

“Pete, you go on ahead, I’ll follow with John,” Evanna said. “Go!”

I followed the sound of the commotion. I tried to remember where the basement door was, but it had been so long since I had ventured down into their basement. There was another scream. It sounded like a girl’s voice. I made it to the kitchen. The first thing that I noticed was that the countertops were completely bare and there wasn’t a single food item in sight. Everything had been packed away in the shelves or in the refrigerator. It was oddly fitting.

To the right was a pantry, and then just a little bit further was a door that led to the backyard patio. Directly to the left of the patio door was another door that was slightly ajar. That had to be the basement door. I heard some more noise coming from that direction. “Mattie?” I called out. “Mattie, where are you?” I pulled the door open slightly and remembered that this did lead to the basement. I called out Mattie’s name again.

“Peter!” A voice called, which was then immediately muffled. I immediately rushed down the staircase. I couldn’t believe what I saw.

Joe Loren was holding Mattie at gunpoint at the far end of the basement while Mark was on the opposite of the room towards the staircase, near me. He looked desperate. “Joe, please!” Mark yelled. “She’s not here!” Where the hell did Joe get the gun? Thinking back, Mark had a gun cabinet at his house. He must have gotten it from there.

Mattie looked terrified. In fact, I had never seen her more scared than she was now. She was crouched on the floor, hands covering her face. She screamed again when Joe pointed the gun at her more intently. “Come on, Mattie, show me where your sister is,” Joe said. He seemed rather poised and reflective, as though he knew exactly what he was doing.

“I told you, I *don’t* know where she is! Nobody does!” Mattie said. Through her tears, she saw me standing in the stairwell. “Peter!” She exclaimed. Joe turned towards me, still keeping the gun pointed at Mattie. “Peter Sansky, don’t make this any more complicated than this needs to be,” he said. Mark, who was clearly surprised to see me as well, said, “What the fuck are you doing here, Pete? How did you get out?” Mark still looked terrible after being knocked out earlier, and he was clearly growing more frustrated with this escalating situation.

“Joe, put the gun down!” I said, arms outstretched, ignoring everything else but Joe and Mattie. “I don’t know what you think is down here, but trust me, it’s not down here, okay?” I in

fact had no idea if the Sorenheims were hiding some secrets other than what I had discovered, but I had to calm Joe down.

“It’s time to put this to rest,” Joe said, almost shaking with anticipation. The gun looked like it would slip out of his hands any minute. “Where is your sister?!” He yelled at Mattie.

“She’s not here!” Mattie screamed back.

“Bullshit! Search the place!” He yelled, kicking some boxes around. “And you too, Mark. I want to see the expression on your face when you see her body.”

“Fuck you, old man,” Mark spat.

“NOW!” Joe yelled with conviction. Mark shook his head and resignedly began to look around the basement with Mattie. Joe kept the gun pointed in that general direction. When I reached for my phone, he turned to me and shook his head. “Don’t,” he said simply. I stopped. “Did your parents cash that check I sent them?” He added as an afterthought. I didn’t know what to say. I just nodded. He smiled. “Good. This will all be over soon,” he said.

“Mr. Loren, you have to stop this,” I said. “They’re terrified. You’re not helping!”

“It’s too late. This is happening,” he said. He turned back to look at what Mattie and Mark had been searching through. Nothing interesting had turned up. “Don’t you *want* to know what happened to Lindsay? This was your ex-girlfriend’s *twin*! It’s practically her!” I saw Mattie’s ear’s perk up. She looked miserable, upset, and wanted no part of this. I couldn’t even imagine what it would be like being forced to search for your missing twin’s body in your parent’s basement while being held at gunpoint by a lunatic. “Come on, Peter, I’m surprised you’re not as interested in this as I am!” He had no idea.

“Why are you so convinced that her parents had something to do with this?” I asked.

“They’re criminals. They did terrible things,” Joe explained. I certainly could not deny this fact. “We can’t let them get away with this.”

“Where’s your *proof*?” Mark yelled. He put down the box he was searching through. “You’re saying the reason you think they did it is because they did it! Just stop this and leave this family alone!” He turned to face Joe. “This is it!”

Joe was unfazed. He walked slowly over to Mark, his gun now pointed at his abdomen. “What is your interest in this, Findelay? Those investigators really got to you.” Joe smiled. “My, look at how the tables have turned. You think you broke me? No. We’re just seeing our true colors now, aren’t we?” He shoved the gun barrel further in Mark’s stomach. Mark tried to remain strong but his face showed panic and, worst of all, desperation. “You’re just trying to protect Mattie. Are you hiding something too?” Joe said.

“You’re out of line, old man,” Mark said, his voice shaking. “Just put the gun down and let them go.”

“Keep looking,” Joe said deliberately.

There was silence for a second before Mark replied. “No,” he said.

“Have it your way,” Joe said. He took the gun and pointed it at Mark’s foot. He was about to fire when I heard a yell behind me. “Stop!” I turned around to see John and Evanna descending the stairs. “Stop!” John yelled again. “What the hell is going on here?”

“Evanna, tell your dad to let us go,” Mark said.

“Dad, put the gun down!” Evanna said.

“Evanna, dear, this is it!” Joe said. “This is what the bullshit investigators in our town failed to do. All the evidence is here.” He pushed Mark away and grabbed hold of Mattie. “This girl is the key!” He said. “She knows everything. Her parents know everything.”

“This is not the right way to handle this. You’re going to go jail. Just stop it, please!” Evanna begged. “You’re not yourself!”

“You’re right, I’m not!” Joe said. “Because Mark Findelay tortured me so he could get to you, and it made me a changed man. It made me realize that this city is never going to change. There are always these fuckers like Mark and John *screwing* everything up. But there are things we *can* change! We can find out what happened to Lindsay. We *can* make a difference! Somebody needed to act. And I am.”

“You’re going to go to jail, Mr. Loren,” I said. “Is that worth it?”

“Yes, oh yes, Peter.” He grabbed a hold of Mattie even tighter. Mattie was crying silently. “Now, sweetie, just show me where your sister is and we can go home.”

In a split second, Mark charged Joe from the back and tackled him. Mattie fell out of Joe’s clutches and I quickly ran over to catch her. While I carried her gently back towards the staircase, where she fell into my arms, sobbing, Joe and Mark had both collapsed to the floor after the tackle. John dialed 911 immediately. Evanna, in shock at the whole situation, just watched the situation unfold. The gun had fallen to the corner away from us, but they didn’t seem focused on it. Joe got up faster and shoved Mark into the wall. While pinning him, he took a brick from the floor. “No!” Evanna screamed. As Joe prepared to smash Mark’s face with the brick, Mark ducked a second before the impact landed and Joe struck the plaster wall instead. He growled in frustration. Mark backed up slowly. “Shit...” he said as he tripped on a shovel that had fallen to the floor during the altercation. He fell backwards onto the concrete floor. Joe tossed the brick away and picked up the shovel. Before Mark could recover, Joe pinned down Mark at his neck with the shovel.

I heard John speaking to the operator. "Hello, we have an emergency at ..." This was going to be over soon, but somebody had to do something. "Dad, don't!" Evanna screamed. Joe lifted the shovel above his head to strike Mark. "Stop!" I yelled. I wanted to intervene but I couldn't move for some reason. At the last second, however, Mark rolled away from the striking path and the shovel hit the concrete floor with a loud clang. Somehow, the shovel stuck and Joe struggled to pull it free. Mark scrambled to look for the gun. As I watched Joe try to free the shovel, I noticed that a small hole was forming on the floor. Amazingly, the floor began to collapse as Joe nudged the shovel around some more.

Mark had found the gun. "Let go of the shovel, old man!" he exclaimed as he pointed the gun at Joe. "Now!" But Joe was only interested in what had happened to the floor. The hole had enlarged to reveal a hidden floor underneath the concrete one. With the shovel now free, he used it to sift around the collapsed floor. "Guys, get out of here! I have the gun now, go!" Mark yelled. But everybody else, including me, was strangely entranced at the hole in the floor. When the dust had settled, it was clear that there was something there. I stood up to take a closer look.

It was a coffin.

"Shit," I said. "Shit."

"I knew it," Joe said.

There was a lock on the coffin. Joe took out the lock with one swift strike of the shovel.

"What is it?" Evanna asked. John looked curious as well.

"It's a coffin."

"What?" she said. "Dad, don't open it!"

"Mr. Loren, you can't do this," John chimed in.

Joe looked amused. He leaned on the shovel. "Is that right?"

