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The Haunting of Wright Manor

Katherine Holzman

Bridgewater State University

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The Haunting of Wright Manor

Katherine Holzman

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Prof. John Mulrooney, Thesis Advisor

Dr. Ann M. Brunjes, Committee Member

Prof. Bruce D. Machart, Committee Member

The Haunting of Wright Manor



Excerpts from *The Haunting of Wright Manor*
With a Critical Introduction and an Analysis of the Hereditary Nature
of Evil

By Kate Holzman

Wright Family Tree

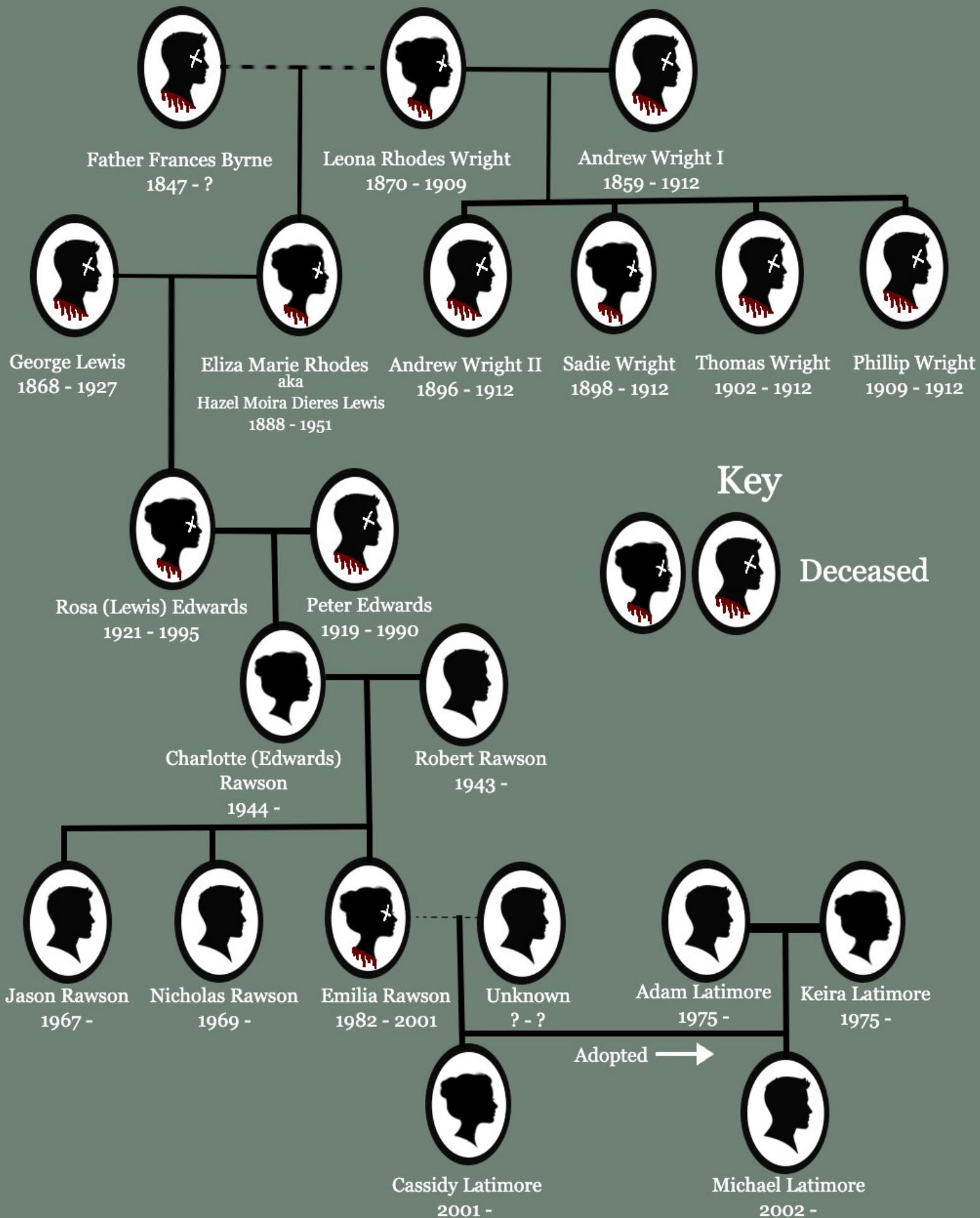


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Introduction

Nature versus Nurture

The root of fear lies within the unknown and misunderstood. Darkness is feared, not for what it is, but for what it might potentially be shielding from our knowledge. Oceans are terrifying because of how much is unexplored. Even the fear of public speaking is the result of not knowing how one's words will be received.

The Haunting of Wright Manor explores the fear of the unknown, and more specifically, the hereditary nature of evil. “The phrase ‘nature versus nurture’ was first coined in the mid-1800s by the English Victorian polymath Francis Galton in discussion about the influence of heredity and environment on social advancement” (Serpell [2013](#)), writes Mick Serpell in the *British Journal of Pain*. Essentially, “Nature versus Nurture” boils down to a debate of which character traits are inherited and which are the result of external environmental factors. *Wright Manor*’s protagonist, Victoria Mariano, finds herself struggling with the aforementioned debate. At the age of 12, Victoria witnessed her mother kill her father before turning the gun on herself, and for the duration of *The Haunting of Wright Manor*, she is left wondering if her mother’s actions can be seen as a predictor of Victoria’s own future. Many times, Victoria indirectly asks herself if her mother’s genetic makeup is what turned her into a killer or if she was pushed by other circumstances in her life. If it was nature that caused Victoria’s mother to kill, then Victoria runs the risk of having inherited that same murderous gene. On the other hand, if Victoria’s mother was driven to kill by external factors, then could Victoria also turn into a killer by witnessing such a traumatic event at a young and developmentally crucial age?

Scholar Karola Stotz writes about the “Nature versus Nurture” debate in their article, “Murder on the development express: who killed nature/nurture?” In the piece, Stotz mentions a

study done with rats where the connection was examined between the behavior of maternal rats and their offspring. They write, “Hence stressed, alert mothers produce stressed, alert daughters who develop into stressed mothers” (Stotz 2012 page 922). Given that the mental state of mother rats has an impact on the kinds of parents their children eventually become, Victoria’s fear is further validated, as a human worried about the way her own mother’s choices will alter her character traits.

Cassidy also has that same underlying concern, as she found out several months before *The Haunting of Wright Manor* takes place that her biological mother was a descendant of the Wright family’s killer. This fear is far more subtle for Cassidy than it is for Victoria, as Cassidy is more focused on acquiring the Wright family fortune than she is on what being the descendant of a killer could mean for her.

Ultimately, the answer of which has more of an impact on a person, either nature or nurture, is that neither one nor the other has greater influence over the development of a human being. Instead, it is a combination of the two that mold a person’s character, and the world is filled with uncertainties, rendering “Who will I become?” to be one of the largest unknowns to fear for a person with murderers in their family tree.

Works Cited for Introduction

- Serpell, Mick. "Guest Editorial." *British Journal of Pain*, SAGE Publications, Nov. 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4590158/#:~:text=The%20phrase%20'nature%20versus%20nurture,and%20environment%20on%20social%20advancement>.
- Stotz, Karola. "Murder on the Development Express: Who Killed Nature/Nurture?" *Biology & Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 6, 27 Sept. 2012, pp. 919–929., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10539-012-9343-1>.

The Haunting of Wright Manor Plot Synopsis

Set in the fictional town of Hampshire, Massachusetts, 30 miles west of Boston, *The Haunting of Wright Manor* follows four teenagers as they search for gold at the abandoned Wright Family Estate. The novel spans twenty-four hours, with flashbacks told through letters and through the thoughts of one of the two narrators: Victoria Mariano and Cassidy Latimore.

On the surface, *The Haunting of Wright Manor* is about Victoria Mariano, Cassidy Latimore, Michael Latimore, and James Sanchez as they search for rumored gold at a haunted house. Wright Manor was the home of the Wrights, a family of socialites, in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The reign of the Wright Family ended in 1912, when the entire family was murdered one night, and the killer was never caught.

At its core, *Wright Manor* is about the connection between genetics and evil. Victoria fears becoming like her mother, who killed Victoria's father before dying by suicide, and Victoria wonders if she is predisposed to killing because of her mother's actions. Cassidy, on the other hand, is adopted but finds out that she is biologically related to the Wright family and their killer. Victoria and Cassidy do not get along well at the beginning of the novel, but by the end their priorities change. The two young women eventually realize that they have more in common than they had originally thought. While Cassidy takes most of the gold for herself, which she feels is her birthright as a descendent of the Wright family, she does go against her original plan by sharing some of the fortune with Victoria. Victoria also grows as a character, as she does not cause harm to another character when given the opportunity, proving to herself that she is not sick like her mother. *The Haunting of Wright Manor* is a horror novel that focuses primarily on two young female protagonists and the struggles they have with accepting their identities and the potential hereditary nature of evil.

The following pages include excerpts from *The Haunting of Wright Manor*

Context:

Take a Minute: “Take a Minute” offers an explanation to the reader about what happened with Victoria’s mom to help give background to Victoria’s character.

