

Coyote Hills

Miranda T. Valenz

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DEDICATION

To my family, the best nutty kids ever, my beautiful, and crazy three sisters, and everyone else who believed in me, thank you. I love you very much, and appreciate all of your help, and support.

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MAY 6, 1970

It was early morning. The sun shone bright above the vast canyon and hills that blushed a deep, wine red against the blue of the sky. I felt the warmth touch down upon my face as I looked to the ancient building they surrounded, as though they were cradling it, protecting it, and I thought they brought it to life. But there was a stillness in the air that made me shiver. A dead silence that reminded me of the calm before a storm, one that lures you into a false sense of security, waiting for you to let your guard down, and when you do, all hell breaks loose. I wondered if the stillness knew it incited fear and exulted over it. I felt the eeriness, and thought it more than appropriate. It would have been smart to walk away if I didn't need this job, but I did, so I shut my car door and headed across the parking lot.

Just the building's mere presence made me take a step back. I'd never seen anything like it before, and I wondered, who really needed protecting? Perhaps it devised this ploy to dismay would be intruders from finding its hidden secrets. I thought anything this old must surely have more than a few. Maybe it didn't like strangers lurking around, poking their noses where they don't belong. Or maybe it was the opposite, maybe it did.

I shuddered at my thoughts, and felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I paid no mind to the prickly sensation. I knew I'd

brought it on myself. Sometimes, I think way too much. I shrugged my shoulders and hurried along. When I reached the end of the pavement, I noticed the long, faded, red brick sidewalk, the grass overgrown onto the top and along the edges. The sound of twigs snapping and dry leaves cracking ruffled through the air as I walked, but I welcomed the change. It was a nice break from the silence.

“Shit,” I gasped, as my high heel dug deep into a crack, and I came to an abrupt stop. I tried to displace it by wiggling it about, but it didn’t move, it was stuck. I almost regretted that I’d worn these heels, but they were my best pair, I loved them, and they matched my outfit perfectly. I bent over and just about fell face forward. “Damn it...” I groaned, steadying myself. The last thing I needed was to break my ankle, even worse, break my favorite heels. I reached for my shoe and carefully lifted it out. I let out a sigh of relief when I saw it still intact, then wiped off the dirt.

As I straightened I noticed the brown, misshaped bricks that held the building together. I thought they swayed, as though they were taunting me. I wondered if they were daring me to come closer. The tattered trimming was no better. It practically screamed at me as its horrid yellow reminded me of a child’s first stool. I trembled, and felt the goose bumps run up and down my arms. I felt uneasy. It was that feeling you get when you think you’re being watched. I knew I was just a bit on edge as I drove up here, but I thought it was because I hadn’t interviewed for a job in over nine years. I hoped that’s all it was, but a shadow of doubt lingered in my gut.

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I was reminded of the first time I had interviewed for a job. I was a new nurse fresh out of school, hadn't even gotten my feet wet, and my mind was young and curious. I wondered about everything, pretty much the same as I do now, minus the youthful curiosity. Every nerve in my body twitched and I had butterflies roaming around in my stomach, but it was nothing compared to what I felt now. I dispelled my thoughts, or at least I knocked them to the back of my mind for a minute, and hurried.

The building now seemed to move towards me as I neared it. I knew it was just an optical illusion, like the puddles of water that you see in the middle of the road on a hot day. But that didn't help to calm the uneasiness I felt. The closer I came to it, the more I thought it knew I was coming. Maybe it was waiting for me. Maybe it wanted me to find its dark secrets. Or maybe it was more than willing to show them to me.

Imposing iron doors stood vigilant at the entrance. I wondered why, what need could there possibly be? Maybe they were made to keep someone, or something, from getting in, or maybe they were made to keep them from getting out.

The hazy windows that reached the pinnacle and almost touched the dying grass, gave me a vague glimpse inside, and I saw shadowy figures. They swayed gently back and forth. I smiled. Their eloquence reminded me of a ballet. But I was no longer as naive as I was in my youth, I knew good and well there was no music, no gaiety, certainly no dancing. I wondered if those silhouettes were the

poor lost souls that were locked inside, desperately searching for a way out. I thought if it had been me, I'd want out.

I reached the doors and my nerves jarred my body, like a thousand pin pricks, but I knew there was no turning back now. There were only two hospitals in Paradise Flats, I'd already relinquished my position at one of them, and it wasn't favorably. I grabbed the latch with both hands, thinking it was going to be heavy. I almost fell over as it easily clicked and the bar slid down into the notch. I wondered if it opened so freely because it wanted me to enter. More unnerving...was it going to let me leave? I shook my head, grinning at my crazy thoughts, my childish notions. After all, I was a grown woman, and I thought a brave one...or at least I hoped.

I drew in a deep breath, pulled the door, and walked in. I'd only taken five steps into the entry way when my stomach turned. It was that nasty feeling you get just before you know you're going to puke your guts up, and you can taste it deep in your throat. Its foulness reminded me of the time I had eaten tuna that had gone bad. I almost gagged. I took three huge swallows, which didn't help any, and continued to the corridor. Reaching it, I was taken aback by the blinding effect of the white walls and floors. I couldn't believe the length of it. "Damn..." It looked just like a street covered in snow as it stretched from one end of the hospital to the other.

Tap-tap-tap-. I heard echo from behind. I smiled casually, glancing over my shoulder, thinking if it were a patient or staff member, I'd say hello, but there was no one there.

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I felt my heart sink to the bottom of my turning stomach, and a lump in my throat as I gasped. My eyes quickly wandered over every inch of the corridor, and I thought I saw a shadowy figure at the end scurry across. It looked like a small, black bear standing upright and trudging through the snow. My feet spun me around like a top, but just as quickly as I turned, it was gone. I wondered if my mind was playing tricks, teasing me with my own uncertainty.

Maybe it was just a patient. "I hope so..." I whispered, trying to convince myself that it was nothing. I turned, and with my next step I heard it echo in front of me. "What the hell?" I mumbled, and thought my mind could not be this cruel. There was nothing there. The only poor soul I saw in this damn corridor was me. I hurried, and the echoes seemed to chase me. I thought this was crazy, I didn't need this job that badly. I stopped dead in my tracks, with every nerve in my body screaming to leave, and the echoes stopped. I glanced down. 'Oh, you dipstick!' I thought, when I realized it was me.

I almost regretted that I'd worn these high heels when I got stuck in the sidewalk, now I just felt like an idiot. I breathed the biggest sigh of relief that I could, almost laughing aloud at myself, and continued on. I reached the nurses' station and the tall slender woman, or what quickly came to my mind, bones with a thin sheet of skin, quickly caught my attention. Flaming red hair stuck out like a sore thumb. It was teased up high into a beehive, and her makeup was heavier than she was. She stood just past the door, tossing her

arms about just as fast as her mouth, chattering, from what I could see, to a short bald man.

I felt a little awkward interrupting their conversation, but then I thought if they'd wanted privacy, I'm sure they would have closed the door. I tapped lightly on the frame, and as politely as I could said, "Excuse me, I'm Aiyana Crenshaw. I have an appointment at nine with Miss Sullivan."

The woman looked at me with her dull, blue eyes and replied, "Yes, Aiyana, what a strange name, but a pretty one. I'm Miss Sullivan. Please come in," she gestured with a curving motion of her finger. "This is Dr. Franks. He's our medical director."

Walking towards them with a smile I reached out my hand, first greeting Miss Sullivan, "It's very nice to meet you," then extending to the doctor who I now had a clear view of. I chuckled, silently, at his huge gut. I wondered how I missed that since the one who obstructed my view was thinner than his arm. Short and bald, he had more hair on his pale, square face than on his head. His small brown eyes were magnified twice their size by his thick bifocals. He was nondescript, with a crooked grin on his thin lips, and totally lacking any sense of cheerfulness or contentment. "Hello, how are you?" I asked.

He glared at me without a greeting whatsoever, and his mustache twitched as he quickly replied, "This hospital is run like a well oiled machine. There are no repairs that need to be made, and little maintenance is required. As long as you keep that in mind you

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should have no problems fitting in,” he then turned to Miss Sullivan. “I need to finish making my rounds now so that I can get back to my office. Douglas is meeting with the owners. He’s going to have lunch catered, and I do believe he said it was going to be a buffet. I hope that you will be able to join us.”

“Yes, Dr. Franks, that sounds lovely. I’ll certainly be there. Thank you,” she spoke softly, in a flirtatious way.

“Splendid,” he answered, and as much as he was drooling, I’m surprised he didn’t drown. “We can continue discussing *that* matter, you know, the one before we were interrupted.” One eye seemed to glance at me as he waddled and went on his way.

“I have your application right here,” Miss Sullivan said, reaching for a folder on the desk. “You have quite a bit of experience in the acute setting, but have you ever worked with patients that have diagnoses of dementia, schizophrenia, or for that matter any psychiatric disorders?”

“No, I haven’t, but I’m very familiar with the characteristics and medications associated with the disorders. I’m flexible, a fast learner and have a keen insight with any patient that I work with. If given the chance, I’m sure that my experience as a nurse will be beneficial to the patients here.”

“Well, Aiyana, from the vibes I’m getting from you, I don’t doubt that one bit. I think I will give you that chance. The job is yours. Now, how does fifteen dollars an hour sound? Is that agreeable?”

I was surprised, tongue tied, almost gasping for air. I couldn't believe it. God, fifteen dollars! That's a hell of a lot more than I was making at the hospital. My mind immediately threw up a red flag. Why so much? Alright, what's wrong with this picture? The interview, hell I couldn't even call it one, it was way too short. The director of nurses from my first job interview had asked me a ton of questions. Not just about myself, but about everyday functions of a hospital. She had drilled me with different scenarios, the 'what would you do if' type. I wondered if I were just reading too much into this, and with my mind, I probably was. I nodded my head and tried to answer without sounding too astounded by her generous offer, "It's very agreeable. Thank you for the opportunity."

"Can you start orientation in the morning?"

That quick? What the hell? I was taken aback, I wasn't expecting that. Another surprise that only made me wonder, or should I say, question, the urgency. And with the way this place made me feel, my mind was screaming, "No, don't do it!" But I wanted a change, I needed one so I could have a life. A social life which, according to my older sister, Kaya, I apparently didn't have. Not to mention the fact that I'd already quit County General. Besides, how could I resist the money?

"Yes, I can. What are the hours and rotation?"

"You will be on the day shift, which starts at six, ending at two thirty. All the nurses rotate on a seven on, three off, then seven on, four off, schedule. I hope working seven days straight won't be a

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problem for you.”

“Not at all. Although it’s different than my rotation at the hospital, I’d love to have the days off. I can’t remember the last time I had a weekend off, especially a four day weekend!”