"I won't let you," he said. He got up and walked very slowly to confront Joe. I tried to hold him back but he pushed my hand away. Joe was not having it now. He and Joe stood face to face. "This family deserves to be left alone," he said. "They've been through enough already."

"He's right. The cops are on the way. Let them handle it," Evanna said. "Dad, it's over."

"Look at what you did, old man," Mark said, unwavering with the gun. "Look what you did. You did this." He was out of breath, beaten and tired. "All of this."

"John was just collateral damage. I'm sorry," he said to John. "But everything else, this was not me. This was *you*," he said, pointing right at Mark's face. "You and your little cult were responsible."

“We provided a safe place for people like Lindsay. She came to us for *help*,” Mark said.

“You know that’s bullshit,” John muttered, almost as an aside. “We’re not innocent.”

“You’re not helping, you idiot!” Mark said.

John shook his head. “We’re all going to get screwed anyway. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Dad, we can stop all of this, okay?” Evanna pleaded. “Don’t make this any worse than it needs to be. Let’s just walk away.”

“Evanna, I can’t,” Joe said. Evanna shook her head. A tear fell down her cheek. “How can I walk away from this?” he said.

I looked down at Mattie. She was shaking, still in shock with her eyes closed. I looked at Mark, who was still pointing the gun at Joe. He looked angry and confused. I looked at John, who was limping but determined to stop Joe. I looked at Evanna, who looked desperate and confused. I looked at Joe, who was tired and yet possessed this expression of childish anticipation. And then I looked at myself in a mirror. What did I want?

Joe reached for the coffin. Surprisingly, Mark didn’t yell for him to stop. He just watched. We all peeked into the hole. But before Joe could even grab the lid, John swiftly grabbed the gun from Mark and pointed it at Joe. “John, are you fucking crazy?!” Mark proclaimed. “Let me handle this!”

“No!” John yelled, pointing the gun at Mark now. “This has gone on long enough.” He pointed the gun back at Joe. “I won’t let you open that coffin.”

“Why? Don’t you want to know what’s in here?” Joe asked. “Don’t you?”

John shook his head. “Let’s cut the crap. I know you’re all thinking *it could be Lindsay’s body! We need to open it!* Well, it’s not. Don’t even bother. Just leave it alone.”

“How do you know?” Joe asked.

“She’s not in there,” John said simply.

“But you haven’t *opened it yet!*” Joe practically screamed. “John, this could be the answer. These fucking parents would not hide a coffin underneath their basement floor if it weren’t something incriminating. These people don’t show remorse or guilt. They are terrible people, don’t you fucking get it? They are criminals!”

“Dad, you have no idea what you’re saying. Just stop it!” Evanna exclaimed.

“I found things. I’ve been in here before. Nobody believed me. The Sorenheims are not that perfect family we make them out to be. *In there*,” he said, pointing to the coffin. “You will see what I am talking about.”

“Why do you want this?” John asked. “Why couldn’t you just leave it alone?”

“*They are criminals!* I’m begging you,” Joe said, dropping to his knees. “We need to open this. We can’t just let this go.”

I heard sirens in the distance. The police had finally arrived after what seemed like an eternity. “The cops are here,” I said. “John, put the gun away. This won’t look good for you.”

“No, you don’t understand, Pete,” John said. “Lindsay is gone forever. She is not coming back. This finally ends here.” He turned to look at me. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything. But this is what needs to happen. Do you understand? It was my fault.” I didn’t have a clue what John was talking about. “You still don’t remember?”

“John, put the fucking gun down!” Mark interrupted. “Everyone get out of here before the cops get here.” He made a move for the door but John pointed the gun at him now. “Shut up!” John told Mark. “You’re not going anywhere either.”

In my arms, Mattie mumbled something. Her eyes were open now. “Pete...” she uttered.

John, visibly upset and stubbornly determined as he kept the gun pointed at Joe now, looked at me and managed a weak smile. “Dude, you’re my best friend. It’s just that I can’t take the guilt anymore. I’m done being who I am. Don’t judge me, man. Can you do that for me?” I didn’t know what to say. I just nodded.

“What are you talking about?” Evanna said. “What did you do?”

## The Catalyst, Part II

At that instant, a police officer descended the steps and saw the scene before him. “Put the gun down!” The officer yelled, handgun drawn. “Don’t move!” John didn’t move a muscle as the officer approached and took the gun away from him. After cuffing John’s hands behind his back, he holstered his own gun and put away John’s gun. Now he turned to address everyone else in the basement. “None of you move! They’re in the basement,” he said to his radio. “It’s secure.” I heard people descending the stairs, from which two more police officers appeared. The commanding officer, an older fellow by the name of Goren, took one look around. “What the hell happened here?” he asked.

“Please, officers, take me away,” John said. “I was fucking pointing a gun at that man.”

“Get him out of my face,” Goren said. John, taking one last look at me with a pitiful expression on his face, was taken up the staircase.

“Someone want to explain what happened? What is this hole?” Goren asked, peering into the hole with the coffin in it.

“Officer, I think Lindsay Sorenheim is in there,” Joe burst out. “You have to open it!”

Goren now had a smile on his face. “Loren, right?” He asked Joe directly. “You’ve been here before. I arrested you. This is what happens when you live in a small town. Kenman, take this man away. He’s delusional.” The other officer immediately took action and apprehended Joe, but Joe wouldn’t give up without a fight. “Officer, you *HAVE* to open that!” he screamed as the other officer finally managed to secure Joe’s hands behind his back.

“We don’t have any grounds for a warrant. We can’t search anything,” Goren said. “You, on the other hand, have been caught trespassing on this property for the third time.” Goren approached Joe and spoke face to face with him. “I don’t know what world you live in that you think these parents are guilty.” He backed up. “Kenman, take him.”

Evanna, who had been surprisingly silent during the struggle, now spoke up. “Please, sir...” she started. Her father, who was defeated and almost in tears now, looked at Evanna. “Please, Evanna...” Joe pleaded. I could see Evanna had trouble forming the correct words. “Officers, that’s my father,” she eventually said. “Let me come with you.”

Goren nodded. Kenman took Joe upstairs, with Evanna following closely behind. As Evanna left, she looked at me briefly. I didn’t see fear or despair in her face. I saw relief.

When they had cleared the basement, Goren looked at Mark, Mattie, and me. “So, I’ll ask again,” he began. “What happened?”

I looked at Mark, who was bruised and battered. I remembered what he did earlier. I looked at Mattie. I could tell she wanted to say something as well.

“Joe broke in here and forced Mattie to look for her sister’s body or something,” Mark said quickly, graciously leaving out certain details. “We tried to help but things got out of control. He found this coffin.”

“And that’s it? How did you get those scars?” Goren asked.

“We fought.”

“Is this true?” Goren asked, turning to Mattie and me.

I nodded. Mattie didn’t say anything.

“Madison? Is this what happened?” Goren said, asking her directly.

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“I need you two to answer some questions over at the station,” he said. “Madison, I think for now you should wait here for your parents. Kenman will stay with you. Sansky, Findelay, come with me.”

“Officer, I’d like to wait here with Mattie,” I offered.

Goren looked slightly displeased but he agreed to let me stay. “Keep her company, okay?” he said. “There’s enough shit around here as it is.” I nodded. He took a closer look at the coffin. “Jeez, what the hell is in there?” he muttered to himself. “Okay, all of you come upstairs and wait in the living room.”

Mattie and I took a seat on her living room couch while Kenman stood guard at the door. Goren led Mark outside to the police cruiser. The house was again eerily silent despite the muffled patter of raindrops on the roof. Mattie lay in my arms and tried to rest. When Goren returned, he told Kenman something under his breath before turning to us. “Mark said he drove the first car that crashed through the gate. Does the other car belong to you?” he asked me.

“No, that’s John’s car,” I explained.

“How did Loren get here?”

“I don’t know. He must have walked.”

“Loren doesn’t live that close. What suddenly made him decide to walk all the way over here in the rain and break into the house again?”

I remembered that Mark’s house was much closer to the Sorenheims than it was from the Loren’s. But I didn’t say anything. “You said it yourself. He’s crazy,” I said.

Goren nodded slowly. “Okay, Sansky. Don’t go anywhere. Kenman, watch these two. When the parents arrive, let me know.” Kenman nodded without saying a word. Goren left through the front door. The house was silent once again.

“Are you okay?” I asked Mattie.

She nodded, although I wasn’t sure she was really okay. “Pete, I’m sorry I just checked out down there,” she said. “I just went into complete shock when I saw that gun. It reminded me of when Lindsay took out the gun and...”

“Hey,” I interrupted. “Let’s not talk about it. Let’s just relax. It’s over.”