Sanchez v. Latimore: This section shows more of the dynamic between the group, explaining why James and Michael don’t get along (beyond Michael disliking James for his treatment of Victoria).

A Shadow in Direct Light: Leading up to the break-in, Victoria was having visions of herself committing murder. She mentions the nightmares but doesn’t explain that they were about her killing her friends until this point towards the middle of the novel. Directly before falling through the floor, Victoria had been with her friends in the attic, which they realized was the bedroom of another member of the Wright family, Eliza Rhodes. Eliza, the stepdaughter of Andrew Wright and daughter of Leona Rhodes, was confined to the attic until the point where she turned on her family for locking her away, killing her stepfather and her four stepsiblings before fleeing the scene.

Still Breathing: Cassidy, from the start of the novel until this point, had been working with her uncles. Six months back, when Cassidy found out who her biological family was, she noticed that her Uncles Jason and Nick had both been convicted of armed robbery and spent ten years in prison. Her friends were separately plotting to try and find the gold at the Wright family estate, and, realizing that her great-great-grandmother was Eliza Rhodes, the killer of the Wright family and heir to the fortune, Cassidy felt it was her right to get the gold. That amount of gold would be difficult to legally sell, so Cassidy contacts her uncles and gets them on board with her plan to give them the info she gets from her friends about where the gold might be, in exchange for them helping her turn the gold into cash afterwards without splitting the money with her friends. In “Still Breathing,” Cassidy realizes that her uncles have turned on her.

Eliza: This final excerpt was written for me to work out the way that Eliza Rhodes’ life was going and what caused her, in her mind, to murder her family. If included in the finished product, “Eliza” may be turned into letters between Eliza and her mother, Leona. The letters would be found by Victoria, Cassidy, Michael, and James, and would offer some explanation to the four friends of why someone would turn on their family.

Take a Minute

Victoria

I'd like for you to do me a favor. It'll only take a minute.

Think about your biggest fear.

No, not that one.

Not that one either.

I'm talking about the one that keeps you up at night.

That scene from that movie that you saw 15 years ago that you just can't seem to get out of your head.

When the floorboards creak inside your house at 2:30 in the morning and you're the only one home. What do you do? Do you tell yourself that floorboards creak all the time, *it's just the house settling*, or do you hide under your sheets and assume the worst? Do you reach for your bedside lamp and decide you'll use it to bludgeon whoever is in your house? What if it's not a person? How do you fight a ghost?

Or is your biggest fear that you'll be stuck in the open ocean and only be able to see vast expanses of darkness beneath you. You can keep telling yourself that one fact that you heard in elementary school, *if you're being attacked by a shark, just punch it in the nose*, but remember that sharks usually attack from underneath. Picture that Great White Shark swimming up at you, going thirty-something miles an hour, barreling towards you, and you expect yourself to be able to punch it in the nose before it catches you in its razor-sharp jaws and devours you? Let's say you can punch the shark in the nose and the shark isn't a threat. Eighty percent of the ocean is unexplored, and there's no way to be certain that you'll survive an attack from any number of

prehistoric beasts that could be swimming beneath the surface. Of course, I'm sure you'd like to think that Megalodons are extinct, but that's a lot of unaccounted for space.

Perhaps you have a fear of the dark. It's like thalassophobia and could explain how the floorboards creaking in your house at 2:30 in the morning would be even more frightening. It means a racing heart when the sun sets and you're sitting out at a campfire, constantly looking over your shoulder into the woods. You hear twigs snap and dry leaves crackle beneath footsteps, and you can tell yourself as many times as you want that they're just chipmunks. Prisoners don't escape from jail often, especially the dangerous serial killers. But things happen, and I'm sure the last victims of serial killers were telling themselves that they'll be fine. Then the next second they were being chopped up by a random guy who came crashing out of the woods. Sure, though. Tell yourself it's just a chipmunk. Or maybe a bear.

I can't forget fears of snakes. Or spiders. Of animals that slither and squirm. Spiders have eight legs, and looking at them can seem unnatural, the way they scutter across floors. Have you ever seen a video of a spider being stepped on, only to release dozens of baby spiders, which spread across the floor in every direction? Snakes, on the other hand, have no legs. They have no arms. Instead, boa constrictors wrap their bodies around their prey and squeeze and squeeze and *squeeze* until they're able to consume the lifeless body of whatever helpless, innocent animal they've just suffocated. Or what about venom? In seconds you can feel the burning sensation, and in minutes you'll be gone. Have you ever tried to pick up a snake? They're evasive creatures. I've heard they can slither up through pipes. But enough about them.

There's more to fear. There are small spaces. Elevators. Crawl spaces. Being on a plane and knowing you're stuck on a metal bird hurtling through the sky with no way out. I mean, there is one way out, but it's skydiving, which is a whole other fear entirely. Claustrophobia is

that sensation of being trapped and being afraid of small spaces. Where you enter the subway and all you feel is that the walls are closing in on you. *Tunnels don't collapse until they do.* The people who were in tunnels when they collapsed likely were telling themselves that they'd be fine right until they weren't.

I can't forget the fear of heights. When you walk two steps up a stepladder and look down, only to find that the world beneath you is spinning. The checkered tile floor that's only eight feet from your eyes now feels miles away, and you clutch at anything you can to save yourself from that vortex of a floor. Have you ever been walking a tightrope, forty feet in the air, and looked down at the people below you? They look so small down there on the ground, and you know that if the harness and rope you're tethered to ever broke, you'd be down with them in a second. Shaky hands and sweaty palms and a racing heart and you know that if you fall it's over.

But you know what no one ever really says they're afraid of?

Sunny days.

No one is afraid of the middle of July, when the day stretches far into the night. When the sun beats down and that ice cream you just bought is dripping onto your hands faster than you can eat it. People don't say they're afraid to feel the summer breeze as they walk through grass, feeling it between their toes, while the sunshine warms their skin. After months and months of New England winter, people rarely shy away from the bright days that make up for a season of darkness.

Except for me.

While some people live for the summer, the cookouts, the days at your friend's pool, I skulk off to my room and shut the shades and just pray to God to bring back the fall. To bring

back the chilly, brisk air and kill the humidity. I blast my A/C and walk around in a sweatshirt and fuzzy socks on my cool tile floors. My friends don't get it. They beg me to go out, they want to go to the fair that comes to town the first weekend in August every year. They want to sit around a fire and swap stories about who has had the most exciting experiences on their summer vacations.

But how am I supposed to be happy and enjoy the heat when all I can think about is how sunny days aren't always as amazing as people believe.

People who are afraid of the dark are sometimes just afraid of the ghosts that reside within the void. The shadows. But the thing is, shadows are only visible when there's light. In the pitch black, there are no shadows, because there's no light to create them. But at 5 pm on the hottest day in the middle of July in Hampshire, Massachusetts, there's plenty of light to create shadows. In the bright sunshine, there's plenty of room for darkness. And, in my mother's mind, it's the perfect time to destroy the family.

You see, it wasn't the middle of the winter when she lost herself. It wasn't when the days are short, and the nights are dark and cold. It wasn't when snow coats the ground, and you have to watch your step because the patches of ice are everywhere and they're ruthless. It wasn't even the spring, when it feels like every day is rainy and the cloud-cover is near constant.

No.

My mom felt her darkest in the middle of July. She took my dad's gun from his safe at 4:43 in the afternoon. And she shot him at 4:47, right in the middle of our living room, as I sat there horror-stricken, with the incessant music of the Disney Channel show I was watching playing mockingly in the background. As my breath caught and I tried to scream or get up to call 9-1-1 or do *anything* to stop her, I watched as she turned the gun on herself. I was 12 when I

learned that the summer isn't the bright and cheery season that everyone wants you to see. Six years later, all I want is to be able to go back to July 11th, 2014, the day before, when the sun was shining, and the birds were singing, and I didn't know that the bad moods my mother was in so often could lead to her ending our happy little family. Now, living with my grandparents, I plaster on a smile and try to pretend that everything is okay. It's not, of course. But they don't have to worry about me. I'm not okay, *how could I be*, but I also know that one day things will get better.

They have to.

Sanchez v. Latimore

Victoria

We had all decided that it would be best if we regrouped at Michael and Cassidy's house, and I would use my grandfather's Ford Explorer to drive us there because, well, he probably shouldn't be driving it anymore anyways, and it was large enough that the four of us could fit without fighting too much over leg room and personal space. For a group that was supposed to be working together, all level of cooperation and patience went out the window if Michael accidentally bumped into Cassidy's arm.

We were better off taking the decades old Ford Explorer with its rusted-out wheel wells and duct-taped bumper. There were stains on the ratty cloth seats that looked like they could've been from either ice cream or blood, and there was a musty smell that got into the car one time when my grandfather left the windows down during a rainstorm, and no amount of tree-shaped air fresheners have been able to fix that, *not for lack of trying*.

But hey, the old thing ran *most of the time*, so it would theoretically be fine for one night.