“Yes, the nurses love it. It gives everyone a four day weekend every third week, and three days off in the middle.”

“Sounds really good. But I might be a little lost and not know what to do with all those days off,” I chuckled.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something. At your age, and as pretty as you are, you’ll find plenty to do. Now, why don’t I give you a quick tour so you can get out of here?”

“Alright, thank you.”

“This, of course, is the nurses' station, not too much to show you around here. Let’s walk down the corridor,” she quickly walked through the door, heading left. Arching my brow, I thought it weird to see a stick moving so forcefully from side to side. She moved, and not so gracefully, with a sway in her thin hips. I almost had to run to catch up to her. “First I’ll show you the break room, and where the restrooms are. Those are important,” she said, twirling her finger about.

“Yeah, I agree. When nature calls it’s always best to know where to go,” I said jokingly. But by the look on her face, I doubt she thought it funny.

Coming to a door almost halfway down the corridor, she reached up for an odd looking brass key that hung atop the frame. It

reminded me of a skeleton key. She unlocked the door, pulled it open, and replaced the key.

“This door is always to be locked! It’s for the safety of our patients. They could tumble down the stairs and get hurt. Watch your step,” she said and headed down.

The stairwell was not very wide, two feet at best, and the decrepit wooden steps did not hide their aging well. I heard them creaking with her every step, and thought at any second they’d collapse. As thin as she was it made me wonder if they’d be able to support my weight. I shrugged my shoulders, and stepped down.

I felt the board under my shoe sink with the pressure, and my stomach tightened, as though it were being pulled in opposite directions. But I wasn’t frightened of the stairs crumbling beneath me, this was different. It was a feeling I’d never felt before. It was like someone was pulling me towards them, and someone was pulling me back, almost like a tug of war.

“Aiyana, don’t worry, the stairs are stronger than they look,” said Miss Sullivan.

I heard her voice travel up the stairs like scratches on a chalk board, as she stood at the bottom staring at me like I was a scared little girl. I quickly smiled at her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you waiting,” I answered, and headed down. The door slammed shut behind me, and I just about jumped out of my skin. I kept on smiling, attempting to hide this weird feeling I had, hoping she didn’t notice.

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I reached the bottom and there was a large entry way, it was bigger than the one in the front of this building. To my right were two yellow doors that were just as old as the stairs. I grimaced. They were the same ugly color as the trim outside. I thought that was original, and from the look of the peeling paint outside as well as inside, I doubt if this building had seen a new coat of paint in years. Big signs hung in the middle that read, 'Gents' and 'Ladies', in bold, blue lettering. Wow, there was no way I could miss the restrooms.

Miss Sullivan began to point almost aimlessly as she spoke, “The restrooms, as you can see, are there. Our drinking fountain is over there. Oh, and by the way, it’s the crispest water you’ll ever taste. It comes from the rivers high atop the mountains, there’s nothing like it. And right through there is what we call the nurses’ getaway.” She walked into what I thought could’ve been a giant egg, it was such a strange, oval shaped entrance.

I followed without saying a word. I couldn’t. This felt unreal, like I had entered another world and my mind was busy trying to decipher it. I cringed as the foul staleness that lingered in this cavernous room wasted no time finding its way into my nostrils and down the back of my throat. I wondered what in the hell could have made such a stench, maybe dead rats in the walls? I wasn’t sure, but it was a thousand times worse than that gut wrenching foulness I’d tasted when I first walked into this strange building. I reached my hand up to cover my mouth and coughed, then brushed it against my itchy nose, hoping that I didn’t have a sneezing convulsion.

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“Are you alright?” asked Miss Sullivan.

“Yes, my throat’s just a little dry.”

“Maybe you should go and get a drink of water.”

“That’s alright. I’m fine now, thank you.”

“The air down here is just a little dry, but you’ll get used to it.”

‘Hmm, that’s an understatement,’ I thought as I swallowed to coat my throat while attempting to maintain my smile. “I don’t see any doors or windows down here.”

“No, there’s not any, this used to be the basement. A lot of rooms here have been remodeled. This one, because of its location, was made into the break room. And that’s why the nurses love it down here. Complete privacy. No one can see a thing.”

“Good thing I’m not claustrophobic.”

She actually laughed, if you could call it one, it was more like a snort. “That’s a good thing, because we have quite a few rooms around here like this.”

“Wow...really?” I gasped. I couldn’t believe it. I knew this place was huge, but how many rooms did it have? To the right of us were dull gray, banged up lockers that aligned the entire wall. A ceiling plain and bleak with no particular shape to it, just flat, was high above the cracked cement floor that more than showed its wear. Huge, round, strange looking lights, not like any I’d seen before, suspended from long, thin, shiny metal poles. They extended straight down the middle from one end to the other. I wondered if this buildings original intent was a hospital? If so, I had yet to see a

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resemblance to one. Except for the white, its structure reminded me of a fortress. Whoever built this place must have wanted to hide something.

“Whichever one has no lock on it, feel free to claim if you need a locker for your personal belongings. You must of course, provide your own lock,” she said with a smile. “This fridge is for staff use. If you bring your lunch and anything to drink, make sure you mark your name on it before you put it in. Sometimes things go missing around here. Any questions so far?”

I had a hundred questions, right on the tip of my tongue, but I got the feeling she really didn’t want me to ask any. Plus, I didn’t want to be rude, nor did I want her to get the wrong impression.

“This building is so different from the hospital I worked at, in fact, it’s different than anything I’ve ever seen. I don’t mean that in a negative way at all, it’s actually quite unbelievable, but one question. As I drove up the road leading into the parking lot, I noticed there were a few other buildings that looked just as old as this one. Are they part of this facility?”

“Yes, they are. My office is just one of many that are in the first building. Mr. Simmons, our glorious administrator, and of course Dr. Franks', offices occupy it as well. The other building is being remodeled at present.”

“What’s it being remodeled for? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“The owners would like to have a second facility such as this one. Hopefully, it will be ready soon so we can start admitting

patients.”

“You said that parts of this building had been remodeled. Do you know what it was before?”

“I don’t know what any of these buildings were before. All I know is that the owners bought them over fifty years ago and converted them. Now, I have a very busy day ahead of me, so if you don’t have anymore questions, I’ll walk you out. Tomorrow Liz can show you around the wards,” she said as her hips again began to sway, and she hurriedly headed towards the stairs.

‘She must be in a hurry to have lunch with Dr. Franks,’ I thought, trailing behind her. She reached the front door at least a minute before I did and walked out, a quick move of her hand without looking back as she waved goodbye, and swayed away. I just shook my head as I chuckled and hurried out. And this time, not only did I pay attention to the sidewalk, I moved my feet carefully. There were so many cracks and crevices that I was amazed I had only gotten stuck once.

I reached the pavement and hurried to my car. As I drove out, I glanced over at the building she said was being remodeled. I was surprised. I didn’t remember it being that big. It was twice as big as the building I was just in. There wasn’t a single soul in sight. If it was under construction, where was everyone at? And the resemblance, it was uncanny. The misshaped, brown bricks, the windows, that horrid yellow trim, and the same crazy doors. There seemed to be a lot of things I didn’t remember seeing as I drove up

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here, but then my mind had been occupied. Now that my mind was clear of any and all obscurities, I relaxed. I felt the clean, fresh air rush through my window and quickly inhaled. God, such a welcome scent. I wondered if air actually had a smell to it. No matter, because it washed away the staleness that still lingered in my nostrils. The red hills were still blushing against the clear, blue sky. I thought even more so now as the magnificent sun hung high. I pushed in my favorite eight track, the Mamas and Papas, and blasted my stereo. I was going to enjoy the ride home.

Sixty five minutes to the exact second, and I was pulling into my driveway. As soon as I walked into my house, I called Kaya.

“You’re never going to believe what happened! Hell, I’m still having trouble digesting it,” I said as she answered her phone.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t get the job!” she shouted.

“No, I got it alright. I start in the morning. It was the oddest thing, Kay, a parody of comedies!”

“Well, don’t just tease me. Tell me what happened? Come on, you know I want details.”

“First off, how outrageous is this? Fifteen dollars an hour!”

“What?!” she gasped. “Damn! That’s a lot of money. What do you have to do? Kill somebody?”

“I hope not,” I laughed.

“That’s too bad, cause if you did, I’d help you. That is, if you split it with me,” she joked.

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“But, Kay, it was so weird, hell, I felt weird! Just that entire place was...I don’t know...different, I guess. Plus, that had to be the shortest interview on record! She only asked me one frickin’ question, and I was ready for anything. What a stooge, huh?”

“Well yeah, but you’re a well prepared stooge that’ll be making a lot of money.”

“Thanks, that makes me feel so much better.”

“Hey, did she have a stick up her ass like the director at County General?”

“No, but she was a stick! I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so skinny. She reminded me of a match, long, thin and red on top. And remember how we used to laugh at the actress’s in the silent black and white movies because they wore a ton of make up? Well, she’s reminiscent of a nineteen thirties movie star.”

“That all sounds so crazy, Aiya! Wow, now I feel weird for jabbing at you all the time to get a life.”

“Don’t. I know you just worry about me and want what’s best. I love you for that. And you know, you’re right. I’m never going to have a life if I spend all my time working.”

“I’ve been pushing hard for years to get you to slow down and have a social life. Now, with a blink of an eye, you’ve jumped into this huge change. When you quit your job, you told me you would take two weeks off so you could take it easy and have some time for yourself. Now you’re telling me you start work in the morning.”

“The opportunity presented itself and I took it. Besides, if I

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hadn't done this now, I know I probably never would have."

"Yeah, you've been a procrastinator now for what, nine years? But it's just so damn sudden. I was even hoping with the time off you were supposed to have, we could spend more time together."

"I know, but it is what it is, and I can't change it. Besides, I get like four days off in a row, so we can spend plenty of time together."

"Aiya, what I'm trying to say is...I hope this decision you made is because you want to do it, not because I pushed you into it. I don't want you to have any regrets, and I certainly don't want you to resent me. I couldn't take it if things didn't work out and you blamed me. I love you so much, and just want you to be happy. More importantly, I hope this decision is the right one for you."

"Don't be such a worry wart. Everything's going to work out just fine."

MAY 7

Driving into the parking lot on the first day of my new job, I felt a fluttering deep in the pit of my stomach. But not the usual butterfly sensation of nerves that one gets. It was more like a dragonfly, desperately and blindly searching for a way out, but unable to find one. Not only was I nervous about the change, I really wasn't sure if I'd made the right decision. I knew I had tried to act like I was for Kay's sake, but in all reality, I had no flippin' clue.