“What was John talking about before? It sounded like a confession.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just hope he didn’t do anything stupid.”

It was the first peace and quiet we'd experienced in quite some time. I expected the Sorenheims to return home quickly but they hadn't shown in the past 20 minutes. "Officer?" Mattie asked. "Do you know where my parents are?"

"No, ma'am," Kenman said. He remained vigilant at the door, arms crossed behind his back. "I was not briefed on this information."

"Thank you," I said. I checked my phone. There were no missed calls or texts. I briefly considered calling my parents but then decided against it for now. Just as I was putting my phone away, I heard a car pull into the driveway. The distinctive rumble from the driveway indicated that it was the parents' car. Mattie heard it too and stood up. A few seconds later, the door burst open and Mr. Sorenheim appeared. "Mattie? Mattie?" he exclaimed. He noticed his daughter and immediately went over to embrace her. "Are you okay? What happened? Who did this?" he asked. As Mattie answered the questions, Mr. Sorenheim slowly calmed down. He then noticed me sitting on the couch. "Peter," he said. "Thank you for staying with Madison." I nodded. He then gave his daughter another hug. I couldn't help but feel slightly uncomfortable watching the scene. "Officer," he said, addressing Kenman. "My wife will be here soon. What's going on?"

"Sir, we need to bring your daughter and Peter to the station for questioning. Is your wife..." he began, but was interrupted when another car screeched to a halt in the driveway. Heels clicked on the pavement and soon the figure of Mrs. Sorenheim appeared in the doorway. "Mattie?" she said. She noticed husband and daughter and immediately hugged them. "I was told there was an intruder and I didn't know what was going on!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad that you're okay. Thank you, officer," she added to Kenman, who simply nodded. She then noticed me and then frowned. "What are you doing here?" she spat. "Officer, this man is..."

"Lauren, he was here to help her," Mr. Sorenheim said. "He helped."

She looked shocked. She couldn't possible imagine a world in which I would've done such a thing. "Tim, are you certain? It looks like it's just us and him. What makes you think that is what happened?"

"Ma'am, the guilty parties have been apprehended. This young man stayed with your daughter," Kenman said. "We have to take them to the station now." He then radioed Goren. "We will be en route to the station in five."

Mrs. Sorenheim looked puzzled. "I... okay, well, what happened?"

"Joe Loren broke in and threatened Madison and Peter and his friends tried to stop them," Mr. Sorenheim explained. "Is that right, Madison?" Mattie nodded.

"I see. I'm sorry that I yelled at you, Peter," she said. I didn't say anything. She didn't look the least bit sorry. Kenman chipped in. "Mr. and Mrs. Sorenheim, will you be coming?" They both nodded. Kenman gestured towards the door. "Then let's go."

Mr. Sorenheim followed in his car while Mrs. Sorenheim rode with Mattie and me in the police cruiser. She said nothing to me during the car ride or at the police station. It was expected. I really didn't remember much from the interrogation. The weight of the events that had just happened began to hit me. I felt overwhelmed with emotion, so much so that I could barely recall the questions that Goren and Kenman asked me. They let me go within a half hour. As I left the interrogation room, I noticed John and Joe Loren in separate rooms being questioned by detectives. John appeared strangely complacent. Joe was screaming furiously. I also noticed Evanna watching her father through the glass, looking very concerned. Mark was being brought to another room as I was leaving mine. We made eye contact but didn't say anything. His face was still covered in dry blood and bruises. I just kept walking.

When I got to the reception, Mattie's parents were pacing uneasily, waiting for Mattie to finish with her interrogation. When they saw me, they simply went back to pacing without breaking a beat. I checked in with the receptionist, who had me fill out some paperwork. After I was done, I took a seat. Within seconds of sitting down, the front doors opened and Mrs. Loren appeared. "Where is my daughter and husband?" she exclaimed. "Peter," she said to me when she saw me. "Where are they?" The receptionist called her over and filled her in, eventually letting her go to the back rooms to see her husband.

It was only a few minutes until Mattie emerged from the back. Her parents immediately embraced her again. If I hadn't known better, I would've called it moving. After they talked, Mattie walked up to me. "Are your parents picking you up?"

"No. I didn't tell them yet," I said. "I should."

"We can give you a ride back home."

"Actually..." I patted my pockets and realized I still had John's car keys. "If you could take me back to your place, I'll take John's car and park it at my house for now."

The car ride back was even more awkward. Attitudes of joy turned to attitudes of disbelief. "How could you let somebody break in, Madison?" Mr. Sorenheim said. "You have to be more vigilant!" Nobody spoke to me, so I just listened. When we arrived back at the house, Mr. Sorenheim parked the car right outside of the gate. "Now we have to fix this gate," he said. "Whose car did this?"

"That's Mark Findelay's car. He was trying to help me too," Mattie explained. "The other car is John Mitchell's."

Mr. Sorenheim shook his head. "These fucking kids are just leaving their cars on my property. I need to talk to the police about that," he grumbled angrily. "Madison, I'm sorry but I have to go back to work for now. I'll take care of the damages tonight. Your mother will take care of you. Peter, do you have a ride home?"

“I’ll figure something out,” I said.

“Lauren, are you okay?”

His wife nodded. “See you tonight. I’ll clean up,” she said. We all stepped out of the car into the rain and Mr. Sorenheim drove back to work. “Mrs. Sorenheim, I have John’s keys. I’m going to drive his car back to my place and leave it there temporarily,” I said after he had left. I didn’t know when or if John would be released. Mrs. Sorenheim just nodded. “Okay,” she said. “Thank you.” She started walking back to the house with Mattie when Mattie stopped her mom. “Mom, I’ll see Pete off,” she said. Mrs. Sorenheim appeared in deep thought for a second. She then simply shrugged her shoulders. “Okay,” she said again. “Madison,” she held her daughter’s shoulders. “You’ve seen what it’s like when you’re not in God’s good graces, okay? Just be careful, is all. I love you very much, Madison.” She embraced her daughter briefly and then slowly walked back towards the house.

Mattie walked back to me. “Let’s get in the car,” she said. I unlocked the doors and we climbed into John’s car. She put on her seatbelt. “Let’s drive,” she said.

“What? Are you crazy?” I exclaimed.

“Just do it,” she said. “Drive. Drive anywhere.”

We drove very far. I don’t even remember where we drove. But we drove so far I think we drove to another state. By sunset, the skies had finally cleared up. We stopped at an interstate service area and pulled into a parking spot. “Peter,” she said when I turned off the engine. “I need some time away from all this. I hope that’s okay with you.”

I nodded. I pulled out my phone. “I should call my...” I began but she put her hand on my phone. “Let’s just enjoy this time for now. It’s been a crazy week.”

“Okay,” I said, pocketing my phone. “So what do you want to do?”

“Sleep,” she said. “I want to sleep.” I found a blanket stuffed in his glovebox and cleared the space from John’s backseat. We both climbed into the back and I held Mattie closely as we lay down in the backseat. I wrapped the blanket around both of us.

“I still don’t understand,” I said after we had settled in. “Why don’t you hate me?”

But she had fallen asleep.

## \*The House, Finally

“Move aside.”

I am walking up the stairs. I can barely hold onto the banister. I hear some laughter downstairs. I turn around and notice that Evanna girl still looking around curiously. I continue to ascend the staircase.

When I reach the top, it is hazy as though someone was burning incense. Some people are huddling around a closed door, listening intently. I hear the sounds of a couple making out. The listeners are quiet but now it is clear that the couple is about to have sex, so they can't help but cheer. I approach and tap a random onlooker on the shoulder. "What's going on?" I ask.

"Dude, it's so messed up. But it's so fun to watch!" The guy says.

Suddenly, I hear a scream and something crashes in the bedroom. The crowd groans in disappointment. Some guys are actually laughing hysterically. "*So close!*" one guy says. A few minutes later, the door is thrown open and a girl marches out and sees the whole crowd of people gathered outside the door. "Is this some kind of sick joke?" she says. Now everybody laughs. The girl just scoffs in disgust. "This is pathetic even for the underground. Where's Tom?" She asks, but nobody hears her. She storms downstairs.

"Has this ever worked?" I hear one guy say.

"One couple got so close to doing it but then the guy had to throw up."

"Okay, who are we setting up next?"

As the underground talks, I hear somebody ascending the staircase behind me. I turn around and I see John. He is leading Mattie up the stairs with him. "Look who I have," he says. "Don't worry about her dad. He's gone." He smirks and gestures towards Mattie, who seems a little bit out of it. I'm worried about her. "I don't know what got into her drink!" he jokes.