"This feels unnecessary," Cassidy complained as she opened the door to her family's garage, letting me and James in. Michael was standing over by a workbench. He lifted a hammer, weighed it carefully in his hand, gave it a practice swing, and then placed it back down on the table with a disappointed shake of his head. "He's been doing that all week," Cassidy muttered.

"What do you have there?" James asked, clapping a hand down on Michael's shoulder, who ignored the question and stepped back from the table with a look of pride, gesturing to the display.

"Okay, so here's the situation," Michael clasped his hands together, "I was tasked with something very difficult."

I briefly wondered if I had made the right decision, asking him to help physically break into the house, but I also knew that if there was one thing I could count on Michael to do, it was to give his all. Especially if “giving his all” meant cutting through chains and shattering glass windows.

“Oh, quit the dramatics, you’re being ridiculous,” Cassidy said, and I shushed her.

“Well, as you all know, we’re breaking into a house tonight,” Michael continued, and I nodded, attempting to follow his lead and ignore James and Cassidy’s snide remarks.

“I was made aware of that, yes,” James said.

“Just throw the stuff in a backpack. Jesus Christ.” Cassidy said.

“Hey, uh, I think I was talking? If you could all stop interrupting, that’d be great, thanks,” Michael said, glancing over at me, and I nodded in approval, as if giving him permission to keep going. “As I was saying, I did research on what would be the best way to cut through chains if there are any on the door. I found these like really sharp pliers that should work.”

“I think those are called bolt cutters,” James corrected.

“Um, excuse me, I literally *just* said I was talking. So yes, I’m bringing these pliers to cut through the chain,” Michael said.

James raised his hands in surrender as if apologizing for correcting him, but the smirk on her face suggested otherwise.

“Next, I had to think about what I would do if things were boarded up. I figured I’d bring a nice hammer, for the claw on the back, but I can’t ignore the possibilities that come with a trusty crowbar.”

“How are you going to fit a *crowbar* in your backpack?” Cassidy asked, and Michael rolled his eyes, dramatically grabbing his backpack from the floor, unzipping the largest pocket,

and sticking the crowbar inside. It fit perfectly, and he was able to zip the pocket back up without any issues.

“Exactly like that, that’s how.” He said. “Honestly, Cass, don’t pretend like you know what you’re talking about. It’s unattractive.”

I watched as Cassidy grimaced and could tell from her furrowed brows and fiery eyes that she wanted to say something to save face, but the silence that ensued suggested that she hadn’t been able to come up with any witty retort.

I enjoyed seeing Michael come out of some of their interactions as the victorious one. It happened so rarely.

“What else do you have?” I broke the silence, and Michael placed his backpack onto the ground once again and turned back to the work bench.

“I took the glass breaker out of my car,” Michael said, holding it up. “In case we need to break open windows.”

“Couldn’t you just use the hammer or crowbar to break glass?” James questioned.

“Couldn’t you just use the hammer or crowbar to break glass,” Michael repeated in a mocking tone. “Uh, yeah, sure I could, but don’t you think I should use a tool that’s designed for what I’m trying to do? You could use a soup ladle to scoop ice cream, it doesn’t mean that’s what would be most effective.”

“We’re not talking about scooping ice cream though. We’re talking about what will break windows the best,” James wasn’t one to back down. “And I think a hammer will work better than a lame glass breaking tool.”

“Hey James,” Michael replied, “Speaking of lame tools that don’t belong, why are you even here? If anyone wanted your opinion on this stuff, maybe Vic would’ve asked *you* to figure out how to break into the house. But she didn’t. She asked me. And on the subject of Victoria—”

“Michael!” I hissed in warning, and he shut up, looking over at me in silence. James, on the other hand, kept his eyes on Michael, seething.

I was grateful that Michael stopped what he was saying, as I knew how badly he wanted to tell James what he was thinking just then, but the furious look on my face had been enough for him to know he was crossing a line. Michael hated James *a lot*, but he cared about me more. I knew exactly what he would’ve said, and the fallout would’ve been too difficult to deal with today.

A moment passed, the silence weighing heavily on the four of us. Cassidy looked amused, glad that she wasn’t the only one Michael had insulted. Michael looked at me with remorse, knowing that bringing up the relationship between me and James was low. James finally stopped glaring at Michael, only to look over at me expectantly, as if I was going to say something to Michael about how he was wrong in thinking that I didn’t care what James had to say.

I stayed silent. Nothing I could say right then would diffuse the tension because Michael was right. When we first started planning all this a few months ago, James and I were still together. I didn’t want to be rude and tell him he couldn’t come with us, but this was also the last time I ever really felt obligated to see him. James had been helpful when it came to researching the Wright family, so I didn’t want to take all the information he found and then cut him out of the plan, but this was it.

After tonight I was done.

“Can we just get everything together and go?” I asked, and Michael quickly began to shove everything into his backpack, swinging it over his shoulder.

“Just when things were getting interesting,” Cassidy muttered, and I glared in her direction. She held up her hands, feigning surrender. “Fine, but I call shotgun.”

James and Michael didn’t always have so much animosity towards each other. When they first met at kindergarten orientation, they were inseparable. Playdates turned to begging their parents for sleepovers. With friendships that start so young, people sometimes grow apart.

That wasn’t the case with Michael and James.

For them, it was eighth grade when things started to break down, but not because of changing interests or a lack of time. Instead, James’ father, while working as an attorney in town, won a high-profile case he had been working on for months. Hampshire didn’t have much crime, or much going on in general, except for in 2015, when there had been horrified buzz over there being a serial killer in town. Three bodies showed up in the woods around Hampshire with their lips carved into permanent smiles and their eyelids meticulously sewn shut. Details were kept out of the media as well as they could be, meaning *not at all*, in a small town where the biggest news stories were about the town’s high school football team *almost* winning a game. It was absolute chaos.

When the police finally found the guy that did it a week or so after the third body was discovered, and the man was put on trial, he needed a public defender, and James’ father, professionally known as James Santos II, was assigned the case. Up until then, James II, Jimmy to his friends, was proving himself to be a bit of a disappointment as an attorney. He stumbled through trials, never seeming to be able to get a leg up on the prosecution. But, in this case, Jimmy noticed that the police didn’t follow proper evidence logging protocol at a couple of the

scenes they investigated, as the chain of custody had hours long gaps for some of the evidence supposedly tying his client to the murders.

And, well, he didn't exactly stumble onto this conclusion either.

It was a Friday night in Hampshire, which meant that James and Michael would be together playing whatever the newest first-person shooter video game was at the Latimore's house, and Jimmy would accompany his son, going over to play poker with Mr. Latimore. Although poker was more of a front so that the two could get together, drink, and laugh so boisterously loud that Michael had to turn the volume on the television up until the audio got staticky.

Lines can get a little blurred after several beers and a fifth of whiskey. Michael's father, Adam, was a sergeant on Hampshire's police force, and sometimes he would disclose some of the confidential information from cases to Jimmy, who was always equally as trashed and unlikely to remember anything he was told. Except that, on the Friday night in question, Jimmy had cut himself off a bit earlier in the night, because he had to wake up early the following morning to meet with his client.

Adam talked like he always did, divulged a bit too much, and Jimmy never stopped him when the discussion turned to the case he was working.

The next morning, while Adam nursed a brutal hangover, Jimmy was up and out at work before eight, with all the new information that his inebriated friend had shared. What had begun as a trial of a murderer with at least three victims quickly shifted to a look into police corruption.

Adam was, understandably, furious.

How could a longtime friend turn a casual conversation into an opportunity to win a case? How could words that had been said behind closed doors be brought into public discourse?

Had Adam imagined that he had built a friendship with Jimmy? Had Jimmy just been waiting for Adam to slip up and share confidential information?

Jimmy won the case because of what Adam told him while drunk, and beyond being mad at himself, Adam directed most of his rage at his ex-friend.

If Jimmy had stayed silent when he learned that the evidence was no longer admissible in court, he would've only furthered the problem. Was the guy they had on trial for the murders probably the killer? Yeah. But that didn't matter when the murder weapon, the main piece of evidence, had a chain of custody with *many* broken links.

Adam didn't see Jimmy's side. He didn't acknowledge that irresponsibly looked after evidence could lead to a wrongful conviction. He didn't think of Jimmy needing to follow the oath he took to fight for his clients. He didn't accept that he should have never been talking about the case with anyone not on the police force.

And, in middle school, James and Michael were still heavily influenced by the words of their parents. Adam stopped wanting James to come by the Latimore house, because doing so meant furthering any kind of connection between the Latimore family and the "traitors over at the Sanchez house". Jimmy didn't want James and Michael to hang out because he saw Adam as morally corrupt for being willing to put a man in jail and hide flaws with the evidence collection system.

The boys got caught in the middle of the fight between their fathers, and no matter how much they tried to ignore what was being said, it was all they heard about from their fathers for a couple months, leading to a blowout fight between the two teenagers. Michael and James said words to each other in defense of their respective fathers. From Michael came comments that Mr. Sanchez was a back-stabbing bastard who should've confronted his friend instead of taking a

private conversation as an opportunity to make Sergeant Latimore look bad and to allow a murderer to walk free. James replied by calling Sergeant Latimore a drunk who wouldn't have run into this problem if he hadn't done his job correctly in the first place.