I got out of my car, and as I fast headed across the parking lot, the dark mist of the early morning eagerly sent its cold chills up the back of my neck and down my arms. It was the darkness that lingers before the dawn, the dark that is not complete, but halfway between day and night. I remembered yesterday, bright and sunny, and the red hills that blushed against the sky as they brought this aged and decrepit building to life. But now before my eyes I saw a faint, murky, distorted image. One reminiscent of an eerie, sinister mausoleum that would only suit the dead.

Shadowy dancing figures with nodding heads and desperate arms displayed graceful imploring movements in the distance. It felt like they called to me. But they were unlike the eloquent silhouettes that I had seen through the windows. I wondered if these shadows sought refuge, but from what, I would dare not ask. I knew only too

well that the dark took pleasure in its trickery, how it enjoyed deceiving the eyes. And though I knew my eyes were being deceived, my mind had other thoughts of these shadowy figures. There was a gnawing uneasiness about me. I knew the darkness struck fear in many, the uncertainty of what lurks within, the unseen monsters that hide and wait.

I knew, because when I was a child, I was one of them. The darkness under my bed and in the closet frightened me to death. But I was no longer a child afraid of the dark. I was a grown woman of thirty, and I would not let it take me back to that place. I flung my shoulders back, stood tall and brave, and sneered at it as I headed up the sidewalk. I thought it had known I was coming yesterday, now, I would make sure it knew I was.

I reached the doors, and without hesitation I grabbed the latch and pulled them open. I drew in a deep breath and held it as I walked into the entry, expecting that same sensation I'd had yesterday. I smiled and released it, I didn't feel a thing, not a twitch nor a churn. I thought it must know that I was here, and I wasn't afraid. Probably being a little too cocky, I headed down the corridor and casually looked around. It was empty, and quiet, almost solemn. All I heard was my breathing, but I thought that was much better than the '*tap-tap-tap*'. Reaching the nurses' station at five forty, I saw the nurse on duty, her curved back towards me as she sat at the desk. Her short, blonde hair was unkempt as it covered the back of her neck. Her white nursing cap leaned to the side, and I thought at any second it would slide off her head.

“Good morning, I’m Aiyana. Miss Sullivan hired me yesterday and told me to be here at six for orientation.”

She turned around, and from the expression on her pale face, she had no clue what I was talking about. I glanced at her dry, dusty pink lips, they looked chaffed with worn lipstick, as though she’d been biting down on them all night long. Her blue eyes looked like they had once been filled with laughter and gaiety, but now seemed to lack luster. The dark circles under them looked almost like she had been struck. Then it occurred to me, she’s been up all night and they work seven days straight, she was probably exhausted. I hoped it was the latter.

“Hi, I’m Jill, the night nurse,” she spoke very softly, standing and extending her hand. “It’s nice to meet you. I apologize for my hesitation, but I wasn’t expecting you. Miss Sullivan failed to tell me she hired a new nurse, but then, she doesn’t tell us much. No matter, welcome to the world outside of our own.” If she was being sarcastic, I couldn’t tell, but I had the feeling she meant what she said.

“No need to apologize. I’m sure it just slipped her mind. From what I saw, I’m sure she’s a very busy woman.”

“Yeah, so busy that everything slips her mind,” she sighed. “You’ll more than likely be orientating with Liz today, she usually gets here about five till. So have a seat, and tell me what brings you up here to the outer limits.” She flopped back into the chair, crossing her legs.

I sat in the chair next to her, a little apprehensive as I tried to

read her face to get a better sense of what she was about. Usually this came easy for me, but she, I felt, was different. It was as if she hid within herself, lost to any emotions, and closed to anyone attempting to get in. I smiled gently and said, “It was time for a change of pace. I needed to make a difference, and at the same time have a life...if that makes any sense.”

“It makes more sense than you know. So where did you work before you decided to join us?”

“I worked at County General for more than nine years. It’s funny, in the beginning it was great. I was able to give the patients all the care they not only needed, but deserved. But as time went on, I found myself used, unappreciated, and completely burnt out. I can honestly say, if I’d stayed there, it would have been the death of me.”

“That’s the best damn reason I’ve ever heard for leaving a job. Around here, it’s just crazy, I’m not sure what it is. Either they’re sick and tired of the bullshit, or can’t handle the patients. ‘See ya,’ is all I ever got from them, if that, usually they just run out. So I’m more accustomed to nurses leaving, as opposed to them co...”

“Good morning, how is everything?” A bubbly voice quickly interrupted. “I hope you had a good night, Jill.”

“Yeah, just like all my others,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “Liz, this is Aiyana, she’s going to be orientating with you.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, standing up and reaching for her tiny hand.

She was petite. Even with the two inch wedges on her pearly white shoes, she barely reached my shoulder, and I was five four.

Her brown hair was pulled up high, which I thought looked odd. It stuck out of the back of her nursing cap and looked like she had a little tail on the top of her head. Her bangs were cut blunt across her forehead, and just touched her brows. Her big, brown eyes gleamed, almost sparkling with her smile. I doubted she was a day over twenty-one. Her fair complexion I'm sure was flawless at one time, but now the scars of blemishes not properly cared for had caught up to her.

"The pleasure is all mine. I welcome all good nurses aboard," she replied with the biggest smile I'd ever seen, and for a quick second, I thought she was going to jump up and down.

'Alright, that's way too giddy this early in the morning,' I thought, smiling back at her. "Thank you," I politely answered. "I appreciate all praise from my peers, even more so when they don't know me."

"Are you ready to count and get report? It's already past six, and I need to get home on time today," said Jill.

"Let's do it!" answered Liz. "Aiyana, why don't you come into the medication room with us so you can see how we begin our day around here?"

"Alright," I answered, and followed them into a small room on the other side of the nurses' station.

Two huge med carts were stuffed inside, much bigger than what I was used to. A hopper used for the disposal of medications was in the corner, but from the looks of it, I doubt it was used properly, or had even been cleaned. Long shelves along the wall sagged from the

massive amount of medication bottles on it. We were crammed into that room like sardines. From the beads of sweat forming on my forehead, I doubted if there was any ventilation. Hell, I didn't even see a fan. While they counted, I couldn't help but stare at the many anti-anxiety, anti-psychotic, anti-depressive, and seizure medications, fifty percent of them were very high doses. I had never seen so many medications in one place, or for that matter, at those doses. Not even at the hospital.

"Damn..." I muttered.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" asked Liz.

"No, I was just thinking aloud." I couldn't tell them that I thought this was a drug smorgasbord with high prices. But what was unsettling, why such high doses?

"Alright, that should do it. I hope you don't mind skipping report, but I have to get out of here. I'll see you in the morning. Hopefully you too, Aiyana. It was nice meeting you. I hope all goes well. Bye," said Jill as she squeezed her way out of the room, then just about ran away.

"Come on, I'll show you around."

"Yeah, it would be nice to know where I'm going around here so I don't get lost. Miss Sullivan only showed me the break room."

"Figures," Liz snickered.

I followed her down the corridor, glancing at the insipid appearance of the white that surrounded me like a blanket of snow, but without the beauty.

"This is the day room. We bring all the patients here for meals

and activities,” she said as we entered a huge room.

It was about forty feet away from the nurses’ station. I was not surprised one bit when I saw the white walls, just like everything else around here. Twenty five tables with six chairs a piece were in the middle, spaced about two feet apart. There was a large console television positioned caddy-corner, one on each side of the room. A raggedy, long, dull orange sofa and two chairs were set in front of them. Drab, faded paintings hung high, almost touching the ceiling on two of the walls. A massive oval, smoked glass mirror hung on the middle wall, and ugly, fake green trees decorated the room's entirety.

“This is very nice,” I said, trying to be polite. The room opened to an enclosed patio that looked to be the entire length of the building. If you didn’t pay attention to the filthy, ripped screen, the dead bugs, and the high, sagging fence, the view was breathtaking. The dark mist was dissipating like steam evaporating off rocks as the sun began to rise above the canyons and the gorgeous hills. I saw the bright, vivid colors of purple, red, orange, and blue excitedly come to life as the wildflowers swayed in the distance.

“This is incredible,” I sighed, as I now stood in the patio.

“Yeah, the patients love sitting out here. It gives them a chance to interact with each other, but I think the women enjoy it more than the men, since they tend to flirt,” Liz said with a giggle.

“I’m sure they must enjoy the beauty of it as well.”

“I guess...yeah, maybe that too. Alright, let’s continue,” she answered as she walked through an entrance at the far end. It seemed

as if we went full circle, we'd walked in at the other side of the room and now we were leaving the opposite way.

We came right back out into the corridor. As we walked, I noticed three rooms, then saw three more on the other side. I was just about to ask a question when Liz said, "These rooms we call the silent ward," she pointed to either side of the corridor without stopping.

I thought she must have noticed the dumbfounded look on my face as I asked, "Why are they called the silent ward if there's five beds in them?" I quickly poked my head in one of the rooms, and at the far end I saw a nursing assistant getting one of the patients up. She was saying something to him, in a voice so low I couldn't make out what was said, but from the look of her body language, I knew it wasn't nice.

"No one cares about the children! No one cares if they die!" I heard the patient cry out.

"Excuse me. I don't mean to interrupt, but is everything alright?" I asked the nursing assistant.

She looked at me, and I suddenly felt like I had done something wrong. "Everything's fine! He does this all the time!" she answered sharply.

"Aiyana, what are you doing?" asked Liz. "I was explaining why we call it that and you just disappeared on me."

"I'm sorry. I was just looking around," I answered, and hurried towards her.

"Like I was saying, the walls in the main wards are thicker for

some reason than the ones in those rooms. We put the louder patients in the main ones, and with the door closed the patients in the small ones can't hear them yelling. So we call them the silent rooms," she gave me a quick nod of her head, the kind of gesture that can only imply, 'Don't you know anything?' and make you think you're a dim-wit.

I smiled, nodding back just as curtly, and simply replied "Really."

Reaching the end of the corridor, we came to a big, heavy looking door. Liz reached for the knob and pulled it open. I quickly noticed the noise. It reminded me of a booming street in the middle of a city, buzzing with traffic. There were twelve beds lining each side of the wall, and two nursing assistants were attending the patients. Now I understood what Liz meant about the louder patients. Before she'd opened it, I hadn't heard one single sound.

We entered, and an old man, frail looking and disheveled, sat in a wheelchair in the middle of this room that was filled, yet somehow empty. He stared at me with sad, black eyes. I shivered as I felt a sense of disparity. My brown eyes were drawn to his. As they met, it seemed I drifted off into another world. One not known by the sane, but one that was known only too well by the poor souls in which sanity no longer remained.

"Each side of the facility is pretty much identical, we keep the men on this side, and the women on the other," said Liz, jarring me back into reality. "Sue, Nicki, this is Aiyana. She's the new nurse for the men's side."