"Hey, be careful with Mattie. She..." I suppress a burp. "...looks not good."

"Why don't you take care of her?" He says, handing Mattie over to me. She stumbles and I catch her by the arm. "You okay?" I ask. She nods. "Super," she says with a smile.

"Listen, why don't you guys go and sit down in one of Mark's bedrooms? Have a nice little chit chat?" John offers.

"We just broke up, I think. What are you trying to do, man?" I say.

"Reconcile things! It's not too late, man." I see John glance behind him at the other people, who all seem to be chuckling about something. "What are they laughing about?" I ask.

"You guys just have to talk, okay?" John says with a wink, patting me on the shoulder. "All you need is some..." But before he can finish, he is interrupted by loud stomping on the stairs behind us. Even the others stop talking to see what is going on. Mark appears from the

staircase, looking furious. He pulls John aside. “What are you *doing*?” Mark yells. “The minute I have something to do...”

“Dude, I got this under control. Don’t worry!” John pleads.

“You’re telling me not to worry?! Somebody said that you’re about to...” But now he is interrupted by somebody screaming downstairs. There’s a sustained banging noise, as though someone is hitting a window. “Mark! Get down here! He’s back and he’s not happy!” Someone yells from downstairs. I hear a window shatter. “Now!”

Mark points a finger at John. “Don’t do anything stupid,” he says. Mark then goes downstairs. When he’s gone, John turns back to the crowd and grins. “That guy is so uptight,” he says. “Where were we?”

Mattie is latching on to me tightly. She looks surprisingly calm given everything that has just happened. John snaps his fingers. “Pete, you’re a good boyfriend. Why don’t you take *Mattie* here and hide out in the bedroom?” he says. “You don’t want to get your girlfriend in trouble with her father, do you?”

“Dude, she’s not...” I begin to say, but a bunch of people in the crowd begin to push me towards an open door that looks like a guest bedroom. They look like they actually want to help, because people are whispering *he’s coming!* I lead Mattie into the bedroom quickly and lock the door behind us. Mattie collapses onto the bed. I listen in the hallway. I hear a man, presumably Mr. Sorenheim, yelling downstairs. *If you don’t tell me where my daughter is, I am going to...* That’s all I hear, because the rest is drowned out by jeering from the crowd. I don’t know what is going on, but eventually the noise subsides as I presume Mr. Sorenheim is driven away from the staircase. When a minute or two has passed, I hear a knock on the door. John calls out, “You’re good. But just stay in there until we know he’s gone, okay?”

I shake my head. This is just completely ridiculous. I walk over to the bed and sit down next to Mattie, who is actually smiling. I want to apologize to her for leaving her alone before. I understand that the presence of her father probably complicated things before. “Listen, Mattie, I’m sorry about before. I wanted to say that I’m...” I say but she shushes me. She then leans in and kisses me.

And I kiss her back.

I don’t really know what is happening. I am kissing her neck. I am taking off her clothes. I am kissing her chest. I look out the open window. I see John in another room with another girl. *I don’t know about this.* I am kissing her lips. I hear a growling sound from the other room. Someone is frustrated. I look down. Mattie is beautiful. We become one. She gasps. She is the happiest that I have ever seen her. She is beautiful.

Lindsay. Lindsay is beautiful.

## The Eighth Morning: Loose Ends

I woke up.

And I remembered.

The sun was rising now. I checked the car's dashboard clock. It was almost half past 7. I reached into the front to check my cell phone. Predictably, there were 20 missed calls from my parents, a bunch from Evanna, and two from an unknown number, which I presumed were from the police station. I quickly called my parents. The call went through on the first ring. "Hello? Pete?" My mom said.

"Mom, it's me. Don't worry, I'm fine," I said.

"Pete, where are you? We tried calling you so many times. We heard what happened at Mark Findelay's house and then nobody knew where you went after that. The Sorenheims are furious!" I heard interference on the line. "Pete. Thank God. Where are you?" My dad said. "Come home now. The whole town's a mess. Is Mattie with you?"

"Yes, she's here," I said.

"What were you guys ... never mind. We'll deal with it later. Just bring her back now."

"What do you mean the town's a mess?" I asked.

"Pete, they found a coffin in her basement."

"I know that, I was there."

"This looks bad for them. And now they don't know where their other daughter is. They're panicking. You have to bring her back now."

"I will. We're heading back now."

"Why didn't you call us?" My dad asked.

I really didn't know why I didn't tell them what had happened. "I didn't want to worry you," I said.

"So you just decide to take a joyride in your friend's car? What were you thinking?"

"I'm sorry, Dad. I just needed some time for myself."

My dad sighed. "Are you okay, at least?" he asked.

"I'm good. I'm coming home now."

During the trip back, Mattie continued to sleep soundly. I kept thinking about the dream that I had last night. The dreams that I had slowly became less lucid and more observational. And this last one was basically remembering what had happened point for point. And it disturbed me. But I knew that somehow it explained everything that had happened during this turbulent week. For some strange reason, I believed that because Mattie and I both had experienced lucid dreams at some point this week, sleeping in the car together had clarified something in our memories. I had a feeling that when Mattie woke up, she was going to tell me she had remembered the same thing.

Everything that night, according to my subconscious bartender, had materialized because of three factors. The vessel, Mark Findelay, had hosted the party and had been away from the upstairs when everything took place. The catalyst, Mattie's parents, for their whole life, had destroyed both of their daughter's lives through abuse and neglect, so much so that they sparked the events of the night. It was a long time coming. The flame, who I now realized was none other than my best friend John Mitchell, was the result of everything coming together. A slave to Mark and the underground, he finally had enough of being bossed around and wanted to screw the underground and go behind Mark's back, as he did that night. He had lusted after Lindsay for many years and settled for the next best thing: her twin. I imagined he must have drugged her Manhattan drink. I gripped the steering wheel furiously. Had he no moral boundaries? When a slave is pushed to the limit, even he will fight back. What he did was so repulsive that it was no wonder that he didn't want to return to Mark and the underground earlier this week. They had roughed him up, and for good reason. Even though Mark was also a disgusting human being, he had limits, limits that John had leaped over. And he had paid for it.

Most likely, John had gotten to know Lindsay better as well (perhaps he had also learned about the journal) and he learned about how she was in love with me. Lindsay herself was in a rebellious state and the combination of the two most likely contributed to the completely inane decision making. In her journal, Lindsay had mentioned her jealousy of Mattie's relationship with me. Although the sisters seemed close, I couldn't imagine there wasn't some rivalry between them as well. She could also go behind her sister's back and hook up with me. I shook my head. This whole situation was fucked up. I couldn't believe John and Lindsay agreed to this. I was getting angry now. John had probably planned all of this too. When he had brought Mattie upstairs, he probably knew that I wouldn't recognize that it hadn't been Mattie, but was in fact Lindsay. And Lindsay was willing to play along, since it finally gave her the opportunity to do what she had always wanted to do with me. John could then have easily take advantage of Mattie. That asshole deserved to be locked up.

His timing could not have been worse, though. He couldn't have accounted for the fact that Lindsay went missing the next day. I suppose that I understood why John had been apologizing and feeling regretful yesterday. He had done some horrible things, indeed. Perhaps he was looking to atone for his sins.

I thought back to the very first dream I had over a week ago. Lindsay had been in my thoughts since I had gotten back here. Something about being back in Riverdale triggered my guilt. It hadn't been my fault, but I had actually been the last person to see Lindsay, and I hadn't even realized until now. My guilt had manifested itself in my dreams subconsciously. I had probably picked up on signs that Lindsay had been interested in me but I either didn't care or chose to ignore it. I had actually been toying with her emotions and didn't even know it. All of this had confused me and actually drove me to discover its meaning. And now it was finally coming together.

I heard Mattie mumble something. She was finally awake. "Pete?" she said groggily. "Where are we?"

"We're almost home," I said.

"Pete..." she said, holding my shoulder. "I just had the strangest dreams."

"I know. Let's talk about this later. Right now you have to get home."

As we approached the town limits, I noticed a significant increase in vehicles on the street, particularly media vans. It was clear that the coffin in the Sorenheim house had attracted a new frenzy of media interest. When we were within a few blocks of the house, we couldn't even find a place to park, so I double parked the car next to a van.

I didn't even realize that Mattie was now crying silently. "Is it true?" she wondered.

"I don't know. We need to talk to him, but not right now."

"No! I need to know now!" she screamed. "It wasn't you! It was him!" Tears were streaming down her face steadily now. "He *switched* us!"