They quickly realized that their fathers were right in trying to keep them apart, as Michael and James lost respect for each other, each seeing their own father as the righteous one, and their friendship burned out just as quickly as it had begun.

Michael and I met the following year when Cassidy and I got into an argument in the high school cafeteria over some stupid cheerleading team drama. I had made it onto the team as a freshman, and she was pissed that the coach would place me in the front row for a competition when Cassidy had been working so hard and hitting every mark. It was a ridiculous fight, but Cassidy refused to drop it if I didn't promise to tell the coach I wanted to be in the back instead. When I tried to walk away, Cassidy grabbed at my upper arm, hard enough to leave a bruise, and pulled me back to face her. Michael saw this and quickly intervened before Cassidy and I would've caused a scene big enough to get us both kicked off the squad and possibly suspended.

After that, Michael began to see me as someone in need of protection. He still viewed James as his enemy, but for the two years that James and I were a couple, Michael tried to overlook his utter resentment for James, in the interest of being supportive of me. He warned me a couple times that he wasn't sure that James deserved me, but when he realized that his words weren't stopping me and James from being together, he eased up. However, now that James had betrayed me, all his original hatred was rekindled.

So, as I nodded at Cassidy in acknowledgement of her request to sit in the passenger seat, I hoped that we'd at least make it to the house tonight without Michael pushing James out of the backseat of the car. Though, if he did, it would certainly make things a hell of a lot easier.

A Shadow in Direct Light

Victoria

I awoke with a start and, with a groan, attempted to push myself up off the floor. A shooting pain spread from my left wrist up my forearm to my elbow, protesting my movements, but I continued anyway. I wasn't going to let myself be stuck there on the floor. After all that had happened, I refused to be left anywhere in that godforsaken house alone. I was acutely aware that I held something enclosed tightly in the grip of my right hand, but I hadn't yet opened my eyes to see what it was or where I had fallen to.

Though I knew, based off my minimal injuries, I mustn't have fallen far, likely only to the room directly below the attic.

The attic.

Why had I gone up there in the first place?

Why had I walked so far into the corner of the attic, knowing that the rotting wooden beams making up the floor weren't likely to be able to hold my weight.

With a grimace— my damn left wrist— I blinked open my eyes, finding, miraculously, that the room I was in was all lit up. I had been wrong, apparently, in my assumption that Wright Manor was void of electricity. It did seem that, while many of the lights probably didn't work, the room I had landed myself in not only had electricity running to it, but the lights were on to welcome me. The lights, the warmth, I felt, somehow, safe, and the thudding in my heart that had accompanied my initial realization that I was alone began to slow. *Wherever I am, I am safe*, I thought.

The only perceived problem now, besides the likelihood that the fall had fractured one of the delicate bones in my wrist, was that something was clouding my vision. I carefully placed

what was in my right hand down beside me, and wiped at my eyes, in addition to blinking profusely, to clear my eyesight.

After some time, I was finally able to see more of my surroundings, and found myself wishing, for the second time in my life, that I could be blind. What use was vision when, in my mind, horrors abounded in the visible world. Seeing meant being forced to believe, and I wanted nothing more than to live in ignorance.

The room around me was, admittedly, beautiful.

The deep red oriental carpet I was seated on was pristine, not a sign of age, though it had to be over a century old. The chairs were upholstered in a mint green satin, shining from the dazzling crystal chandelier overhead.

There was a fireplace in the corner, surrounded by white marble, that was stocked with wood, and it seemed that all it needed was a lit match to set it aflame.

But I didn't get the chance to appreciate the splendor of the room, the pristine way it had been preserved all these years, for I was too preoccupied with other matters, beginning with what I had rubbed from my eyes to help clear my vision.

Blood covered my hands, and, before I lifted my gaze to the rest of the room, I almost felt confident that the blood must have dripped down from a cut on my head and run into my eyes. I *had* just fallen through the floor, which could certainly account for such injuries.

But unfortunately, I lifted my gaze toward the rest of the room and found myself to be in the presence of a most gruesome scene.

Those mint green chairs, the white marble of the fireplace, even the rich red, intricately woven oriental rug, had been saturated, splattered, and stained with a volume of blood that I had never before seen.

Draped across one chair, head slumped sideways, sat Michael. A gash through his throat was still oozing some blood onto the collar of his white t-shirt.

James was seated with his back against the white marble of the fireplace, and the splatter of blood around his fractured skull indicated that he had been beaten on the head repeatedly. The murder weapon had been thrown down on the ground by his lifeless form. A stone lion bookend was snarling from its place by James' feet.

Cassidy was face down in the far-right corner of the room, hidden behind Michael and those beautiful chairs. The only indication that she was injured was the crimson pool that spread from her body, under the chairs, and through the threads of the rug.

If the blood had only been on the rug, I may not have noticed it, for it only enhanced the colors. It only added to the exquisite design. The blood was a complement, almost an improvement.

But the blood was everywhere, with an overpowering, nauseating iron scent, and thus the room could not be appreciated.

"No," I whispered, the word catching in my throat, the universe not wanting me to object to what was before me. "No!" When repeated, the word came out with a force I had never felt from somewhere in the pit of my stomach, and I yelled the word again and again until my throat felt raw, and the sound crackled with the hoarseness of my voice.

My eyes darted down to the spot on the floor where I had placed what I had been gripping in my right hand and found that it was the knife I had put in my pocket at the start of the night. A knife I had only intended to use for self-defense. The handle where I had held it was gleaming with blood, as was the shining silver blade.

With a sharp gasp, I kicked at the knife, sending it scuttering against the hardwood, off towards the doorway.

No. The word bubbled up in my throat again, along with the sickeningly sour taste of bile. I rarely got sick, and having a strong stomach was a point of pride for me, but right then all I felt was the twisting feeling of my stomach threatening to expel its contents.

I swallowed hard, hoping my saliva would wash away the awful taste. It didn't.

My brain allowed me to take in bits of the room at a time, so as not to be overwhelmed, and the next aspect I was able to comprehend was the way the eyes of each of my friends looked.

It was as if razor sharp claws had sliced through their faces, leaving their eye sockets as barren, sightless voids.

With apprehension, I looked back down at my hands. Initially, I had only noticed the blood I had wiped away from my face, but, turning my hands over to look at my fingernails, I saw the flesh embedded beneath them. My nails, while not incredibly long, had been long enough to shred their skin, puncture their eyes, and leave them bleeding.

The nausea I had tried to subdue finally won over, and I turned to my side, as my stomach violently heaved.

"Oh God," the words left my mouth in a murmur, so quiet that if anyone had been left in the house to hear me, they wouldn't have been able to make out those words over the wind swishing through the leaves of trees outside.

I tried to look elsewhere in the room, but my gaze kept being drawn back to Michael, facing me from across the room. His deep brown eyes now reduced to the vitreous, spilled over, tears of blood streaming down his pale face.

Michael looked frightened and desperate, and I felt hollow. I had caused that look on his face.

I began beating at my face, the chorus of, “No,” and “Why,” leaving my mouth in quick succession. I pulled at my hair and clawed at my skin. If I could make my friends stop seeing, then surely, I could do the same to myself.

I could protect my eyes from the torture of seeing what I had done, but I would never be able to forget it.

“Victoria,” the call came from somewhere above me, and I felt that the universe was mocking me. The voice sounded nervous and impossibly familiar, and I looked at Michael’s corpse with disdain.

His lips unmoving, even with the sound of his voice in the stagnant air of the room.

“Victoria!” his voice called again, and I realized that the voice had been calling the whole time I was in the room, but my mind had chalked it up to the sound of wind in trees and settling old floorboards. Now, with focus, I noticed that Michael’s voice was not the only one I heard.

“Vicky!” someone else called. James. But I could see him clearly by the fireplace with his skull smashed in.

Whatever cruel trick the house was playing on me, I wanted no part in it.

“Shut up!” I shrieked at their bodies, but it only made their voices grow in volume.

“Victoria!” Cassidy called as well, sounding closer, causing me to plug my ears and scream nonsense. Anything to block out the awful noise; the lies being fed to me by the sadistic house.

I closed my eyes tightly, my eyelids shut to the point of pain, but I ignored it, like the throbbing in my wrist. No physical pain could be worse than the knowledge that the nightmares I

had been having every night leading up to this were premonitions. I was unstable, a cruel fact, and I had gone into this house with three of the people I most cared about. I put them all at risk of my own psychopathy, and for what? For some gold that may or may not exist?

My mind was swimming in circles, only to be interrupted by the gentle touch of a hand on my shoulder.

With a start, I opened my eyes and looked up to find that the beautifully lit up room had been cast again into darkness. A flashlight was being shone down on me, into my eyes unfortunately, but through it I could make out the silhouette of three figures standing above me.

“Are you hurt?” James’ voice came from behind the flashlight, and he quickly knelt beside me, checking to see if I was okay, as his question had gone unanswered.

Ghosts, I thought for a second, but then took a closer look into the darkness of the room and found that, with the lights, the bodies had also vanished. I was in that same room with the mint green chairs and the red rug and the white marble fireplace still, and yet the bodies had disappeared. The chairs were draped in what appeared to be white sheets, meant to preserve the fabric while the house was vacant.