“I thought they’d never find anybody to...”

“Nicki, please!” Liz sharply interrupted her. “This is neither the time nor the place.”

I glanced from one to the other, carefully reading their faces. I knew they were hiding something, but what?

“It’s nice to meet you. You’re going to love it here,” said Sue, smiling from ear to ear. By the tone and speed of her words, it was apparent she was hoping to throw me off.

“It’s nice to meet the both of you, and I’m sure I’ll enjoy working here. So far, everyone I’ve met has been very friendly,” I replied, a bit sarcastically.

“Well, we need to get back to the nurses' station. It’s getting late, and we need to start the medication pass,” said Liz as she walked out.

Returning to the small medication room, she prepared everything, explaining as she went along. It took us about sixty five minutes, then almost four and a half hours to pass them to all the patients. The morning had flown by, and after we took a lunch break and charted, it was approaching two. The nurses for the next shift, Beth and Ruth, didn’t say much, but the looks they gave me made me feel like an outsider. I thought I was the new kid on the block and they were going to treat me like it. Liz counted with them, then we made rounds. Two fifty five and my day came to an end as I headed out the door.

And so it went for the next five days of orientation. When I

returned from my three days off, I was on my own, and officially the nurse for the men's ward. The days quickly passed, and I came to know some of the staff well. Liz I found to be sweet, naive and as timid as a mouse. In the short time we worked together, I thought we'd become friends. We worked together very efficiently and covered for one another. She never said, "That's your patient, not mine." Which I had become more than accustomed to from the nurses at County General. If anything unexpected occurred, which around here seemed to happen quite often, Liz and I helped one another.

Jill was different. I still couldn't read her. It was like she'd built a ten foot stone wall around herself. She always wanted to know what everybody did on their days off, but would never speak about herself. I thought it sad, she looked to find happiness in others so that she could know how it felt. What misery hid behind those darkened eyes, I often wondered, as the discoloration never seemed to fade away.

Beth was a loner, and not very friendly. All she wanted was to count, get report, then start her day. No personal talk of any kind, she was beyond professional, and I found her to be cold, and void of any empathy. Ruth liked to chat, she'd talk your ear off if you let her. She reminded me of my grandma, always talking, but never saying anything. It was like she purposely talked so much just so she could keep you there longer. She seemed to be nervous all the time, jumping at every sound she heard. I had the feeling she was frightened of the patients.

Sue and Nicki turned out to be the best nursing assistants I'd ever worked with, which surprised me. They were polite, sometimes I thought they were too nice to me. It was like they were trying their hardest to please me so I wouldn't leave. It was a strange feeling. But I swept it aside because they genuinely cared for all the patients here, and that's what mattered. I could count on them to help me whenever a problem arose, which also happened frequently. The nursing assistant I had peeked in on my first day, hadn't been back since. I'd asked everyone if they knew what happened to her, but they all said they didn't know. I had the feeling they did.

I came to know what Dr. Franks was about within my first week. He was a pompous, inconsiderate, overbearing ass wipe! There was not one ounce of compassion within his more than obvious, portly, stubby body. He had no concern whatsoever for any of the patients in his care. He thought himself the greatest of doctors to ever walk the earth, and I'm sure he thought he could walk on water as well. He thought he knew all, but all he knew was how to over medicate the patients.

As for Miss Sullivan, except for that first day, I had yet to see hide nor hair of her. I asked Liz about her and she'd said, "Don't expect to see her unless there's a tornado zooming by and she's caught in it." Which would never happen around here. I understood her meaning, and didn't ask again.

My patients were very different than any I'd dealt with before, and a lot harder to read. I wasn't sure if it was because of their diagnosis, which struck me as odd since just over sixty percent of

them had the same one, Schizophrenia with delusions, and they were all on the same medications, or if it was my inexperience working with mental disorders. I had fifty four in the men's ward.

I had no difficulty adapting, but I had to adjust to their needs, which at times was exhausting. I treated them all as the human beings they were, respectfully, gently, but also very carefully. Not like the poor, misguided, mindless fools Dr. Franks thought they were. The women's ward had fifty patients. Maybe ten percent, if that, had the same diagnosis as my patients, and the same medications, but not as high of doses. Needless to say, they kept us on our toes and constantly on the move. There were days when I was on my feet so much that I wished I had a pair of roller skates.

It was funny, I thought I was over worked at the hospital, but the pace here was twice as fast, and oddly enough, it didn't bother me. I really enjoyed it. Not Dr. Franks, working with him was awful. It was the patients here. They touched my heart unlike any I'd ever cared for, and I was drawn to them.

There were two patients that for some reason from day one, had latched on to me, as though I were their life line. Mr. Bentiz had just turned ninety, and was still as feisty as a twenty year old. I'm sure in his youth he was strong and tall, but now just a curvature stature remained. He tried to act like he was shy, to throw you off, but he was a grabber. If the moment presented itself, any body part within his grasp he'd reach out and touch. It was never in a malicious way, and I thought it was actually kind of cute. He'd smile and wink, then his frail little arm would shake, like a bowl of jello.

The man with the sad, black eyes that drew me into his world, was Mr. Blidsen. Seventy six years old, but he looked ten years older than Mr. Bentiz. I wondered how he had spent the years of his life to have aged ahead of himself and hold so much misery in his eyes. I thought if the eyes are truly the windows to our souls, his soul must hold more pain than any other. It was through him that things had begun to change.

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I walked as fast as I could, all the while attempting to maintain my composure, which was a feat in itself. I made my way down that damn corridor, mumbling to myself the entire time like a dunce who was put in a corner with that stupid hat atop their head. Reaching the door, I grabbed the key, almost busting the rope it hung on. I unlocked the door, replaced the key and headed down the stairs to the break room.

I just needed a few minutes to cool off, but I knew that was only wishful thinking. I thought more than likely it'd take hours, maybe even days, to cool off. I opened my locker, grabbing my pack of cigarettes. It had been over ten years since I last smoked, but after just two weeks of working with Dr. Franks, I found myself craving them, at this moment, starving for one. Sitting down, I lit it, and that first big puff fast entered my lungs.

Dr. Franks and I had gone round and round these past two weeks, and it wasn't a nice carousel ride, but rather like two coyotes stalking their prey. I found myself wondering when he'd urinate to mark his territory. But this disagreement, and his display of vulgarity, was by far the worst yet. He was out for blood, my blood. He thought I was the weak, the wounded, and probably hoped the defeated, as he went for the kill. He did so without any qualms,

hesitation, regret or regard. He had questioned my capabilities as a nurse, my ability to comprehend, and bluntly stated that I had a pea for a brain, and that I was lucky to have that, otherwise I'd be crawling on all fours. If that wasn't bad enough, with his barrage of insults and his fiendish attacks, he decided to put the icing on the cake and made clear his extreme dislike for me, that my very presence offended him, then he threatened my job.

My mind screamed bloody murder, and I thought him damn lucky I had no sharp objects in my possession. His words were sharp, that I admit, and they had assaulted my senses, but not as he hoped. I knew he thought that his attack would bring me to my knees sniveling like a baby, but he didn't know me. He didn't have a fucking clue that I knew pain intimately. I'm sure my fair complexion had even turned a shade of blue. I think I'd felt it as I held my breath and bit down on my tongue, but I had to bide my time, which I knew wouldn't be long. A blow hard like that, there was no way he could go on and on without coming up for air.

And so it was, like all creatures of nature my instinct for survival had quickly surfaced. I knew I'd take pleasure in returning the favor and be as blunt as he'd been. I had released that breath that I'd been holding and told him the feeling of dislike was more than mutual. That I was a nurse, a more than capable one, and my first priority was to my patients, not to make him like me, nor to be his friend. I questioned his judgment, because medicating the patients to the brink of not knowing reality, was not beneficial. How is it for the well being of the patients, for their quality of life, their basic right to

have a clear mind, if they don't have one?

If that meant getting fired, so be it. Go ahead and fire me for having genuine concern for my patients. I knew that's what threatened him in the first place, more than likely because he had none. I didn't think I was asking for much, just the simple little things that they deserve, like free will. Hell, if he'd just smile at them and treat them with dignity, it would make them feel better. I went on to say, "Who would want to work at a place that cared more about making money than they did about their patients?" I now found myself wondering if I'd made the right decision taking this job.

I squashed my cigarette out, glancing at the clock. I'd been in here for fifteen minutes. I was still pissed, of course I knew I'd be, but at least I had my nicotine fix. I entertained the notion of having a second one, the thought was tempting. But it quickly passed as my mind calculated fifteen minutes in here, is equal to fifteen more at work, and after that ugly scene, the only thought I wanted in my mind was of getting out of here. I sniffed the smoke that lingered as I stood, and almost heaved. It had mixed with the foul staleness. That stench was something I still hadn't gotten used to, unlike what Miss Sullivan had said. Even if I worked here for twenty years, I doubt I would.

"Shit, that's something I'll avoid doing next time," I muttered, swallowing the residue that coated the back of my throat. I tossed the cigarettes back into the locker and rushed to the fountain. I took a giant gulp, and it was the best water ever, then headed up.

Walking to the nurses' station I found myself hoping, beyond hope, that Dr. Franks had left. I knew I couldn't handle another scene like that. I'd lose it. I was just about half way down the corridor when I heard footsteps behind me. *Tap-tap-tap*-. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck quickly stood up. 'Shit,' I thought. 'Dr. Franks is behind me. Here we go again.'

I turned around. "Dr. Fran..." my words trailed off and my mouth remained wide open. Shivers ran down my spine as I stopped cold in my tracks. Nobody was there, not a soul did I see. I quickly began rubbing the goose bumps that were now making the hair on my arms stand at attention. "What the hell..." I whispered, looking all around. I knew that someone had been there. I'd felt it. I shook my head and hurried.

Reaching the nurses' station, I looked for Dr. Franks. I didn't see him. "Liz, is Dr. Franks still here?" I asked.

"No. He left right after you went on break. Why? Don't tell me you're going to apologize to that pompous ass," she answered.

"Of course not! I was just wondering, that's all," I sighed, plopping into the chair.

"You don't look very good. I hope you're not going to let him get to you."

"I'm fine. I just...never mind, it's not important," I answered, not wanting to get into what had just happened.

"Well, I hope you know you're right. Just stand your ground, because you're the only one who's ever been brave enough to stand up to him. Now, I'm going to take my lunch break. You want me to

bring you something?”

“No thanks.”

“Alright, be back in thirty,” she said, grabbing her purse and leaving.

My mind had now shifted into second gear, and I wasn’t quite sure how many times your mind could shift so sharply before you scream. First Dr. Franks, and now this, whatever this was. I hoped it was nothing more than my nerves. “At least that’s better than no explanation, now come on, get some work done, Aiyana,” I mumbled and reached for a chart.