"Mattie!" I yelled. She looked surprised. I hadn't really lashed out at her before. "Now is not the time. Go home first." She looked upset, but she knew that I was right. "We'll talk later," I added. "And go through the back. You don't want to attract attention."

"I don't care," she said. She got out of the car. "Wait..." I said, getting out of the car as well. But at that point she had walked straight to the front gate in plain sight of the media. In only a few seconds, she was flooded by reporters asking questions. Luckily no one noticed me so I stayed back from the crowd. Mattie had finally made it to the gate. It was still broken, but somebody had managed to push it back in place so the reporters couldn't squeeze in. Mattie rang the buzzer, ignoring every question. A few seconds later, the front door opened and Mrs. Sorenheim ran out. "Mattie? Where have you been?" she exclaimed. She rushed to the gate and reached through the bars to give her daughter a hug. The rest of the conversation was lost over the noise from the crowd, but I assumed that she was accusing me of kidnapping her daughter.

The gate began to budge. Mrs. Sorenheim called out loudly, “Excuse me. Please let us exit!” Mr. Sorenheim then appeared at the front door. He joined his wife and daughter as they all squeezed through the broken barrier. They positioned themselves right in front of the cameras. “We have an announcement to make,” Mrs. Sorenheim said. The crowd was quiet except for the loud clicks of the cameras.

“With our daughter back,” Mrs. Sorenheim said, holding her daughter close. “We can finally make an announcement. The coffin that was found in our basement is a memorial for our other daughter Lindsay. We are trying to keep her memory alive and I believe that the best way to preserve her memory is to keep a shrine. It is intensely private to our family. Again, we desperately hope that our daughter Lindsay will return home. We are letting the police search our basement and we will fully cooperate. Thank you.”

Did they really miss their child? Or did they still feel she deserved it? This made them seem remorseful, but I couldn’t tell what was going through their minds. And a coffin shrine just seemed morbid. Regardless, the police would soon find out what was in there.

The media erupted after they completed their statement, but the family backed up through their gate and closed it. They didn’t answer any questions as they retreated back into the house. That was my cue to leave. I slipped out in the frenzy.

When I got home, I realized I was still driving John’s car. When I got out, my mom ran out and hugged me. “Peter!” she yelled happily. She hugged me. I couldn’t help but smile. My dad followed soon after. “Peter, that was a very stupid thing of you to do,” he said. “Where is Mattie?”

“I sent her home,” I said.

“You dropped her off in front of all those reporters?”

“I tried to tell her to go through the back.”

“Oh, stop it, your son is home!” my mom said. “Are you okay? Did you get hurt?” She did a once-over, patting me to make sure I had no bruises. “Mom, stop!” I said. “I’m fine.”

“Pete, the police station called and filled us in,” my dad said. “They said that John Mitchell wants to see you and Mattie as soon as possible.”

“He needs to rest! He’s been through so much lately,” my mom said. “Come on inside...”

“Mom, I should go,” I said. “I need to do this.”

My mom was unwilling to let me go, but she eventually relented. “Just promise me you’ll come home right after, okay? *Promise me, Peter Sanksy*,” she said.

“I will,” I said. “I’ll take John’s car. I need to bring it back to the police station, anyway.”

“Pete?” My dad said. “I don’t need to say that I’m glad you’re okay?”

I shook my head. I knew him better than anyone. “I’ll see you guys later,” I said.

## The Flame, Part II

“Pete!”

Evanna rushed over and hugged me. “Where the hell were you?” She hugged me so tight I could barely breathe. “Hey, it’s good to see you too,” I gasped. “I missed you so much!” she exclaimed, proceeding to kiss me multiple times. I was so surprised by this onslaught of kisses that I couldn’t help but blush. I saw that her mother was there too. She was smiling, but she was pretending not to look. Evanna finally released me from her embrace.

“I never got a chance to thank you. I’m sorry they got you. I know you were looking for me. Everything’s been tough. I’m not perfect, you’re not perfect, but you’re all right,” Evanna said, grinning. It was harsh but it was true. “I know I got emotional that day we met Zoe, and I don’t know, there’s just so many unanswered questions, and I don’t really know what to think anymore. But I do know that you’re always there for me, and I appreciate it. I really do.”

“I’m sorry that you had to go through all that,” I said,

“It’s okay. Overall, I actually feel decent now. I feel like a weight’s been lifted off of my shoulders. Something’s different.” She smiled.

“Good. Hey, did you hear the Sorenheim’s statement?”

“Well, yeah, it’s a small town. I doubt my dad will believe it until the police search it.” She scoffed. “He’s never going to change.”

“Did you guys stay over here last night?”

She nodded. “Yeah, we crashed on this couch in the lounge.” She looked a bit upset. “Look, they let Mark go. My dad and I tried to convince the police that he had abducted us, but John didn’t say anything and Mark defended himself. Plus, you and Mattie weren’t there. There was just no evidence. They just wanted to arrest my dad because they’ve always hated him. And it was just so easy to book John, since he made it so obvious. I don’t know. If you guys had been there to say something, maybe we could’ve got him. You could’ve convinced them!”

Mattie and I had said nothing when Goren asked about Mark. I pitied him, and given the grand scheme of things I felt that putting him away would just make everything worse. Perhaps I

had been acting selfishly. I remembered how Mark had tortured Joe and Evanna. He certainly deserved to be punished, but perhaps things didn't work that way in Riverdale. This town could be cruel.

"I just had to go, Evanna. I can't really explain. I'm sorry I wasn't there," I said.

"Where did you go?" she asked, folding her arms.

"I was with Mattie. We just needed to talk, get away for a little while."

She raised her eyebrows. Somehow I could tell she understood. "Okay, fine. While you were gone," she added, "my dad was arrested for trespassing and for menacing. I'm trying to arrange something to get him out. But like I said, I feel rather ... okay give what happened." She walked over to her mom and hugged her. "At least I'm okay and I have my mom to support me."

"Thank you, Pete, for caring about where she was," Mrs. Loren said. "I appreciate it."

"Of course, Mrs. Loren," I said. "Evanna, can I speak with you for a minute?"

Evanna and I took a walk to a vending machine, away from the reception area. "What's up?" she asked.

I lowered my voice. "John asked to speak to Mattie and me. She's on the way."

Her eyes lit up. She was almost her old self again. "Let me join. I want to take notes."

"That's not a good idea," I said. "Look, there's a bunch of things I need to tell you. But first I need to confirm some things," I said.

"What's it regarding?" she asked.

"Well, for starters, what did your dad mean yesterday when he said he'd found things in the Sorenheim's basement?" I asked quietly.

She looked around to make sure nobody was listening. "Don't you remember?" she whispered. "When Goren arrested my dad, he said he'd arrested him before. It's true. He's trespassed twice before. He said he found something hidden, in like some secret hiding spot." I remember that Mattie had mentioned this before. "But he got arrested before he could take it. Nobody believed what he said. He did it again and at that point nobody trusted him, let alone believed him."

"What did he find?" I asked.

"He said he'd found the journal."

So Joe Loren was the one to have spread the original rumor about the journal. The journal had originally been a hotly contested item because investigators thought it would have provided clues to Lindsay's disappearance. It looked like Joe had stumbled across it in the 'family' hiding spot even before Mattie had. Now it was sitting in my drawer. I remembered that I had dreamed about it about a week ago. It all started with the journal. It seemed as though I knew that I had to look for it.

"This is all completely ridiculous," I said, shaking my head. "I just don't understand why your dad was so obsessed with the Sorenheims."

She shrugged. "To be honest, I think it's something completely menial. I don't think Mrs. Sorenheim treats my mom very well at school. And he's distrusted the family ever since. It's stupid because she's just like that to everyone. You know that. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I really think it's something that trivial which caused all... this."

"Listen, Evanna, I have the journal," I said without thinking.

Her eyes widened. "*What?*" she exclaimed.

I immediately regretted bringing this up. "It's ... at my house."

"Why don't you bring it forward to the press or something?" she asked.

"I don't know. There are some pretty terrible things in there," I explained.

"That's *exactly* why you need to bring it forward!"

"You don't understand. It's not about what you think it is." I lowered my voice even further. "Their dad sexually abused them. And their mother let it happen."

She held her mouth. "Are you serious?" She gasped.

I nodded. "She told me, too."

"How could she stay with them for so long?" she said. "Those poor girls, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no..." she shook her head. I could tell that she was fighting back tears. "Why didn't she *tell* anyone?"

"Would you?"

"Yes!" she practically yelled at me. Mrs. Loren called out, "Is everything okay?"