The marble of the fireplace, somewhat visible in the beam of James’ flashlight, was dull and covered in soot.

The rug was worn down to almost nothing, the lovely colors faded to a dust and dirt-coated brown.

The room was as it should be, blood was nowhere to be seen, not on my hands, not on the rug or the chairs or the marble.

They weren’t ghosts looking down at me, but instead Michael, James, and Cassidy, looking at me with concern.

I quickly jumped up, away from James, throwing my arms around Michael, almost knocking him sideways, but he steadied himself and hugged me back.

The overwhelming feelings that had taken over my body when I thought I had completely lost my mind gave way to tears that came so hard that I struggled to breathe through the sobs. My body shook as Michael hugged me tightly.

“Vic, are you okay?” he asked. Normally, I would want to follow that up with some sarcastic comment, as I was clearly *not okay*, but I was so grateful that he, too, was fine, that I only tightened my embrace. I heard James stand behind me, placing his hand on my back in a soothing gesture. Over Michael’s shoulder I could see Cassidy, a look of genuine fear painted on her face, replacing her usual mocking expression.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine,” I decided not to mention my wrist, as that pain was certainly more manageable than what I had just encountered. “I’m so glad you three are okay,” the relief washing over me and soothing my distressed soul.

I stepped back, looking at the three of them with glee, as they exchanged looks of confusion.

“Uh, yeah, we’re not the ones that fell through a fucking floor,” Cassidy scoffed.

“It was a little funny when it first happened,” Michael added. “Like you were there and then you went to reach for something and then *bam*. Gone. Right through the floor.”

James elbowed Michael, but he just shrugged.

“Okay, I’m sorry, I’m just being honest. She should know that it was funny until we couldn’t immediately find her.”

James looked as if he mouthed something at Michael to get him to stop talking, but I could hardly even make out their facial expressions in the dim moonlight coming through the drawn shades.

“Guys, I think I lost my flashlight,” I mentioned and looked around.

“It was right on the floor by the door when we got here,” James said, passing it over to me.

Another sigh of relief. The thing I had been holding in my hand when I fell was a flashlight, not a knife. I felt my pockets and, thankfully, my knife was still there, folded up in my front right pocket, not covered in blood.

With a click, I turned my flashlight back on, and felt the jolt of my heart thump erratically in my chest, for a split-second seeing Michael, James, and Cassidy’s faces as they had appeared to me moments ago, eye sockets hollow, Michael’s throat slit, James’ skull bludgeoned until brain matter trickled down the side of his head. Except this time, they weren’t dead. They were fully alive, their faces directed at me, and regardless of their lack of eyes they seemed to see straight into my soul.

Just as quickly as they had morphed into those horrid versions of themselves, I found myself once again seeing my friends as they truly were. James was looking towards me, those haunting emerald eyes filled with concern, while Michael scoffed, his eyes dancing with unspoken jokes. Cassidy’s eyes betrayed her, showing genuine fear.

“There’s no way we’re that hideous to look at,” Michael said, taking in my pallor, the way my jaw went slack when I first looked at them in the beam of my flashlight. “And if you’re going to try to trick us and say that there’s someone behind us, don’t even think about it. We’re not idiots.”

As Michael spoke the words, he still glanced nervously over his shoulder. Just in case I had seen something in the background, as I wouldn't normally lie about something like that. In fact, there wasn't much I *did* lie about.

"I've been having these dreams," I said, the words rushing from my mouth before I could even comprehend the weight of what I was saying. I meant to keep this a secret, bring it up later when we were all home safe, but I now knew that I couldn't trust that my nightmares were confined to the inner workings of my mind, not when I was still reeling from my recent hallucination. "I've been having these dreams, for months now, that you guys were dead. That I had killed you all."

I wasn't sure what I had been expecting in response, but the silence was sharp and distinct, as was the desire that reality could be rewound and reworked. If I could have, I would go back and keep those words to myself, but now they remained, floating in the air, waiting for someone to snatch them up and formulate any sort of reply.

It would have been bad enough for me to bring this up in a café, in broad daylight, while everyone sipped on various cappuccinos and lattes. In a situation like that, they could have simply stood up and left the table, leaving me to accept that, with a family history like mine, I couldn't afford to talk about those sorts of dreams.

Instead of telling everyone in public, where they could've easily left if they felt uncomfortable, I had chosen to let the secret out in a mildewy room on the third floor of Wright Manor. *Where no one would be able to hear their desperate screams*, I thought.

"Is this where you tell us that you killed the Wright Family?" Michael asked nonchalantly, and James swiftly elbowed him once again. The absurdity of the question made a nervous laugh bubble up in my chest, but I pushed it down.

“I mean, everyone has weird dreams sometimes. Do you want to kill us, Vic?” James asked, and, again, I felt that tickle in my throat. I was going to laugh. Their questions weren’t serious. *Of course*, I didn’t want to kill them. James knew that. Michael knew that. Cassidy knew that.

And yet, a resounding *No* did not instantly leave my lips, for I wondered if my subconscious had been trying to tell me, again and again, something that my conscious mind was too frightened to admit.

Sure, my friends got on my nerves occasionally. Michael made jokes at the most inappropriate times. Cassidy rarely focused on anyone other than herself. James, well, James seemed to believe that his current attempts to get closer to me would change my perception of the past.

But were any of these good enough excuses for murder? Certainly not. Everything else I could think of that bothered me about my friends were all mere nuisances.

I realized that I had been quiet too long, thinking.

“Yeah. That’s actually why I brought you all out here. To kill you. I’m sure you understand,” I joked, finally letting out my laugh to try and maintain the light mood that Michael had originally started.

“What did you even see up in the attic before you fell?” Cassidy questioned apprehensively. “I couldn’t tell if you were looking outside or if there was something in the corner of the attic. It all happened so fast.”

I combed back through the last few minutes, but I found myself unable to recover any semblance of what I had been thinking of or looking at just before the blood-soaked room overwhelmed me.

I glanced around at the crumbled plaster that coated the floor where I had fallen, before I directed my attention overhead, to where jagged wooden beams framed a sizable hole in the ceiling, and pointed my flashlight upwards, hoping that something would stick out as being the reason for me walking over to such an unstable part of the attic. My light illuminated particles of dust suspended in the air, and just for a split second, before the dark void overhead was cast into light, I could just barely make out the silhouette of a person looking down on me, their face shrouded in darkness and altogether unrecognizable, disappearing like a shadow in direct light.

Still Breathing

Cassidy

“What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing?” spat Nick, his hot breath reeking of menthol cigarettes. “Jay, get over here!”

I cleared my throat and straightened up, not letting my gaze stray from Nick’s bloodshot eyes. He seemed to notice my attempt to stand my ground and let his hand rest on the plastic handle of the gun in his waistband, reminding me how far I was from having control of the situation.

To our left was the car. Victoria was on the ground by the front tires, motionless. James and Michael were in the house, making another trip to grab the last of the gold. Until they got back to where Victoria and I were meant to stand guard, I was the only one capable of stopping my uncles from driving away with nearly the entire family fortune.

I avoided the urge to glance over my shoulder as I heard the crisp crackling of dead leaves, while Jason walked up behind me. He rested a palm on my shoulder, looking between me and Nick with an excited and intrigued glint in his eyes.

“This bitch doesn’t seem to know where her place is,” Nick grinned eagerly. “She seems to think that she can kill our sister and still get our help.”

I knew he was trying to get a rise out of me by mentioning my mother, so I focused on the latter part of his statement, not wanting to give him any level of satisfaction.

“I *never* said I needed your help. I actually think you need me more than I need either of you,” I stated. “You never would’ve been able to figure out the connection between our family and the Wrights if it weren’t for me. You wouldn’t know about the gold if it weren’t for me—”

I felt the sting of Nick's palm colliding with my right cheek and fell back a step, Jason letting out a shocked cackle, as I brought my hand up to cover the side of my face. The rough edge of his stainless-steel ring had sliced through my skin, and when I dropped my hand back to my side, a streak of my blood stretched across my palm.

I took another step back, my gaze darting over quickly to Victoria's form in the grass, willing her to get up and help me somehow. I knew I didn't deserve any assistance from her, not after being the one to get us into danger, but I still hoped beyond anything that she would *just wake up*. Then worried, *Dear God, was she even still breathing?* I watched for the rise and fall of her chest to indicate that she was alive, but from this far away, I couldn't see anything.

Nick quickly got my attention once again by grabbing onto my wrist so tightly that his knuckles turned white. I attempted to twist my arm to get free, but before I could make any progress with that, Jason decided to join in on the fun. Weaving his fingers through a fistful of my hair, Jay yanked back until my head was tilted up towards the stars. Unable to move my head or free my arm, I found myself at their mercy.

Nick released my hand, and I tried to grab at him, but with Jason's grasp on my hair, I was only pulled back more harshly as punishment for trying to fight back.

"Dumb bitch," Nick snarled, and I grimaced as Jason slid his hand up closer to my scalp. I wondered how much force he'd have to exert to tear out a chunk of my hair, though I certainly didn't want to find out.