I grabbed my pen, and as I began to write I noticed my hand trembling, then felt it twitch. Quickly I let go of the pen, and started cracking my knuckles, thinking it weird. I hadn’t put any pressure on it, yet it felt like I had, like I’d laid on it too long and it had fallen asleep. “What the hell?” I whispered as I felt a coldness sharply brush my right ear. It felt like what I thought an ice cube would feel like if someone pressed it tight against me. With a brisk stroke of the palm of my hand, I rubbed against it, not a gentle rub, but one that would cause friction.

Standing, I moved quickly towards the window, hoping that it was open. To my dismay, it wasn’t. “Oh shit...” I muttered, closing my eyes and letting go of the breath that I held. I turned around, and a numbing, buzzing sound, not one similar to a bee, but one of a chain saw ripping through a redwood, vibrated in my ears. Tugging forcefully on my ear lobes, the sounds became clear, they were voices, but low voices. It reminded me of when I was a child, those

children who enjoyed teasing by talking aloud so they could be heard, but not loud enough to make known what they'd said. "Is anybody there?" I asked, walking out.

Standing just past the nurses' station I looked down the corridor, first to my right, nothing, then to my left, still I saw nothing. Slowly moving my feet and looking about, I headed towards the day room. Nearing, I heard voices. As I entered I saw the projection screen on the wall, the reel was winding a movie and the patients were chatting. I sighed a breath of relief and thought I had found the voices, but listening carefully, I could tell it wasn't the same sound.

"Miss Crenshaw, are you looking for someone?" asked Anne, one of the nursing assistants for the women's side.

"No. I'm just making rounds," I shakily answered. I started to walk out and noticed a few of the patients staring at me. From the look on their faces, I could tell they knew that I was looking for someone, or something. I thought it odd for their eyes to fall on me so quickly, so questioningly.

"Did you finally hear them?" asked Mr. Blidsen. His sad, black eyes staring into mine, as though he thought I would say yes.

He was on much higher doses of medications than any of the other patients, and I'd been discussing with Dr. Franks, or should I say, disagreeing, with his reasons for it. Mr. Blidsen spent the majority of his time incoherent and over medicated. Dr. Franks insisted that the delusions were so severe that the higher dose was needed in order to keep them under control.

"Hear who, Mr. Blidsen?" I asked, and hoped he didn't hear the

uncertainty in my voice.

“You know who I’m talking about! I’ve told you a hundred times already. You just haven’t listened...” he answered, disappointed.

“Mr. Blidsen, I listen to everything you say, you know that, but I didn’t hear anything. I’m sorry. You enjoy the movie, and I’ll see you later, okay?” I answered. That was the only thing I could do. I couldn’t tell him I thought I had heard voices. It would just add to what I hoped were only his delusions.

“The children...the children...the children...the children...the children!!!” He shouted at the top of his lungs, his fragile body shaking as he grabbed on to the handles of his wheelchair.

“Mr. Blidsen, it’s alright. The children are just fine, there’s no need to worry. I’ve already taken care of them,” I said gently, just like I had numerous times before. It had always calmed him down, but this time there was something different in his voice. A sense of urgency I thought, and he was coherent, more than he’d been since I started here. I hurried towards him.

“No! No! No!” he continued to repeat. “They’re not fine, not fine, not fine! You haven’t helped them, you haven’t even listened to them!”

I grabbed a chair and sat down next to him. I was worried about his blood pressure, every time he had an episode it shot through the roof. I knew I needed to get him to calm down. I reached for his hand and said, “Mr. Blidsen, please take a deep breath and try to relax...”

“You don’t believe me!” he shouted, cutting me off. “I don’t think you’ve ever believed anything I’ve said. Have you Miss Crenshaw? You think I’m crazy just like the rest of them, but I’m not, I’m not, I’m not!!”

“I don’t think you’re crazy, and just because I don’t see them and you do, doesn’t mean I don’t believe you. Now, why don’t we go to your room and you can tell me all about the children, alright?” I said as calmly as I could, hoping he’d believe me and I’d be able to get him out of the day room before he frightened the other patients.

“No! No! No! I’m not going anywhere with you until you believe me, believe me, believe me!” he screamed.

“Aiyaana, what’s going on? I heard Mr. Blidsen yelling as I came in the door. Is he alright?” asked Liz, walking into the day room.

“He’s fine. Just a little upset. Help me take him to his room, maybe we can get him to calm down,” I answered.

“Yeah, we need to get him out of here now before he upsets the other patients, or we’ll have a complete mess on our hands! ” she said as she walked behind his wheelchair.

He grabbed the wheels and held on, making it difficult for Liz to push his chair, then began to forcefully throw himself back against it. “They need help, they need help, they need help! He’s going to kill them, kill them...” he continued to repeat.

“Mr. Blidsen, please pick up your feet and let go of the wheels. You don’t want to hurt Liz do you?” I asked.

“No! No! No! Just listen to me. Listen, please...I could never hurt anybody, but he does, he does...he does...he does...”

“He has a standing order for Ativan for increased agitation, Aiyana. I think we should give it to him before he gets out of control,” said Liz.

“Mr. Blidsen...I don’t want to medicate you. Let us take you to your room so I don’t have to,” I said, hoping he’d agree and I wouldn’t have to medicate him.

“Listen to me! Listen to me! Listen to me!” he continued to shout.

“Please...let me take you to your room and I’ll listen to everything you have to say. I promise.”

“No, she won’t. She’s just saying what they all say...” whispered one of the old ladies in the room.

“Yes...she’s saying that to get you to shut up! Don’t be such a fool. Don’t fall for her tricks. She doesn’t hear anything because she doesn’t care, and she doesn’t believe you!” yelled Mr. Franco.

“They’re good at that around here, no one cares and no one will listen to you!” shouted another old lady.

“Please, everyone try to calm down, that’s not true! We all care. Mr. Blidsen, you know that I do,” I answered.

“She’s a liar! Don’t believe anything she says,” shouted a little old lady, waving her crooked fingers in the air as she shuffled into the day room, crumpled over her walker.

“The children, the children, the children! You see! No one listens!” shouted yet another old lady.

“Miss Crenshaw, if you truly care then help...help...help...” cried Mr. Blidsen.

“Aiyana, we need to give him his shot now before things get out of control!” said Liz worriedly, as she raised her hands and rested them upon her small hips.

“Alright...I’ll go draw it up. Anne, would you please come and help Liz take Mr. Blidsen to his room,” I said to the nursing assistant as I quickly ran out. I knew if I didn’t do this we’d have a riot on our hands.

“Of course,” she answered, quickly running to Liz’s aide. “I’ll grab his legs and you push.”

“Let go...let go...let go!”

“Mr. Blidsen! You need to try and relax, we don’t want anyone getting hurt. Alright?” Liz firmly said.

“Miss Crenshaw, just listen to me please...!! I’m not crazy, please help them, help them!!” I heard him shout as I reached the nurses’ station.

This was the last thing I wanted to have to do. Hell, I’d been trying hard to get his medications decreased, but Liz was right. This was the only way he was going to calm down. He’d been talking about children since I started working here, but then, so had a lot of the other patients. I just thought they were mimicking each other, which is common. One will say something and the rest will repeat it, but this episode was unlike anything I’d seen before. I quickly drew up the medication, then double checked my dose.

As I came out, I saw Liz pushing his wheelchair and Anne struggling as she tried to keep his legs up. He was still shouting, “The children, the children, the children, the children! Please, Miss

Crenshaw! Please!”

I shivered and practically ran towards them. When I reached them, they were just entering his room. “Mr. Blidsen, it’s going to be alright...I’m going to give you a shot, and it will help you to relax,” I said softly.

He looked at me, and his sad, black eyes pierced right through my heart. He nodded his head slowly, leaning from side to side. It reminded me of a slide show being played in slow motion. His tears rolled down his cheeks, pooling in his wrinkles. I felt a knot being tied in two in the middle of my gut. This was wrong.

“Aiyana, I have his arms, just give him the injection!” said Liz impatiently.

“Alright...alright!”

He fell flaccid, shoulders slumped over, arms limp against his side. His head hung down as though his body gave in along with his will and screamed out, “Do whatever you please! I’m nothing but an empty shell lacking dignity, strength, voice, and perseverance. I’m at your mercy, weak, frail and useless! I no longer care.”

I drew in a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. The sight of his poor, defeated presence made me weak in the knees. It broke my heart. But I knew I had no choice, it had been determined, judged and set in stone. The syringe, filled with enough medication to sedate him for the remainder of the day, rested in what I felt to be a forced hand.

I pulled his curtain, and with remorse I gave him the injection. “Let’s get him on his bed,” I shakily said. We laid him down.

“Thanks for your help. I have it from here.”

“Are you sure?” asked Liz.

“Yeah...” I answered, sitting down next to him. As soon as they left I asked, “What children, Mr. Blidsen? Please tell me. Why do you keep saying that?”

“Don’t you see them? If you try you will...just open your eyes and look...they’re scared. They don’t want to die...don’t let them die...don’t let him...” his words trailed off as his eyes closed.

I cringed as his words pricked me like a thorn. Goose bumps quickly ran down my spine and up my arms. Not only did I feel like shit for what I just did to this poor man, but now I found myself questioning if he really did see things, or if the darkness taunted him as well. I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who had fallen prey to its trickery. I shrugged my shoulders and briskly rubbed my arms, then removed my stethoscope from my pocket. I checked his pulse, his heart was beating like someone banging on a drum. I listened until it returned to an even, regular beat, then reached for the blood pressure cuff hanging on the wall. I wrapped it around his arm and squeezed the bulb, inflating it. His pressure was high, just like I expected. I replaced everything and stood up.

“He’s right, Miss Crenshaw. You know that don’t you? They’re scared. Can’t you see them?” asked Mr. Bentiz with his tiny, shaky lips.

I looked him straight in his glossy, green eyes, and I felt his disappointment in me. I walked to his bed and felt it tugging at my heart. I wondered why? Why did he feel that way? It must be

because of what I had just done. I let them down. Me, the one who was supposed to help them. “Please tell me! Please. See who?” I pleaded.

“Aiyana, Dr. Franks is on the phone.” I jumped as I heard Liz from behind me.

“Alright, thanks,” I answered, then walked out.

“How is Mr. Blidsen?” she asked.

“He’s sleeping comfortably,” I answered, almost shamefully. I thought I’d ask her if she had ever heard things, or seen things, but then dared not. I didn’t want her to think me a fool. We walked into the nurses’ station, reaching for the phone, I hesitated, then drew in a deep breath and exhaled as I picked it up. “This is Aiyana. What can I help you with, Dr. Franks?” I asked as nicely as I could.