"We're fine, mom!" she said. "You have to give the journal back to her and tell Mattie to give it in," she told me. "Even if it doesn't solve where Lindsay is, it's better than nothing. You have to do it!"

“Evanna, think about this,” I said. “She hasn’t told anyone. Lindsay didn’t tell anyone. Think about the consequences this would have in a small community like Riverdale. Would you destroy your family’s entire reputation? Would you sacrifice your image?” The more I explained, the more I realized what the answer was.

“Yes and yes!” Evanna exclaimed. “Pete, there are certain truths that the public deserve to know. Call it my journalistic instinct, but I think the world needs to know these things about this terrible family.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe you guys would even think otherwise. If they’re capable of this, what makes them incapable of murdering their own daughter?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” I said.

“They’re playing the sympathy vote with that memorial. Look at how convenient the timing is. It’s like they wanted it to be found. The bad guys could be getting away with this and my dad could be right!”

“Maybe they’ve changed...” I countered. “Maybe they really do miss their daughter. Maybe they’re atoning for their sins. But they didn’t kill their daughter!”

“Peter, don’t be stupid. You have to open your eyes and...”

The front doors opened. It was Mattie. She didn’t see us at first. Evanna took me aside and looked directly into my eyes. “Peter, you have to tell her. This is serious. I’m not letting this go. This is not something I can let go.”

“Pete,” Mattie said, noticing us near the vending machines. “Evanna. How are you?”

Evanna cleared her throat. “I-I’m good. I’m just here with my mom. We’re trying to figure out what to do with my dad. I’m sorry he threatened you yesterday.”

Mattie didn’t reply to this, but instead just nodded curtly. “Pete, we’re meeting John?” she asked. “Yes,” I said. “Evanna and I are done here. Let’s go.” I led her back to the reception area. Evanna followed, joining her mother at her side. At that moment, Goren appeared from the back doors. “Peter, Mattie. Glad to see you’re okay. Come with me please,” he said.

While we walked to the visitation room, I asked Mattie about the announcement that her parents had made. “Did you know about the ... memorial?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“Are they telling the truth?”

“Yes, Peter.” I could tell she wasn’t really paying attention, as she was probably more focused on having this conversation with John. It seemed the ill-fated house party 2 years ago took precedent over her sister’s fate, for now. She walked with furious intent.

We were led into a room with telephones and glass windows. Goren led us to a bench, where we took a seat and I picked up the receiver. The door buzzed and John walked out, dressed in an orange jumper suit. He looked content, almost relieved. When he sat down to pick up the receiver, Mattie immediately lashed out. "What did you do?" she screamed into the phone. She banged the glass. "Tell me!"

John didn't react at first. But then he spoke slowly. "I said I was sorry."

"That's not good enough!" she yelled.

"How did you find out?" he asked.

"I've been having these lucid dreams. I told you, didn't I? It was back when I was your friend," I said. "And you laughed it off."

"You had to admit it sounded really lame, Pete. Come on. You know I'm always honest with you."

"Don't talk to me like things are the same."

"It's still the same, bro. It's just perceptions that are different. Do you know what I put in your drink that night?" he asked Mattie. "And yours?" he said to me now. When neither Mattie nor I answered, he explained, "It was a special toxin. It makes you lucid dream. It's so powerful it... dude, I'm just fucking around!" He now laughed heartily. "Pete, I *still* think the dreams are fucking weird, okay? I don't know why you guys are so strange but you two must have some crazy connection deep down and share a lot of subconscious guilt about Lindsay or something. And it gets worse when you're near each other, right?" How the hell did he know so much? "I'm just guessing. Don't quote me, okay? But Pete, you told me this started recently and it happened to coincide with Mattie being back in town. You two are something special, you know. I should never have gotten in the way, now that I think about it."

"Fuck you. You're a rapist. I was drunk and I could barely tell who anyone was. You took advantage of me," Mattie said. "You deserve to be in there."

John nodded slowly. "I came to that realization, yes."

"Why did you do all this?" I asked.

"Don't ask stupid questions, Pete," John said. "You know why. I was nobody. I wanted to make something of myself. So I pulled a trick."

"No wonder Mark hates you. You disobeyed him."

"Yes. No wonder Mark hates me," he replied. "You're remembering now? Congratulations. Everything I said is starting to make sense?"

“I’m amazed you kept it together this long,” I said. “What else are you hiding?”

“Do you really want to know?” he asked.

“Spare me, you asshole,” Mattie chimed in. “I’m done listening to you.” She stood up.

“Lindsay told me about your parents and how they abused both of you,” John said. “I am so sorry.” Mattie didn’t move. “She … she told you about that?” She asked.

“Yes, she told us many things. We took her as our own. We learned that she loved you, Pete, and that she was jealous of her sister.” Mattie took a seat, almost pouting. “We also learned about the abuse, about Rachel, about the gun, and about your awful, awful parents.”

“I don’t believe you,” Mattie said. “And it still doesn’t change anything that you did.”

“I know.”

“You’re a despicable human being,” she spat.

I was still thinking about how Lindsay had confided in the underground. Something bothered me. “Wait,” I interrupted. “I’m surprised she even wanted to talk to you after that whole mess in middle school. What made her change her mind?”

“I cared about her, okay? Why do you find that so hard to believe?”

“Just like you cared about all those other girls that looked like her that you fucked. Don’t pretend. She didn’t like you or confide in you. She liked the underground, which you’re not even really in, as Mark made so painfully obvious.” I shook my head. “And she hated you. So don’t tell us that you know her or something, because you clearly don’t.”

“I didn’t know her as well as you did,” John said, raising his eyebrows.

“You took advantage of Mattie so you could give the middle finger to Lindsay again,” I said, ignoring his comment. “You don’t care about her at all.”

“Lindsay wanted to be with you, Peter,” he articulated.

“She didn’t want you to hurt me!” Mattie yelled.

“So I screwed up!” John suddenly burst out. “I’m not perfect! I had a few drinks, and you too Peter! How the *fuck* could you not recognize your own girlfriend? I didn’t think it’d actually work! I thought Mark would’ve stopped me but he had to deal with your fucking father. I’m sorry, okay? You…” he held out his hands out towards Mattie like she was a prize. “You always seemed like the forbidden fruit. It got out of hand. But I still cared about her. I always did.”

“You are something else,” Mattie said. “You expect me to just sit here and forgive you because you feel sorry for yourself. It’s not happening.”

“No, I don’t expect you to forgive me. But I do expect you and Peter to understand what I’ve been through,” he said, almost imploring us.

“You have no right to talk about things you’ve been through,” Mattie shot back.

“I’m not a funny person. But I kiss up to everyone and act like this because otherwise I have nothing. I never see my dad, my mom hates me, and my friends are all I have. I tried too hard to get everyone’s approval. Look where it’s left me. Do you understand?”

I had trouble feeling sympathy for John. “People adapt, John. My parents aren’t perfect either. Neither are Evanna’s. Not everyone turned out like you,” I said. I always knew John had issues at home, but I’d seen him less and less since college began and I couldn’t tell what was really going on with him. I never knew he could have stooped this low.

“I’m not as strong as you,” John said.

I slammed the table. “Cut the bullshit. I don’t want to hear any more about you and Lindsay and you caring about her. What the fuck did you call us here for?”

“But I *did* care about her. Peter, Mattie, don’t you get it? I did the best thing for her. I sent her away.”

Nobody said a word. I didn’t believe what I heard.

“What?” I asked. “What … did you do?”

“I sent her away,” John said, calculated. “That night, I… I put her in a cab and stuffed a hundred bucks in her pocket. I told the driver she needed a ride to the bus depot. And then…” he sighed. “She was gone.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

“Peter, you can believe whatever you want,” he said. I turned to Mattie. She was in shock. I could tell she didn’t believe what John said but she was still speechless. The statement had come out of nowhere. I turned back to John. “Nobody saw you,” I said. “Okay.”

“Nobody saw me, Peter. It was, like, 5AM.”

“And you just forced her to get into a cab?”

“She wanted to come.”

“And you just decided to tell everyone now?” I said.

“With you poking around, everyone’s feelings getting hurt, all that bullshit, it seemed like the right time. That was why I couldn’t let Joe open that box. I knew her body wasn’t in there. But whatever was in there couldn’t be good. It would just serve as a reminder of the failures that those parents are... those abusers, those awful people. It was just best to just leave it alone.” John said. He then leaned forward. “Do you know what this means?” I noticed that Mattie was now crying. She didn’t lash out. She was just overwhelmed with emotions. I was in denial that John would do such a thing. But I had just learned more terrible things about John in the last five minutes than I had for the entire time that I knew him, so it didn’t seem entirely implausible. John continued. “She didn’t come back. *She didn’t come back.* She’s not drunk anymore, Peter. She’s sober. If you had been put in a taxi cab and sent miles away, you would do your best to find your way home. But she didn’t come back. She likes it out there.”