"Hey, Nick," Jason said, and I could hear the playful smile in his tone.

Before I could think too much on what they could possibly be planning to do next, I felt the cold metal press against my temple.

I didn't have to be looking at their faces to know that fire danced behind their soulless eyes. If they killed me right now, that was it. Victoria was unconscious or *dead*. Michael and James would hear a gunshot, but they'd get here too late to know what happened. Jason and Nick would take the keys from my pocket once I was a lifeless corpse, and they'd drive off with all the gold we had been able to get to the car so far.

People usually say that, before you die, you see your life flash before your eyes.

All I could see were the stars overhead, while the pounding of my heart muffled my hearing. If I reached for the gun, my hair would either be ripped out or I would be shot, but with the shakiness of my hands, I wasn't sure what I'd be able to accomplish if, by some miracle, I was able to get a grip on the handle.

I heard their snickers, accompanied by the bone-chilling sound of the gun being cocked.

For a split second, I hoped that if my life flashed before my eyes, it was only good memories, but I was interrupted by a gunshot and the thud of weight slamming into my side, knocking me onto the ground.

But I wasn't dead.

Nick had missed.

I looked around me from my position in the grass and realized that the weight on top of me was Nick as he struggled to get back up onto his feet, his breath coming in unsteady and aggravated huffs.

"Uh, Nick," Jason said uneasily, and once Nick had stood up, I was able to get a better view of my surroundings. Standing a few feet away, with his hands helplessly held in front of him in surrender, was Jason. Nick stumbled a few steps before going still.

Victoria was alive.

Not only was she alive, but she had knocked Nick off his feet. In doing so, he had lost hold of his gun, and Victoria was now standing by her grandfather's car, gun in hand, poised and ready to shoot.

My own hands were still shaking from when the gun was up against my head, and yet Victoria seemed calm. She seemed ready.

Eliza

Eliza

May 6th, 1907

I've known many people who grow up fearful of the devil and the intricate ways he insinuates himself into lives. I have seen the ways that he intrigues the vulnerable and persuades them to sin. I've heard he lives in the darkness of every night, feasting on souls, hungry for the lust, greed, gluttony, envy, pride, sloth, and wrath, the sins he's possessed people to commit.

I'm aware that, once he's dug in his claws, once you've been ensnared, you'll succumb to your own inner turmoil long before you're close to breaking free of him. I know that, once you stray from God, it's not long before the devil takes you over.

I've watched good people fall apart, be ripped from the inside, torn to shreds. I've seen people become their own archnemeses.

And yet, there are other more sinister beings than the devil.

No, I'm not afraid of the devil, I'm far more fearful of *him*.

I'm afraid of the curl of his lips as he smirks. I'm afraid of the soft skin of his hands as he gently caresses my face. I'm afraid of the way his brown eyes darken with lust as he gazes into mine.

Whenever my mother leaves, her husband turns his affections towards me. Oftentimes, she leaves for a few hours at a time to run into the city or enjoy a luncheon with friends, but on rare occasions, she'll be away for days at a time to get her head in order.

When the door shuts behind her, he never fails to view me as a replacement for my mother. And, when it comes to Andrew Wright, one never turns down his advances.

After nights that I hopefully never fully remember, where he's poured me drink after drink of burning scotch until the warmth settled in my chest and I was no longer repulsed by the idea of intimacy with him, I would wake up beside him, my clothing strewn about the floor, and I would hasten to get my life back together. I would awake prior to dawn with a pounding headache and an immense amount of resentment towards the man who seems to always forget that he raised me.

I would get up and run around the room, collecting my clothing, before I would make my way back to my own room in the attic, hoping my siblings stayed asleep and, if not, I hoped that they were too young to understand what they were seeing. It was bad enough for me to be aware of what was happening between us. It would be so much worse to know that my younger brothers and sister knew as well.

By the time my mother returns to see me, I feel hollow for the first few hours, as if the daughter she left behind was lost, as if she's coming home to a shell of the person I once was.

A part of me wonders what would happen to that person if my mother never returned. Would the hollow feelings remain to shelter me from the knowledge of my actions, or would I eventually be able to live with myself?

November 3rd, 1909

For years I have felt most connected to the crisp autumn months.

Of course, I enjoy the way the trees light up, with brilliant golds and scarlets, as if their branches are filled with flames, alight against a cloudy sky. I watch those same trees shake free from their leaves, standing solitary, bare, and majestic while boldly exposed. I appreciate the spark of fear that settles in my soul when I witness masked children celebrating All Hallows Eve. I enjoy the season of McIntosh apples, of my teeth breaking through the crisp flesh, tasting the

sweet flavor before all the apples fall to the ground, rotting from the inside out, while writhing worms and scurrying ants feast on the fermented fruit.

I am aware of why people see beauty in fall, but my pleasures are derived more from the sound of silence echoing through the air, the opportunity to finally be alone with my thoughts after the rush of summer. When the tractors are no longer rumbling down the dirt roads, creating clouds of dust, and children aren't running rampant through the fields, basking in the sunlight, I am finally able to know peace.

With the end of the harvest season, as autumn begins to end, and winter is just barely visible on the horizon, I am most content with the world.

This year marks the first time in my life that the silence does not offer me that sense of serenity, and instead shrieks at me and reminds me what I'm without.

I haven't seen my mother in weeks.

Whenever she has left before, whenever her world became too overwhelming and she felt cornered, she always continued answering my letters. She's never vanished so suddenly without returning to go for walks through the open, empty fields and tell me all about where she'd gone and why she realized that she couldn't wait to get home to her children. She'd go on about how hard it was to have four young children and a husband who stopped calling her beautiful years ago. A husband who, when she's gone, turns to me for solace, but I'll never trouble her with my own sins.

But, once she was done complaining about the trials she's endured as a mother, she'll go on about the beauties of her life. She could never stay away, not for real, she would say, because the idea of being away from her children, whom she loved with all her heart, was too painful for her to bear. I'd question how she could say she loved us so much and still be able to leave, but, in her mind, becoming overwhelmed had nothing to do with love, and sometimes parents needed

space to remind themselves of who they were before they became parents. It didn't mean she loved her children any less, it simply meant that she needed to ground herself, as she could sometimes feel herself slipping when she was wrapped up in her life for too long.

I felt the aching pit in my stomach, gnawing, a sensation I had grown familiar with since late September when I was informed that she had left again.

This time felt more final than the last, and I could vividly picture the look in her eyes in the days leading up. She wasn't happy, and when my mother wasn't happy, she took her negative emotions and tucked them away, hiding them deep within her head. She always felt that there was no need for her to trouble anyone else with the sick inner workings of her mind. Everyone had bad days, what mattered was that she kept it quiet and didn't cause a stir.

Those days leading up to September 19th were filled with a glassy eyed stare, a look she'd give me when I wasn't sure she really saw me. It was almost as if her gaze traveled past me to some point behind my body, to some invisible spot in the distance that had transfixed her beyond my ability to garner her attention.

I felt I was the only one to notice the signs. The only one able to see when my mother wasn't happy. The children were old enough, but it seemed as if they lacked the empathy necessary to pick up on mother's distress. Each year that they aged brought them no new wisdom, and I couldn't help but feel that they were the ones to blame for her abandoning me.

Schooling hadn't been going well, as had been the case for the past few years. It was difficult to get a group of children, at a variety of different ages, to get together and focus. They were at distinctly different learning stages, but all any teacher wanted to do was make sure that Andrew turned out to be the smartest he could, him being the eldest son. It didn't matter if Sadie knew how to spell, as long as Andy would be able to successfully take care of the estate and provide for the family.

I spent most of my time helping with my siblings, but whenever I was down in the kitchen fetching meals from the cook, the children would run for our mother. She had plenty of time alone, but I think the more time she was given to think, simply meant more time to realize the distress her situation was bringing her.

I should have said something about her vacant stare one of those days. I should have acknowledged the signs instead of being like my mother, sweeping uncomfortable conversations beneath the rug. Leaving sadness to fester until it pushes in on the foundation, leading to irreparable cracks. Leaving sadness to fester until a person implodes.

February 16th, 1910

I clenched my hands into fists at my sides, squeezing tighter until I felt the familiar sinking of my fingernails into the skin of my palms; until I felt the warmth of the blood on my fingertips.

“Eliza, I swear, that’s enough of this!” Mr. Wright screeched, slamming his hand down on the top of his desk, causing the marble globe at the corner to shake, and his Shaeffer’s pen holder tipped over from force of the vibration. “You’ve been treating me as if I’m a villain, and I won’t have any more of it! It’s been months, and you still won’t look me in the eye.”

In response, I turned my gaze from the upturned pen holder to look directly into his eyes, my piercing gaze catching him off guard, but only for a moment. Then, for a split second, I could have sworn a smirk flashed across his face, but it was gone just as quickly as it had appeared, leading me to believe it was a trick of the candlelight.

“Surely you could accept that, if your mother wanted to see you, she would. It’s not my fault that she’s done spending her time with you.” The words were biting as they flew from his mouth, but I took them in stride.