“First, let me apologize for this morning. I shouldn’t have raised my voice as much as I did. Second, and foremost, if you continue to question my orders, we will continue to have a problem. Now, I need some lab work done on Mr. Blidsen,” he rudely said.

“No need to apologize for raising your voice, and at this moment, that is the last thing on my mind. I was just about to call you regarding him. He was extremely agitated, yelling about the children again, but this time I had to give him Ativan to calm him down. He’s sleeping now, but I’m a little concerned about his blood pre...”

“Now do you see why I have him on high doses of medication?!” he raised his voice, cutting me off. “It is for his well being as well as his safety, and the safety of others. If I were to

decrease his medication, as you so stupidly suggested, he would have more of these episodes.”

“Yes, Dr. Franks,” I reluctantly agreed. I felt no need to say more than that, there was no point. I’d get nowhere with him, except into another argument.

“Now, I’d like a CBC, Chem-seven, and a renal panel in the morning. If he has any more episodes, let me know. I might need to adjust his dosages,” he said, and hung up.

“So what did lard ass want?” asked Liz.

“Just a bunch of lab work on Mr. Blidsen. I don’t think he even paid attention to anything I said.”

“After everything he’s done that shouldn’t surprise you.”

“No, it doesn’t, but it irritates me. Just his holier than thou attitude irks me. I don’t think I’ve ever met a doctor who cared more about himself than his patients.”

“I’m really sorry for everything, Aiyana. I just want you to know that in case I don’t get to tell you.”

“What are you talking about? Why do you sound so morbid?”

“I just thought with everything that you’re going through, and what you...never mind, I’m being silly.”

“If you’re worried that I’m going to quit, don’t be. I care about the patients too much to leave them at the mercy of Dr. Franks. Besides, for some reason I feel like I belong here.”

It was after five o’clock when I finally walked out the door, my mind was fried, and my body ached. I couldn’t wait to get home. I jumped in my car and didn’t even turn on the stereo as I usually did.

I just drove. All my thoughts were focused on Mr. Blidsen and Dr. Franks, which was more than enough to keep my mind occupied and keep me from thinking about what had happened in the corridor.

I wondered if Dr. Franks could be right. After all, I'd only been at Coyote Hills a little over a month, and he'd been seeing patients there for five years. Shit, it jarred every nerve I had to think he could actually be right, but I just didn't know. I only knew something was completely off kilter. Not only was that dragonfly trying to escape from my stomach, but I felt a tug in my heart like someone was reaching for it.

"Finally..." I sighed, pulling into my driveway.

Walking inside, my thoughts swiftly turned to a hot bath. I no longer wanted to think about anything else. All I wanted was to lose myself. A state of oblivion quickly came to my mind. I tossed my keys on the table, dropping my purse next to them, then ran up the stairs into my bathroom. I filled the tub, and knew I poured way too much lavender oil in the bath, yet I poured even more. I hadn't done that before, but I hoped the soothing aroma would take my mind to another place, a quiet place.

As I watched the bubbles gently float to the ceiling and softly ooze over the top of the tub, I wondered how it felt to be so carefree, so worry free, so light that you could just fly away. I'd probably never know, I thought as I undressed and slipped into the bath. God, it felt so good to relax. The hot water pushed against my shoulders and neck, and slowly began to ease my tension. When I finally got

out, I was as wrinkled as a prune.

I turned on the television, and as I flopped down on my bed, the phone rang. I knew it was Kaya. Picking it up I said, “Yeah, I was supposed to stop over, but I didn’t. So don’t jump down my throat, okay? I had a bad day and just wanted to get home. Besides, I wouldn’t have been very good company, not in the mood I was in.”

“You know, since you started working there, I think you’ve had nothing but bad days. So it doesn’t make a difference what kind of mood you were in, you still could have come over,” she answered.

“I know...I know...but today was the worst. Dr. Franks actually had the nerve to tell me if I didn’t stop questioning his orders, he was going to have me fired.”

“That might not be a bad thing, Aiya. You haven’t been as relaxed as I thought you’d be with this job. Plus, I think you’re getting way too involved with the patients, and...”

“I’m tired,” I quickly said, cutting her off. “I’m going to sleep now. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” I hung up. My mind was numb. I couldn’t think anymore, and I didn’t want to talk. All I wanted was sleep. That wonderful state of nothingness, the only darkness I knew that was peaceful.

JUNE 11

I woke to the sound of my buzzer. “Shit, already?” I moaned. It was four am and it felt as though I had just went to sleep. Usually I wake well rested, but I fought with my eyes just to open them. With one eye open I reached over and smacked the button, harder then I intended. My poor little clock jumped and flipped off the night stand. Jarred by the noise, my fumbling hands fast reached down for it and set it back. “Argg!” I shouted as I reluctantly got up and made my way to the bathroom.

After I finished getting ready I stared at myself in the mirror and wondered how this day would play out. I actually waited for a few minutes. Waited for the woman in the mirror with the black hair placed in a tight bun atop her head, the nurses cap so neatly over it, her dark eyes filled with remorse, and pink lips that quivered, to answer me. Uncertainty drained my light complexion a dusty pale, and I thought my reflection cruel. It wouldn’t answer me. “Of course not!” I shouted, then hurried down the stairs into the kitchen. I made a pot of coffee, filled my thermos, and left.

I pulled into the parking lot at five forty, which was late for me. I normally arrive at five thirty. Oh well, I was in no hurry. I walked into the building and headed straight for the break room. I drank the last of my coffee, opened my locker, threw my purse and the thermos

in, then slammed it shut. This was my usual routine, only this time it didn't feel usual. The way my stomach felt, I thought that dragonfly was eating its way out.

"Hey, what time did you end up getting out of here?" I heard Liz from behind and just about jumped ten feet high.

"My god! You scared the crap out of me!" I gasped "I didn't think anyone was down here."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to. I...was just in the bathroom freshening my makeup."

"Hell, it was a little after five by the time I left."

"Well...let's hope today is smooth sailing."

"I couldn't agree more," I replied with a nod, and we headed up the stairs.

"Hey you guys, how's it going?" asked Jill as we walked in the nurses' station. "It's been a long horrible night! I just want to count and give report so I can get the heck out of here."

"Alright, I'll count with you," I answered. We counted the narcotics, and when we finished we started to make rounds. We reached Mr. Blidsen's room and not only was he still asleep, so were the other patients. That was odd, at this time they were always up and ready for breakfast. I wondered if it was still the lingering effects of the Ativan I'd given him.

"Mr. Blidsen was on a roll last night," Jill whispered.

"What do you mean on a roll? Is he alright?" I quickly asked.

"Yeah, he's fine. It's just he wouldn't stop talking about the children, and when he starts up, he gets all the other patients in the

room at it as well for half the night. I had to give him another injection of Ativan to calm him down. He'll probably sleep for most of the morning."

"Another shot, Jill!" I gasped. "I didn't want to give him one. I felt so bad for him yesterday. I wish I knew why he talked about children all the time. For that matter, why do the other patients?"

"It's just one of his delusions. He's not talking about any children in particular. And once one starts the rest just follow suit. That's just how it is around here."

"Are you sure? Maybe he's worried about his children."

"He doesn't have any, nor does he have any family members still living. A lot of the elderly who don't have any children tend to talk about children. Could just be a regret that they never had any, and the fact that they're lonely."

"You're probably right."

"Yeah, I know I am! They all sound like a broken record," she chuckled. "It took me a while to get used to it. You haven't been here that long, but once you have, you will too."

Get used to it, huh? I knew that wasn't going to happen. How could anyone get used to this? It saddened me just to think about it. "I know how he feels, and I worry about him," I sighed.

"He's been like this ever since he got here. So if I were you, I wouldn't worry about it too much."

"I don't mean to interrupt you guys, but Dr. Franks is on the phone," said Liz, coming up behind us.

"Oh no! Mr. Blidsen's lab work. Jill, did you get a chance to

draw it?" I asked.

"Yeah, I did. He didn't even twitch, and it's already gone out," she answered.

"Great, thanks," I said as we walked back to the nurses' station.

"Don't mention it."

"Do you think that's why he's calling so early?" asked Liz.

"I don't know, but guess I'll find out." Reaching the station, I picked up the phone, "Good morning, Dr. Franks."

"I'll be in this afternoon to see Mr. Blidsen. Have his chart ready," he said, and hung up.

"Well hello to you too!" I sarcastically said, hanging up the phone. "He didn't even ask me how Mr. Blidsen was, or if the labs were drawn. Guess he'll just come and adjust his medications, as usual."

"Nothing new," answered Jill. "Liz, if you're ready, let's make rounds."

"Let's do it," she answered, and they walked out.

I stood there thinking about what Jill had said, it just didn't sound right. I know people get lonely and talk about family they wished they had, or ones they'd lost. I did it a lot, but this was way different. They weren't talking about children they wished they'd had. They were saying the children need help, and they were asking me if I'd seen or heard them. That didn't make any sense. I had never noticed them ask Liz or Jill those questions. With diagnoses such as theirs, I knew they could imagine seeing a hundred different things, and mimic each other to the tee, but now I was beginning to

wonder.

“I’m going to start passing my medications, then get a jump on my charting, just in case Dr. Franks decides to bombard us with orders,” said Liz as she walked into the medication room.

I jumped, I hadn’t even realized she was back. “Yeah...I think I will too,” I answered, following her.

We prepared everything and began. Liz went down her side of the corridor, and I down mine. “See you in a bit,” she said with a smile.

Our medication pass, if everything went smoothly, took us about two and a half hours to complete. Usually I started with Mr. Blidsen’s room, but I knew I wanted to spend time with him, so I decided to do his room last. I finished quicker than I expected, but the patients were calm, almost too quiet. It reminded me of the calm before the storm. I wondered if they were preparing for a repeat of yesterday.

When I entered Mr. Blidsen’s room all the patients were awake and eating their breakfast, except for him. I saw Mr. Bentiz staring at me anxiously, as though he’d been waiting all night for me. I wondered what thoughts ran through his mind. I started with Mr. Franco, his bed was the first one on the right side. He smiled at me, almost questioningly, but didn’t say a word.

Moving at an even pace from one patient to the next, and greeting each with a big smile, I said good morning and handed them their medications. They didn’t say a word, and I thought it strange. When I reached the end of the room I came to Mr. Bentiz, and knew

something was wrong. The cute little smile that he always greeted me with wasn't there, and he was much too passive. He didn't make any attempt to grab me, as he usually did.

His green eyes seemed troubled as they melted into mine and he whispered, "The children were so scared last night."

"What children, Mr. Bentiz?" I asked, and wondered if I really wanted an answer. "Help me to understand, please."