“You don’t know that. It’s been two years,” I said.

“Two years of *bliss*. I did a good thing. I atoned for my sins. I made her happy, Peter. I was better than any of her stupid boyfriends. I helped her. I fixed her.” John actually smiled. “I wanted to do that for such a long time, and I found my opportunity.”

“You *took her away from us!*” Mattie screamed and slammed the glass again. “*You’re a monster!*” Now she was bellowing from the bottom of her lungs. Goren had left earlier, so a security guard had to come to check on us. I told the guard that everything was fine. He gave us a funny look and stood watch at a location much closer to our phone.

“How could you be upset at me, Mattie?” John asked. “That last night, she was really happy. She was the happiest I’d seen her. That night, I had been feeling guilty about the horrible thing that I did to you. And I realized this would never have happened if it hadn’t been for your parents. *They* were the fucking catalyst, Mattie. Your sister was unhappy. Your sister had been abused for so long, as were you. How do you solve the problem? You remove the catalyst.” He spoke surprisingly calmly. “I couldn’t bear to see her take the abuse. I did what was best for her.”

“You took her,” Mattie gasped, now crying.

“It was my last act of love for her,” he said. “Call it repentance.”

“Why take her only? Why not save both?” I asked.

“I cared about Lindsay. She needed the most guidance.”

Mattie got up, tears streaming down her face. “I’m going to be sick. I need to go,” she said. The guard quickly came over and led her to the exit. When she had gone, John shook his head. “Pete, surely you understand?” he asked.

“You... you literally did all this. You’ve caused all of this chaos. You’re the reason why this is all happening. You set fire to this town,” I said. “And you expect me to forgive you?”

“I’m not the bad guy, dude. I’m the hero. I saved the day. But nobody can see that. You’re the bad guy if you couldn’t see that she needed to be away from her parents. And you saw that, I know you did. You’re my best friend, pal.” He smiled. I almost felt sorry for him. “I hope you understand. I was under extreme pressure from the underground. I was their slave. So yes, I might have done some terrible things to impress them, and I might have gone too far, and I might not have been thinking straight when I did those things, but in the end it was all worth it when I saw Lindsay’s face. She left the room, looking so happy. Sure, she was still drunk and stumbling, but I had never seen her so... content. Something clicked in my head. I took out all the cash I had, I told her to hop in a cab with me. *Where are we going?* She said. *You’re going home.* And she smiled. She hasn’t been back since. Do you know why? She’s happy now.” He looked at me for a reaction. I gave him none. “You would’ve done the same thing, Peter. You wanted her to be happy, just like you want Mattie to be happy.” He paused again. “Say something, dude.”

I hung up the phone. I took one last look at my best friend and turned to leave. I heard mumbled yells behind me as John was dragged back into his cell.

## The Eighth Afternoon: Endless Summer

The lobby was empty. I checked outside. Mattie was sitting on John’s car hood. I went over and sat by her side. She was gazing at the sky, not crying anymore. “I can’t believe my parents would keep that... memorial a secret from me,” she said.

“We are our parent’s children,” I said. “Lindsay is always going to be their daughter. It doesn’t matter what you think about them or what they’ve done. They miss Lindsay, and I’m sure they would have told you at some point. They’re parents.”

Mattie scoffed.

“What, you really think this is all for show?” I asked. “You really don’t believe that your mother and father miss Lindsay?”

She didn’t say anything for a second. Then she made that little growling sound and took a deep breath. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what was going through her head now.

“She’s gone, isn’t she?” she uttered. “She really is gone. Maybe she was taken, like my parents say. Maybe John did send her away. But she is gone. She has been for 2 years. I won’t see her again. She’s in the past, just like that party.”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe John would do those things. I really thought Mark had something to do with it.”

“Mark only hosted the party. He just wants to maintain order in his little community, like John, but John is infatuated with your sister so it clouded his judgment.”

“I suppose,” she said. She looked at me, eyelids drooping, exhausted and confused. “Shouldn’t I be more upset, Pete?”

“I think a part of you denies what he said, and another part of you believes him and thinks he’s right.”

“Either way, she’s not here. It doesn’t matter what happened. She’s not here.”

“I like to think that she’s started a new life,” I said. “Maybe she’s teaching at a school or managing an office now.”

Mattie smiled. “She’d definitely be happy. She could be settled down in New York City, maybe even living in Brooklyn. She might have opened an organic grocery there by now.”

“Maybe she met a guy on the road and joined him on his adventures around the world.”

We looked at each other.

“This is it, isn’t it?” Mattie asked. “This is where we part ways.”

I stood up from the car’s hood. “Not yet. We never really talked about those dreams.”

“What about them?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe John is right. When we were both back in town, maybe something in the universe aligned just for us. Maybe we are connected. Maybe we had known all along about what happened, but were just in denial because we felt guilty about our actions and it felt right that we were apart. It could be suppressed memories or something. All I know is that I felt very guilty after having those dreams.”

“But you have nothing to be guilty about. You were manipulated, just like I was.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t make what I did any better. I made some terrible decisions. Plus, I still was... well, I *thought* I was the last person to see Lindsay. It turns out it was John. But in any case, I barely remembered. How terrible is that?”

“At least she was happy to have been with you that last time,” Mattie said.

"I guess that's true, in a messed up way. What about you? You had nothing to feel guilty about either."

Now Mattie stood up from the hood. "I always felt there was something weird about that night," she explained. "And when I blamed you and my parents went ballistic, I just felt so terrible. Something bothered me. Something didn't feel right." She frowned. "I'm sorry I acted so terribly that night. I knew you were trying to help. But my dad just dropped by at the worst possible moment. I wonder why he even came that night..."

It was a good question. What could have prompted their father to come by? Somebody must have informed him that his daughters were acting up. But how was that party any different than the other parties that they had attended? "There's no point getting caught up over it," I said.

She nodded. "I guess I'm just glad that this... thing between us isn't as bad as it seems."

"I don't think it'd change your parents' impression of me," I said.

"The only thing that matters is what's between us, okay?" She took a few steps away from the car. "Although I can't imagine what's going to happen when they hear what John has to say. I know my mom is going to freak out. They ... do care, even knowing who they are."

On that note, I suddenly remembered the conversation that Evanna and I had before meeting John. "I still have the journal, Mattie," I said.

"Keep it," she said. "I'm done with it."

"But it has important evidence."

"Peter, we already talked about this. This is the worst possible time, too. Think about it," she said, frustrated.

"No, this is the best possible time. You have to do something!"

"Peter! I've had enough to process for an entire lifetime and I don't want to think about something else."

"But this is the single most important thing," I said. "Dealing with your parents, dealing with the future... there is nothing else that is more important." Mattie just stared into the distance, contemplating. "For now, at least promise me you'll think about it."

She hesitated for a second. "Okay," she said. "Take me home, please."

As we got into the car, the doors opened behind us and Goren walked out. "There you are!" he said. "I'm glad I caught you before you left." He approached the car and then gave me a funny look. "This is John Mitchell's car," he said. "We need to take this."

I had overlooked that fact. "Of course," I said. Mattie and I exited the car and I handed Goren the keys. He nodded and then gave us a serious look. "So, I overheard what John was talking to you about," he said. "Madison, if what he's saying is true, I'm sorry. You have to believe me when I say that we had nothing to go on when we looked into your sister's disappearance. We only had testimonials from teenagers, no less. The kids were inebriated, and nobody said anything. The taxi drivers didn't say anything, either. I just wanted to tell you..."

"It's okay, officer. I understand," Mattie said.

"Madison, we're going to confirm what he said. But we have a lot of things to do," he said. "We need to look into that coffin at your house and then investigate Riverdale Taxi once more. We will find your sister. I promise," Goren said. "Let's just all of us keep this quiet for now, because we don't want to attract any more press."

Mattie and I nodded.

"Now, how about I give you two a ride home?" he offered.

When we reached the Sorenheim house, the press was still mobbing the residence. Goren flashed the sirens on his cruiser for reporters to get out of the way as we slowly approached the broken front gate. "Every time I leave my house for the next few days, it's going to be like this," Mattie said in disgust. "Officer, thank you. Right here is fine." Before she got out of the car, she gave me a very long hug. When we parted, I said, "The summer's long. It's just getting started."