“If you don’t tell me where she’s gone off to, I have no way of ensuring that my letters ever reach her. That’s why she hasn’t answered. It has nothing to do with her not wanting to talk with me. In fact, I’m sure she would rather I go to be with her than stay here with you! You’re the one who drove her away, you self-righteous *fool*.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized what a great mistake I had made. The bright look in his eyes darkened into a predatory glare. He stepped around his desk and walked up to me. I wanted to run, but I felt rooted to my spot, as he reached up and grabbed my chin with one of his hands. At first, his fingers were soft against my skin, but he soon tightened them, squeezing my jaw with all the force he had.

“Your mother left me,” he spat at my face. “She left us. Don’t you dare try and turn this around on me when she walked out on all of us.”

Tears pricked my eyes, but I maintained eye contact. If I tried to apologize right now, that would be admitting defeat. As it was, he was squeezing my jaw so tightly that I couldn’t open my mouth to speak. I think that’s what his intent was, to silence me.

His face had reddened with his rage. “Eliza, she didn’t want you. You can blame this all on me, but it’s foolish. She told me when she left that she couldn’t handle you anymore.”

I shook my head fervently.

He was wrong.

Mr. Wright had told me before that my mother had left without so much as a word.

“You told me that she hadn’t given you an explanation,” I mumbled, and his gaze softened.

“I lied. To protect your feelings, of course. If I had told you the truth, that she regretted ever having you and yearned for a life free from the burdens you put on her, then you certainly would’ve felt bad.” He surmised, and I nodded solemnly.

I didn't want to believe him. My mom had never been anything but compassionate towards me. But, without her here to tell me her truth, I only have one side of the story to go from. Andrew Wright will have to be the one I believe, because if I think that he's lying to me, then I would have to accept that I have no adults whom I can trust. That's a truth I cannot bear.

Suddenly, Sadie ran into the room, and a hand pressed to her face, as blood poured from between her fingertips, dripping down the back of her hand and landing in crimson droplets at her feet. Andrew stepped back, as I went to take Sadie out of the office.

"Eliza, it started again!" She announced, and I pulled her down the hall towards the bathroom. Sadie seemed to get nosebleeds whenever the air was too dry, and winter in Massachusetts was frequently too dry. Once we got to the bathroom, I grabbed a towel and pressed it up against her nose, soaking up the blood and slowing the bleeding.

"Hold this to your nose and stay absolutely still," I said as I looked in the cabinets for a new towel to put beside the sink. "And you didn't get any blood on your nightgown this time," I added, pleased, thinking of the previous week when she had come to see me looking as if she had been stabbed.

Sadie stayed quiet, and I stepped away from the cabinet to go and kneel in front of her. "There's blood on your sheets though, isn't there?" I asked, and she nodded solemnly.

I wasn't angry, she was only a child and couldn't be expected to prevent blood getting on the sheets when her nose is bleeding this heavily.

I wasn't mad at her, but I couldn't help but think of what Andrew had said.

My mom left because she could no longer handle being my mother. And now, about five months later, having stepped into her shoes, I'm beginning to see how a life of constant responsibilities could get tiresome.

Once Sadie's nosebleed had stopped, I followed her to her room, where she pulled back the silk sheets on her bed to showcase the blood stains on her pillow. I quickly fetched new sheets from the cupboard and swapped them out, the scent of fresh laundry filling the room as I smoothed out the new linens.

Was this what I should come to expect from my life?

I had been having an important, albeit stressful, conversation with Mr. Wright in his office when Sadie barged in. I couldn't be mad at her for getting blood on her pillowcase and bedsheets, just like I couldn't be mad at her for needing help from an adult. I knew I had to temper my reactions and accept that she would slip up, as would the others, but at what point was I able to react the way I wanted?

At what point could I express the disappointment I've been allowing to build within me?

I placed a spare towel on Sadie's bedside table and picked up the candle to carry with me down the hall.

"Goodnight, Eliza," she mumbled, and I nodded sullenly. Another day.

I tiptoed back to the hallway, careful to step in the spots of the floor that were less likely to creak, for fear I would wake someone else up, or that Andrew would come and find me to finish our previous conversation.

Unfortunately, my prayers went unanswered, and as I turned the corner into a separate corridor, I saw a figure looming by the stairs to the attic, waiting for me. In the pitch black, I could only see the silhouette, and as I stepped closer, the figure did the same, still faceless in the darkness.

After a few more hesitant steps, I was face to face with Andrew, who was holding an envelope out to me.

“We were interrupted earlier before I could give you this. Your mother wrote this for me to give to you before she left, and I didn’t have the heart to share it until tonight.”

I took the envelope, the paper smooth in my hand, and noticed the wax seal bearing my mother’s initials. I flipped it over and saw my name, Eliza Rhodes, in an elegant script.

The familiar curl of the ‘e’ and the way the tail of the ‘z’ looped into the ‘a’ made me certain it was my mother’s hand.

Andrew had just opened his mouth to continue, presumably to tell me that I should read it later while I was in my room alone, but I was too busy tearing into the paper to listen to whatever he had to say. I placed the candle on a nearby ledge and pulled the letter from the envelope. There were a million questions running rampant through my head. Why would Andrew have kept the letter from me when he knew how much I was missing my mother? Why didn’t he offer a better explanation as to why she had left until I prodded him tonight? Was there truth to any of his words? Did my mom truly leave because of me?

“Have a good night, Eliza,” Andrew added as my eyes began scanning the page, taking in what my mother’s last words were to me before she left. Was she going to give any indication of when she would be back?

He waited one more moment before hesitantly turning away, as if waiting for a response. Certainly, he could understand if my good manners escaped me, and I forgot to wish him a good night and thank him for the note. There were too many thoughts swirling in my mind to think about the person standing right before me.

As Andrew strode away from me in the direction of his bedroom, I began to read the letter, hoping to sense the warmth she had always greeted me with when she was here. I hoped that this letter would indicate that everything Mr. Wright had told me about my mom leaving because of me was wrong.

Dearest daughter,

I simply cannot keep up this charade anymore. There is much of the world that I am yet to explore and having you at such a young age has kept me from experiencing many of the joys that life has to offer. Being the mother of a bastard child has left me with scars that are unlikely to ever truly heal.

Take care of your siblings, and do not search me out, for I do not wish to be found. Not by you.

Best wishes,

Leona

I kept going over the words, but with each pass, they seemed to make less and less sense. I hadn't seen my mother in months, and the way she wrote to me in the letter she left is to tell me that she doesn't want to be around me anymore? The page was signed with her first name, as if to distance herself from me, as if it meant nothing to her that I was her daughter.

I hastened up the stairs to my room, setting the candle down on a table before I got down on my knees beside my bed, reaching underneath to pull out a worn wooden box.

I dusted off the cover and opened it, sifting through photos and mementos, placing some on my patched-up cotton quilt. There were photographs of my mother and Andrew on their wedding day, and a couple of me as a young child. Once I had pulled out the ones I wanted, I shoved the box back beneath my bed and sat atop my quilt, grabbing the candle.

In the flickering light that just barely filled the room, I took a photo from the top of the pile before me, holding it to the flame, watching the orange and brilliant red shine through the curling paper. After some time, I pulled the candle away and blew on the paper to stop the edges from burning even more.

Setting the photo aside, I moved on to the next in the pile, watching more paper curl, as the shadows cast by the candlelight danced around the room.

By the time I was finished, the photos all lay on my quilt, scattered about, scorched at varying degrees. I set the candle on my bedside table, with the letter from my mom, before blowing out the flame and sending my room into complete darkness. I tucked my feet beneath the sheets and stretched out as much as I could on my narrow bed, causing the photographs to flutter to the ground.

All burned to remove the image of my mother.

June 16th, 1911

I swear I couldn't help it, and if anyone else was in my shoes, I assure you they'd be tearing out their hair by now.

I never chose to have children, that was my mom's decision, and yet I seem to be stuck with them now, as Leona never returned. If that's how she chooses to refer to herself in her letter to me, then that's how I shall address her. I no longer wish to view her as my mother, for a mother isn't supposed to leave her children, no matter how hard things get, and especially not with a man who views his stepdaughter as a source for his own pleasure. It's sickening and I've had damn near enough.

Sometimes, when I wake up in the morning beside him, I look over at his sleeping form and think of the ways his blood would splatter on the walls, creating beautiful artwork, if I took a letter opener to his throat. Or, perhaps, I could dig around in the kitchen and bring the largest knife I can find with me to the bedroom. I can thrust the blade into his gut, watching the blood trickle down my hand as I keep the blade inserted. Deeper.

When I awake in my own bed, I think of how peacefully he must be sleeping, knowing that, when he lost his wife, he already had a replacement.

“Eliza, Andy won’t stop stealing my pencils!” Sadie groaned in frustration, stomping her foot down for emphasis.

I wanted to tell her how ridiculous she looked. How girls aren’t supposed to show so much hysteria. They should sit down and shut up and take what they’ve been dealt. I want to tell her what Andrew has been telling me. I want to tell her about the ways Leona kept her feelings quiet, to prevent looking like a mad woman.