"Those children," he answered, pointing to the wall. He hadn't done that before, and this time his words were clear and precise, without hesitation. I thought he was, at this moment, not delusional, but very coherent.

Cold pricks jarred my senses as they ran down my neck, my spine, all the way to my frickin' feet. My mind teased me with crazy thoughts of what could be there. Slowly, cautiously, and apprehensively, I glanced behind me, then shook my head, not sure if I was relieved that no one was there, or disappointed. For a second I'd hoped there would be, because now I was back to square one, they were just delusions after all. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bentiz, I didn't see anyone. Maybe they left. Here's your medication."

He took his pills without a fuss, but then he always had. I just thought since his behavior was different, and I didn't confirm what he had seen, that he wouldn't take them. He shakily set his glass down and whispered, "If you listen, Miss Crenshaw, really listen, you'll hear them calling for help. Then you'll see them, and you'll know."

I tried to smile, not only to ease his mind, but mine as well. His

words shook me. Damn, he sounded as sane as I was. “I’ll listen for them, don’t worry, and if I can help them, I will. Okay?”

“Okay, as long as you promise you’ll help them.”

“Promise. Now finish your breakfast before it gets cold,” I answered, then went across to Mr. Blidsen. His bed was the last on the left side. “Good morning, sleepy head. Time to wake up, your breakfast is here and I have your medications for you.” He didn’t answer. I reached out and touched his arm. “Can you hear me Mr. Blidsen?” Still no answer. I glanced at his chest, slow and even, he was breathing. I checked his pulse, it was fine. I thought with that damn shot I had given him, plus what Jill gave him, no way was he going to wake up. “Mr. Blidsen, I’m sorry,” I whispered softly, squeezing his arm.

“He’s not going to wake up. That nurse gave him too much medicine, but he was only worried about the children. I don’t think she likes it when he talks to them, it scares her. I told him to go back to bed before she caught him, but he wouldn’t listen,” said Mr. Bentiz.

I didn’t answer him, there was no need. I knew there was nothing I could say that would make him believe otherwise, and the last thing I wanted was for him to become agitated. I couldn’t handle it if I had to medicate him too. I checked Mr. Blidsen’s pupils. There was no doubt he was over medicated, and there was nothing I could do but let him sleep it off. He began to moan. “How do you feel?” I asked.

“If he can’t hear you, he’s not going to answer you,” said Mr.

Bentiz with a nod.

He was right, all Mr. Blidsen did was moan. I covered him, smiled at Mr. Bentiz and started to walk out. I reached the door and heard Mr. Franco, “You’re wasting your breath, she’ll never believe us. I don’t think she cares as much as she claims she does.”

My nerves twitched with what he’d said. Not only was I pissed at myself, I wondered if any of the patients would trust me again. When I returned to the nurses’ station Liz was already charting. “Mr. Blidsen won’t even wake up. I think Jill gave him too much Ativan,” I said reaching for his chart.

“Well, from what she said, he was completely out of control,” she answered.

“I’m not giving him any of his medications today,” I said, thumbing through his chart. “Look at this!” I shouted, pointing to the amount of medication she had given him.

“Wow! That is a high dose,” she gasped. “But he does have an order for it, so not much you can do. Alright, I’m going down to the break room, I need some coffee before Dr. Franks gets here,” she said as she smiled, then got up and walked out.

I practically threw myself down on the chair. I felt so damn bad for Mr. Blidsen, for Mr. Bentiz, hell, for all of the patients here. I wasn’t sure if they saw children or not, but whatever it was, I knew they felt helpless, because at this moment that was exactly how I felt. It must be horrible to believe you see things, and have no one else believe you, just over medicate you. I wanted to believe it was for their own good, after all, I saw firsthand how out of control Mr.

Blidsen could get. What if I hadn't medicated him? Could he have hurt himself? Maybe hurt another patient, or even staff? I shuddered at the thought.

"Shit, it's ten thirty already," I whispered as I glanced at the clock. I took my pen out of my pocket and made an entry in the chart, then set it aside for Dr. Franks. As I reached across the desk for another chart, that coldness came to me again, bringing with it those whispers that had chilled me to the bone.

I wondered if this was my torture, my guilt, my remorse for what I did, telling me I was wrong. I forcefully pressed my hands against my ears, leaped from my chair, and walked to the corridor. Again I found myself standing in front of the nurses' station looking both ways, and again, not one soul in sight. But the whispers still lingered in my ears, like buzzing from a distance, and it drew my attention to the men's ward.

Slowly I began to move my feet, and I thought of that first day when Liz opened the door, the sounds I had heard. Was it the same sounds? Maybe the patients were yelling again, that had to be it. Mr. Blidsen could be awake. Then my mind quickly reminded me of yesterday, and my feet decided not to move any further. I stopped. I couldn't move, yet I knew I had to. I had to move. I had to find these voices that taunted me. I had to know what it was. Mr. Bentiz had said if I listened, I'd hear them, could it be?

"Alright. I can do this, come on, I'm a grown woman," I said my words firmly, bravely, and headed down the corridor. Not twenty steps did I take when my heart began to pound against my chest and

I heard the '*tap-tap-tap*'- familiar sounds of footsteps behind me.

My feet froze and a chill ran up my spine. Dare I ask who's there? 'No...no...there's no one there. Just turn around,' I thought. My head turned so slowly that I heard the creaking of my neck. My mouth opened and I thought I would scream, but nothing but a faint whimper escaped. I saw a small, shadowy figure quickly move past me, and it reminded me of that shadow I'd seen the first time I walked down this corridor. Every nerve in my body twitched, tingled, and I felt like I was being thrown around like a rag doll. "Is anyone there?" I asked aimlessly, looking about. "If somebody's there, please answer me!" I thought my mind must be playing tricks on me, at least I hoped that's all it was.

"Miss Crenshaw, are you alright?" I heard Anne's voice like a sharp stab in my ears. "Do you need some help?"

My body felt like it went into convulsions, taking my heart along with it. I quickly jerked around, and she was right behind me. "Did...you see anyone out here?" I asked.

"Just Sue and Nicki bringing their patients out to the day room. Miss Crenshaw, what's wrong? You look as white as a ghost," she answered.

"Were they just down here?" I asked, trying to ignore her question.

"No, they weren't. Why? Do you need them?" she asked, arching her brow in curiosity.

"No...no...never mind, it's not important. Have any of the patients been yelling? What about Mr. Blidsen? Is he awake yet?"

“No, its been quiet. Most of them are up and dressed and out on the patio already, and Mr. Blidsen’s been sleeping since you left his room this morning.”

“Alright, thanks,” I said, and hurried back to the nurses' station. I felt nauseated, almost lightheaded. My legs were wobbly and I felt like I was going to fall. I reached out for the chair and sat down. I leaned back and drew in a deep breath. My god, what the hell was going on around here?

“I’m back. Why don’t you go ahead and take your lunch?” said Liz, walking in.

I flung up in the chair, startled by her. “Yeah, I think I will,” I quickly said as I got up and left.

I moved swiftly, and cautiously, down that corridor, looking about, expecting to see something. Or maybe I was hoping to see something, anything, to put my mind at ease. I reached the door, grabbed the key, and unlocked it. As I hung the key back on the hook, I glanced about, and actually chuckled. I knew I was being foolish, childish. I was letting everything get to me, and this was probably my imagination running wild. After all, it had been a hell of a long week. With all that had happened these past few days, if I were any more stressed, I’d explode into a million pieces. I shrugged my shoulders forcefully and cracked my neck, attempting to dispel my thoughts, or at least push them aside for a minute. I knew it wouldn’t, but it felt good, just like the cigarette I was going to have.

I started down the steps, then just a little faster, and the creaking seemed to increase a notch with my every step. I heard a snapping

sound, and I thought the stairs were going to collapse. I quickly laughed at the thought, then just as quickly, the light flickered and my laughing stopped, along with my feet.

“Shit! What the hell’s wrong with that stupid light?” I whispered, and suddenly it stopped. I practically jumped the rest of the way down. My mind said it was just the bulb, but my gut was disagreeing. I walked into the break room, and I was surprised to see Maggie sitting there smoking.

She smiled big and wide, revealing her discolored, crooked teeth. “Hey ya,” she spoke with a twang.

She was an older woman, and from all the wrinkles on her face, it looked to me like she had lived a hard life. She wore the reddest lipstick, which only made her yellow teeth stand out more. I wondered if the discoloration was from years of smoking too much, or not brushing them, and thought it was probably both. Her dim, blue eyes were empty and weighed down with way too much mascara. Her short, wavy, platinum blonde hair had not one strand of gray, and I knew it came from a bottle, or two, of dye. There was no way she could have that bright hair color without a stitch of gray, not when I had stitches of gray sneaking around in my hair. She was one of the nursing assistants for the women’s side, but I didn’t know her as well as the others.

I smiled at her and opened my locker, “Hey, how's it going?” I grabbed a cigarette. “Do you have a light?” I asked, walking towards her.

“Sure do. I didn’ know ya smoke. I never see ya down here

when I come for my break,” she answered, lighting my cigarette.

“Thanks,” I replied, taking a puff. “That’s because I try to avoid this dark dungeon as much as possible. Plus, I’ve been trying to quit.”

“Yea, me too,” she chortled.

I walked to the fridge and grabbed my soda, then sat down next to her, hoping she wouldn't think me strange as I causally asked, “Did you notice the lights flicker just now?”

“Naw, they haven’ don a thing and I’ve been in here for ten minutes.”

“That’s weird. As I was coming down the stairs they started to flicker on and off.”

“Could be just the stairway light. I don think them bulbs have been changed in eons,” she said.

“Yeah, I can only imagine how long it’s been. This entire building is so damn old, it’s not even funny,” I answered, trying to make myself believe it was just the light bulb. That was better than thinking it was something else.

“It a hundred and twenty years old, my dear,” she answered.

“Wow! So how long have you worked here?” I asked.

“Thirty years.”

“You’ve been here that long?!” I said excitedly. Damn, she'd been here for as long as I'd been alive. I was amazed. I thought my nine years at County General was long. “Then you must know this building inside and out.”

“Yea...sad to say, but I do.”

“Hey, do you mind if I ask you a question? It might seem a little strange, but it’s just my curiosity.”

“Naw, of course I don’t mind. Ya ask me anythin’ ya want.”

I couldn’t believe I was going to do this. I drew in a deep breath. “Have you ever seen anything odd? I mean, anything out of the ordinary?”

“That depends on what ya mean by odd. When ya live as long as me, ya see many a strange thing,” she answered.

“Have you ever heard things around here? It’s a little difficult to explain, but I don’t mean the staff, or the patients having conversations. I mean like, maybe somebody you don’t see talking?” God, she was going to think I was crazy.