"We should stay out of each other's way for now," she said.

"I know. See you later, okay?" I said.

She nodded. "Bye," she said, getting out of the cruiser. Mattie disappeared into the mob.

As Goren drove me back home around Cypress Hill, we didn't talk at all. I figured everything that needed to be said had been said. When we finally got to my house, he turned around. "Mark Findelay was let go earlier," he said.

"I know," I said.

"We let him go because he didn't do anything wrong, like you guys."

"I know."

He gave me another funny look, but almost seemed disappointed. "Mark is a troubled kid. I'm glad he didn't screw up this time," he said.

"Yes."

He nodded. "Listen, Peter, you're a good kid. You're not like the rest of them. You care. I can see that. Doing the right thing is hard. We can't always do the right thing, but we can make right things that are in our control."

"I know, officer. Thank you," I said. "I should be going." I got out of the cruiser.

Once I had entered my house, my parents greeted me warmly again. "How did it go?" my dad asked.

"It was fine," I said. "John and Joe are in prison. Everyone else is okay."

"Good. Now you can finally rest," my mom said, ushering me into the kitchen to sit down with a hot cup of tea that she had prepared. She then went into the refrigerator and brought out leftovers from dinner. I immediately dug in. I forgot that I hadn't eaten in so long.

"Peter, your mother and I decided that we're going to issue a statement supporting the Sorenheims. It'll be like a truce," my dad said.

I resisted an urge to spit my food out in surprise. "What? Why?" I asked.

"It's useless dancing around the issues and the hostilities between our families. This is a good time. The Sorenheims are vulnerable now. We support their decision to hide a shrine for their daughter from the public because we understand the emotional toll that a missing child takes on a family."

I didn't know how I felt about that. But if anything, it would end the bad blood between our families. "Okay, I understand," I said. Now was a better time than any. I put down my fork and told my parents to sit down at the dinner table with me. "Mom, Dad, I have so much to tell you about everything, including the audition," I said specifically to my dad, who actually smirked. "But this is going to take a while."

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I was taking a brief nap when I heard the doorbell rang. "I got it!" I called as I rushed downstairs to check the door. When I opened it, I was surprised to see Evanna and Mrs. Loren carrying a big carrot cake. "Hello!" Mrs. Loren said. "Pete, are your parents at home?"

"Yeah, they're around. Mom? Dad?" I called. "They'll be here in a second." Evanna looked at me and smiled. She mouthed the word hello. I did the same. When my parents came to the front door, they all greeted the Lorens warmly. After the formalities had been exchanged, Mrs. Loren spoke up. "We just wanted to say thank you. Pete has been so helpful. He really cares about Evanna, and he's always been so nice to us."

My mom and dad turned to me and smiled. "He's a good kid," my dad said. "Joanna, won't you join us in the kitchen? You kids, you run off and do something else."

“Gladly,” Evanna said with a smile and took my hand. “Let’s go for a walk.”

We walked through the neighborhood as the sun set. The first thing I had to ask was about her father. “Is your dad going to be okay?”

“I don’t know,” Evanna said. “We don’t have any lawyers, so we have to settle with the shitty lawyers. I’m not sure. But we’re going to visit him every day.” She sighed. “It’ll be fine. I think it’ll be fine.”

As she finished her sentence, we noticed a couple walking hand in hand on the other side of the street, going in the opposite direction. I was taken back when I realized who it was: Mark and Zoe. I could tell Evanna was upset at seeing him walking around as though nothing had happened, but she seemed more interested in who Mark was walking around with. She turned to look at me with a puzzled expression on her face. “Since when?” she asked.

Mark and Zoe looked very happy as they kissed. Apparently I looked too long because Mark then noticed Evanna and me watching. He didn’t say anything, and neither did Zoe. Instead, Mark just nodded curtly and kept walking.

“What was that?” Evanna asked when we were out of earshot. “They’re back together again? Why would they do that?”

“These kinds of situations make you reassess things in your life,” I said. “I get the feeling he won’t be leaving Riverdale for a long time.” I nodded. “Again, I’m sorry nobody believed that he kidnapped you and your dad. I should have been there.”

She shrugged. “I don’t think you alone would have made a difference. He’ll get what’s coming to him one day.” She cleared her throat. “Listen, I don’t mean to get right down to business, but you said you had things to tell me.”

“Oh, come on, Evanna!” I exclaimed. “After everything you’ve been through, you still are only thinking about the case.”

“Journalistic instinct,” she said with a wink. “Come on, spill it.”

I gave in. “It turns out John and Lindsay had actually been planning something for the party that night all along, and you actually warned me about it,” I said. “I remembered that you said *don’t go up there* or something. They were switching couples around and John actually switched Mattie and Lindsay so Lindsay, who had been in love with me, could finally get what she wanted. Mark wasn’t there to keep things under control because Lindsay’s father had come to the party to find their daughters. So John, who had always wanted approval from others and would become anybody’s slave to do it, did this favor for Lindsay and then *he* was the one who slept with Mattie. It was almost like petty revenge. He called it forbidden fruit or something.”

“Jeez...” Evanna said. “So it wasn’t you that hurt Mattie.” She looked relieved.

I shook my head. "I was manipulated."

"I knew something was up. I knew it!" she exclaimed. She threw her fists in the air. "Journalistic instinct, again," she said. "That explains why you were feeling so guilty. It looks like you were the last one to see Lindsay alive. You didn't even know that. Ugh... well, at least she was happy, right?"

"Actually," I said. "This is the real kicker. John claims he sent Lindsay away in a taxi and gave her money. And he's convinced she's still alive and away from her awful parents, because she never returned. I mean, who would?"

"Holy shit," Evanna said. She held her forehead. "This is big. This is real big. John was responsible for *everything*? Who would've known?"

"I should have seen it. I should have done something."

She shook her head. "I'm not sure I buy the whole 'sending her away' thing. Did the police confirm this?"

"They just found out. Goren told me they're doing everything they can right now to look into the situation."

Evanna took a deep breath. "Okay, well, this is huge. It'll make for a great headline tomorrow. Just kidding!" she added when I gave her a look. "Oh man. I hope she is alive, though. She's not here but I hope she is somewhere else, doing well."

"I am hopeful she is alive," I said. I now took her hand. "May I?" I asked. She smiled. We continued walking down the street.

"This whole experience has changed me, Pete. It's been a tumultuous week. When Mark abducted me, I only thought about who I was going to tell this to once I got out. And I kept thinking about you, Pete. I wanted to tell you about it. I know it seems crazy, but I thought about what a crazy story it was going to make later. And then I saw my dad. My dad is crazy, but he's my dad. And he'll always be my dad. So I have to fight for him. And I won't stop fighting for him." She swung our hands back and forth. "It's pointless to worry about things that you can't change. Only worry about things that you *can* change. That's why I want to be a journalist. I see spreading the news as effecting change on people, as knowledge. That's the best we can do for certain people and for certain events. But it's something."

"I used to think that I was doing that with my music," I said. "But it turns out I was only doing it for Mr. Brown and for Mattie, essentially, so I wasn't really effecting change the way that I wanted to. These dreams, though, they awoke something in me. I knew I had to get to the bottom of it. It was a new goal of mine. And I think I succeeded, to an extent. My persistence led

to ... all this, you know? I feel satisfied. I made my mark on the community, albeit indirectly. But it's something, and I'm okay with it."

We didn't say anything for a few blocks as we just walked aimlessly down random streets. As we turned a block, she said, "So, how does it feel when your best friend is actually your worst enemy?"

I shrugged. "It stinks," I said. "Honestly, I don't even know how to feel anymore. But I feel as though a weight has been lifted off of my shoulders."

Evanna gave me a kiss. "Well, let's take your mind off of things," she said, winking. I didn't even realize that we had just reached her house. "Come on inside."

There were no dreams that night.

## **\*\*Epilogue: The Twins**

Mattie slipped into Peter's room. He was sound asleep. After quietly searching through various drawers, she finally found what she was looking for. She flipped through the journal. It looked fine. She then slipped out as stealthily as she had entered.

When she was back in her room, she looked through the journal once more. She started to read an entry from about eight years ago. She distinctly remembered this conversation, and tried to imagine it from Lindsay's perspective.

*"We're strong, okay? We're going to get through this," Mattie says.*

*She holds me. I love her a lot. We don't say much. I cry into her shoulder. I hear Mom saying very loud things to my father. My father is screaming at her.*

*Mattie says, "We might always be their children, but we are also always sisters to each other. That'll never change, ever. We'll always be here for each other."*

*"Do you promise?" I ask.*

*"I promise."*