But I remember I’m supposed to look out for Sadie. Supposed to teach her to stick up for herself, even in instances where I would succumb just to avoid conflict.

“Andy, give her back her pencils, Lord!” I demanded, and he rolled his eyes. Every day without Leona, the children began acting more and more like their father. It didn’t seem to matter that I’ve been trying my best to raise them to be respectable young members of society. I guess I shouldn’t have expected them to be able to overcome their ancestry.

Andy returned the pencils reluctantly, and I watched as he turned to walk away, muttering under his breath.

“He just said my drawings were hideous!” Sadie screeched, her voice piercing my ears, and I knew she was lying. I wasn’t sure if she was just trying to get Andy in more trouble now, but there was no way she could’ve heard what he said from that far away.

“I did not! I actually said that they’re hideous *and* a waste of your time and I was just trying to help you by taking your pencils.” Andy replied smugly, apparently deciding that if he was going to go down for something he didn’t initially say, he may as well make worsen the blow. May as well make the punishment worthwhile, I suppose.

I knew I had to intervene, as Sadie's face was turning a shade of red that I had never seen before, but just as I opened my mouth, Thomas came running in, followed by my youngest brother, Phillip. They were both out of breath, and Phillip had a tear-stained face.

"Father's home, he's asking what's for supper," Thomas said, and I shook my head. The cook had quit a couple weeks ago, and I had been preparing meals in her stead, but I had lost track of time today. I had nothing prepared and it was already nearly six thirty at night.

Then, Phillip piped up, still crying. "And I fell outside, and my knee hurts!" He complained, pointing to his knee, which didn't seem to have any cuts or scrapes on it. I was sure he was just going to have a bruise but was ultimately fine.

I stood there in the middle of the kitchen, looking from Sadie to Thomas to Andy to Phillip, and before I could even begin to come up with a place to start, Andrew Wright came through the door. I took a deep breath as everyone began talking at once.

"He said my art is ugly!"

"Because it is!"

"Eliza, what's for supper?"

"Father, I just asked, I don't think she cooked."

"I think I broke my leg! It hurts awfully bad!"

"Oh sure, you're the next Leonardo da Vinci!"

"For all you know I could be!"

"What do you expect us to do, Eliza? Do you honestly expect me to cook a meal for this family when I've just finished work? Christ, I thought your mother would have taught you better."

Words kept flying, making my head whirl. Andrew and Thomas looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to tell them what was for supper, as if they couldn't see from our surroundings that I wasn't in the middle of cooking anything.

Andy and Sadie continued their back-and-forth about whether Sadie had any artistic talents, while Phillip stood to the side, weeping, while putting all his weight on his 'broken' knee.

"Eliza, you need to put in more work around here if you expect to be able to stay," Andrew scoffed, which finally forced me to refocus my attention on what he was saying to me.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" I whispered, and he furrowed his brows, looking at me in confusion having not heard what I said. "I said what the *hell* do you mean by *that*" I shrieked, garnering the attention of everyone in the room. "Since my mother left, I have done more than my fair share in this house," I spat. Ever since Leona left, my concerns were about how I was supposed to be expected to raise my siblings as if nothing was wrong. I was worried about how I was supposed to help with the cooking and cleaning when the staff left. I never stopped to consider the fact that, without Leona, Andrew had no ties to me. I was not his daughter. I was the product of some tryst my mother had when she was young and unmarried and easily seduced. I was a bastard that, right now, was only causing him problems. He had no reason to continue giving me room and board if I was going to act out.

I knew the best decision I could make would be to keep my mouth shut. No use talking when all I had to offer would appear as the ravings of an ungrateful lunatic. Surely, I had to understand the generosity Andrew had shown me, keeping me here when he certainly didn't have to.

But who would he take to bed if not me? He'd have to go into town to find a new woman, charm her, and convince her to come and live with him, his four children, and his stepdaughter. I could feel, in my heart, that Andrew was bluffing. It would take time to get another woman to

come and spend time with him. On the other hand, I was readily available. I was the easy choice. Consent wasn't an issue for him, of course, as he had given me so much, and in his eyes, it was only right for me to return the favor.

My siblings looked at me with a combination of fear and awe, waiting for whatever would come out of my mouth next. I was rarely unpredictable, so I'm sure they saw this as me finally giving in to the madness in my mind.

"You ungrateful little bitch, you would be out on the streets if it weren't for me!" Andrew replied.

Phillip, who had stopped crying and resigned himself to sniffing when I made my initial outburst, now turned and ran from the room. I watched him enter the main foyer and sprint up the stairs, leaving just me, Andrew, Andy, Sadie, and Thomas standing in the kitchen.

"Oh, shut up!" I screamed. I knew it was a mistake to speak to him this way. I knew, after this, Andrew could want to throw me out of the house. But I also knew that he wouldn't dare.

Andrew wouldn't send me away anywhere, because wherever I went, I would be able to tell the truth of who I was. Around guests, I was the children's cousin turned nurse. It was only behind closed doors that I was referred to as Leona's daughter or acknowledged as being the sister of all the younger children. It was easier for them to not explain to anyone that Leona Rhodes had a daughter before she married Andrew Wright, and that he had married a woman who was impure. If I was cast aside now, there were too many secrets I could reveal, and while many people would view me as a psychotic teenager who doesn't know what she's talking about, there would be others who would hear my stories and no longer respect the great Andrew Wright. I could ruin his reputation, even without everyone believing me. I could ruin him.

Andrew silently took a few steps towards me. I felt my hands begin to shake from rage, just as he came to stand directly before me. I knew he was going to do something to show his

dominance over me, and my blood boiled at the thought, so with my siblings watching, I raised a hand against their father.

With a resounding slap, my hand collided with his cheek, and he took a step back in shock. Sadie gave a yelp of surprise, while Andy and Thomas were horrified. A triumphant grin spread across my face before I could restrain myself, but before I could feel too happy about the pained look on his face, his lip curled back, showing his teeth in an animalistic grimace.

Everything that happened next went by so quickly that it's hard to pinpoint the exact course of events.

Andrew ran at me, grabbing me by the throat.

I fought back, attempting to push him away, but his grip was strong, and my attempts at freeing myself were unsuccessful.

Black spots and little specks of light began to swim in my vision, and with the last bit of strength I had, I grabbed a glass of water from the counter beside me and swung it at his head, feeling shards of glass slice open the skin of my palm as the cup shattered.

A second later, a shooting pain went through my head, and the darkness spread until it covered my vision, leaving me unmoving, unseeing, and unfeeling.

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I didn't wake up for hours or days and when I did my head throbbed agonizingly with each beat of my heart. The light in the room was overwhelming, and I stumbled over to the window, slamming the shutters closed, before collapsing onto the floor, my hands clutching my head, willing the pain to end.

When I was finally able to open my eyes without the dim light of the room feeling like knives into my brain, I took in my surroundings.

I was in my room, by myself, and I had no idea how I got here. The last thing I remembered was being in the kitchen, but now, here I was, stories above the kitchen, in the attic.

I dragged myself over to the door, worried that my vertigo would take over if I tried to stand again, and when I reached the door, I grasped the cool, brass handle and turned it.

Only to find that it wouldn't budge.

I dried my clammy hands off on my skirt, attempting once more to turn the doorknob, but again I was unsuccessful.

Panic quickly began to set in, and I slowly stood up from the floor.

"Help," I called, my voice quiet and hoarse before I cleared my throat. "Help!" I cried, ignoring the way my brain protested the volume. I slammed my hands against the solid wood, resulting in soft footsteps audible on the stairs outside. "Who's there? Please!" I begged.

A small voice from the other side of the door responded after a few minutes. "He doesn't want us up here," I could hear Sadie whisper. "Please don't scream, though. I'll come up here as often as I can, he just doesn't want us to open the door unless we're giving you food."

How was I supposed to be expected not to scream, when my sister was telling me that I was going to be locked up here alone, save for when people would open the door to give me food. I'm not a danger to my family.

Well, I'm a danger to Andrew, but I'd never lay a finger on my siblings.

I shouldn't have been worried about what would happen if Andrew tried to kick me out of the house. I should've, instead, been concerned about what would happen if he didn't. I was viewed as the children's nurse. No one would pay much mind to the Wright family getting a new nurse for their children, so if no one ever saw me again, I doubt there would be many questions.

I'm twenty-three years old. I should've been married off years ago, so if he told people that I got married, no one would bat an eye.

I'm sure he would kill me if he would have another woman to turn to.

"How long is he going to keep me up here?" I asked her, but before she could reply, I heard shuffling on the other side of the door.

"What are you doing up here?" Andrew hissed. "I told you not to come up here alone."

"I'm sorry," Sadie said, and I couldn't tell if she was talking to me or her father before she ran down the stairs.

"I wondered at first why your mother would've left you so unceremoniously, but now that I've spent so much time with you, I can see exactly why she gave up on you."

I stayed quiet on my side of the door, waiting for him to continue.

"You're just as much of a useless whore as she was."

He pounded the door with his fists, causing me to crawl backwards in surprise. I heard his footsteps recede down the stairs, and dragged myself back onto my bed, where I looked over towards the window, my only source of light for God knows how long.