“This is an old place, and the building makes a lot of strange noise. I think it’s like anything that lives a long time, it can see, it can grow, it can feel, it can hurt, it can breathe. The longer it lives, the more it sees, the more it hurts, but it’s not lucky like us, it never dies. It just goes on and on,” she spoke, almost on the verge of tears.

Her words saddened me. I wasn’t quite sure what she meant, or if she was talking about the building, or herself. I think I got the gist of it though. This was an old building making noises. It was like a house settling, it almost sounds like breathing and moaning. And that made sense. “Maggie, I’m sorry...maybe I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Sometime ya think ya hear people talk, maybe a whisper, or two. Ya might think ya see things, but ya ignore it and look past it. As time goes on, ya get used to it.”

“Aiyana!” I heard Liz shout from the top of the stairs. “Dr.

Franks is here!”

Damn! I jumped out of my chair so fast I almost fell, she had startled the shit out of me. “Co...coming!” I shakily replied. Then smiled at Maggie. “It was nice talking to you. I’ll see you later.” I hurried out.

“So ya heard them too?” I heard Maggie whisper as I started up the stairs.

I paused and took a step back. My god, she did know exactly what I was talking about! I wanted to run back in there and ask her what she meant.

“Aiyana, what are you doing? Don’t keep Dr. Franks waiting, you know how he gets,” said Liz, standing at the top of the stairs looking at me.

I shrugged my shoulders and hurriedly continued up the stairs. “Has he been here long?” I asked, reaching her.

“No, only about thirty minutes. He went in to see Mr. Blidsen, and he’s been writing in his chart since,” she answered as we quickly walked to the nurses' station.

“Hello, Dr. Franks,” I said as I darted in.

“Aiyana, I’ve made some adjustments to Mr. Blidsen’s medications. All my notes are in his chart, please follow up. If you have any further problems with him, give me a call,” he said as he stood.

“Adjustments?” I questioned, reaching for his chart. I couldn’t believe it when I saw what he had done. “You’ve increased his doses again! Dr. Franks that’s... ”

“Yes, I am his doctor!” he said sharply, cutting me off. “After his episodes yesterday and last night, I thought it appropriate. We need to keep his delusions under control, and not let his delusions control him,” he answered.

“But, Dr. Franks, did you see him? He's been out of it all morning.”

“Of course I saw him, and he is not as out of it as you think he is. These patients know exactly how to play on your sympathy! They can have you believing anything if you allow them.”

“I understand that. I'm not a new nurse. I've done this for nine years!”

“I'm sure you have, Aiyana, and we've discussed this enough. I told you yesterday exactly where I stand on the matter, yet you continue. You have not been here long enough to understand how their minds work. And unless you are blind, you have seen that our patients are not typical of what you have worked with before we were lucky enough to have you join us here,” he sarcastically said.

“You're right. I haven't had much experience working with patients like we have here.”

“Of course I am right, and the sooner you come to accept that, the better it will be for you.”

“I'm sure if I just give in and bow down, it would be easier for me, but not for the patients. I know well the ill effects high doses of anti-psychotic medications can cause and...” I stopped myself from saying anymore. I felt my temper rising and I knew if I didn't want a repeat of our argument, it was best to bite my tongue.

“Do you think I do not know the side effects? Do you presume to know more than I?” he asked, arching his brow.

“No, I don’t. I’m just concerned about my patients.”

“My job is to make sure they do not harm themselves or others. I have been doing that for twenty years! And I have never been questioned by a nurse. Perhaps this is not the best place for you,” he said as he reached for his briefcase, then stormed out.

“Aiyana, you know he’s going straight to the administrator’s office to complain about you,” said Liz.

“Yeah, and I’m sure this isn’t the first time. But Liz, I know I’m right. Look at these high doses he ordered,” I pointed to them. “My god, that will keep Mr. Blidsen in la -la land, and he’ll never be able to tell what’s real and what’s not!” I sighed in frustration.

“I completely agree with you, but I’m gonna tell you it doesn’t matter what we think. We’re just nurses, and the administrator will always take the doctors side over us.”

“Even if they’re wrong?”

“It doesn’t matter if they’re wrong or right. You’ve been a nurse much longer than I have, you should know that. If you want to keep your job here, I think you’d better learn to accept that. I actually thought for a second that because you were brave enough to stand up to him, that it might make a difference. But I was wrong, no one can,” she said with a nod of her head, then sat down, reached for a chart, and began writing.

I stood there dazed, confused, shell shocked, all the feelings of being so unsure. I had thought I could make a difference and actually

help the patients, but no, I was just a fool who couldn't do anything. Dr. Franks was in control, he regulates, he dictates, he over medicates. And there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. I felt horrible. I wanted to turn tail, just run away and hide. I sat down next to Liz and began to chart as well. I knew from the look on her face, she felt as bad as I did. We were so busy for the remainder of the day that we barely said one word to each other. But I knew that wasn't the only reason. Her silence was fueled by her inability to help, mine by my frustration. I wondered how in the hell she had been able to cope with Dr. Franks for the year she'd worked here, I knew I couldn't.

It was three fifty by the time I headed out the door. Ahh, fresh air. I drew it in, and it felt so good going through my nostrils into my lungs. Hell, just seeing my car and heading towards it made me feel better. Then I twitched when I saw Dr. Franks' car at the end of the parking lot. He drove a yellow nineteen-sixty-eight Corvette Convertible. I wondered how that fat, arrogant, ass managed to fit in it. I swiftly glanced around thinking he was waiting for me, maybe he wanted to finish me off. He was nowhere in sight though, and I was more than relieved.

But it struck me as odd. I had never seen his car here this late. I looked over at the other buildings. He was probably with Miss Sullivan. Maybe they were having dinner or something. I chuckled, and my thoughts quickly fell on the other building. I still hadn't seen anyone around it, or any kind of remodeling going on. I thought maybe they were just going to leave it as is. After all, it takes money

to remodel a building that size. And why bother anyway? They like money in their pockets, and not in their buildings, as evidenced by the one I worked in.

I jumped in my car, started it, shoved in my eight track, and drove the hell out of there to the tune of, “California Dreaming.” Too bad this wasn’t a dream. A dream that I could just wake from and not think of again. I knew I couldn’t be that lucky, as my mind was trying to decide if yesterday was worse than today. Nah, it was pretty much a tie. At least being busy for the last half of the day kept me from thinking about the whispers, the shadow. But now I found myself wondering about what Maggie had said. Had she heard the buzzing, numbing echoes that seem to enjoy teasing my senses? Maybe it wasn’t just my imagination, my guilt, my stress, or the settling of an old building. Maybe it was something entirely different. Maybe what I heard was what Mr. Blidsen and Mr. Bentiz hear, what the other patients hear. What they’ve told me to listen for.

I pulled into Kaya’s driveway. I knew if I didn’t come over this time, she’d be really pissed, and probably wouldn’t talk to me. I didn’t see Daniel’s car, and thought he must be working late, since he was usually home by this time. I reached the door, rang the bell three times, then opened it. Walking in, I jokingly said, “Honey! I’m home!”

“Aiya, you’re so damn funny! Now get your ass in here,” Kaya retorted.

“I’m moving as fast as I can, Miss Bossy Ass,” I answered, and

almost took a step back as I entered the living room and saw her sitting on the couch. Her long, slender legs were crossed in front of her, and she had a glass in her hand. Her long, black hair tousled, and from the look of her gleaming black eyes as she stared at me, I knew she'd had more than just one drink. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm waiting for you. I didn't think you were going to stop by, just like yesterday. Guess I'm getting used to it, huh?" she said as she took a drink from her glass of wine.

"So, you've just been sitting here by yourself, drinking?"

"Well, since we were supposed to have dinner and drinks yesterday, but you were a no show, I thought I'd make up for it."

"Where are the boys and Daniel?"

"The boys went camping for the weekend with Mr. Belier and his sons, and Daniel had to work late, so I'm all alone..."

"Alright, I get your meaning. Now where's my glass?"

"Sit down. I have it right here waiting anxiously for you. So tell me, how was your day, honey?" she giggled, filling my glass.

"Horrible!" I screeched, taking a big gulp of my wine.

"So what the hell is going on? All of your days there have been nothing but shit, Aiya. I hoped this job was going to be better for you, but it seems as if it's worse."

"It's just different. The patients need more attention."

"Yeah, so you've said...but what's up with this doctor you've told me about? He doesn't seem like he's a very good person at all."

"Dr. Franks the Almighty! You know how I said he likes to give

the patients a shit load of medication? Well, lately he's been increasing and increasing the doses, so I questioned his judgment, and that didn't go very well. It's so sad though, Kay. I feel so bad for all of them. But you know what the weird thing is? I'm beginning to wonder if they really do see things," I sighed.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Remember how I told you that they're always talking about children? Well, what if they really do see them?" I drew in a breath, and shivered with my thoughts.

"It's all in their minds! I can't believe you would think otherwise," she answered with a sharp nod of her head.

"It's hard for me to explain why, but I kind of do."

"Well...I think you should take a big drink and try. I'm all ears."

I did just as she suggested, but it was too big of a drink as the wine ran down the side of my mouth. "Shit..." I sputtered.

Kaya chuckled, "I said to take a big drink. I didn't say to bathe in it."

I didn't bother replying to her remark. I just rolled my eyes and wiped off my mouth, then blurted out, "Yesterday, I heard these weird voices, whispers, like somebody talking in the distance, but I didn't see anyone. Today, I heard them again. When I went to take a look to find out where they were coming from, I thought I saw someone."

"Then you found who had been whispering. I don't understand what's weird about that."

"No! I didn't find who was whispering, there was no one there!

When I said I thought I saw someone, I meant like when you know there's someone there, but then you look, and there's no one." God, I thought I sounded like an idiot. Kay was going to think I'd lost all my marbles.

"Aiya, come on, from what you've said a majority of the patients are crazy. So it could have been them messing with you."

"Kaya! You don't have to say it like that. Besides, I know it wasn't them. I think whatever it was, is what they've been hearing, what they've been seeing."

"Come on, don't creep me out! You're just stressed out about this stupid doctor, that's all. You feel bad about all the medication you have to give them, and your guilt is probably screaming at you."

"I hope you're right and that's all it is. I do feel guilty as hell..." I sighed. After all, no one knew me better than Kaya. Sometimes I think she knows me better than I know myself. My older sister by two years who has always tried to take care of me, she was my guardian angel.

"Yeah, of course I'm right. We both know you always have to help. You've been like that since you were small, and when you can't, you feel like shit. Now, give me your glass, it's empty. You're here to drink with me and we're not going to talk about that god damned place anymore, alright?" she said her words in a very bossy manner, as I was sure most older siblings did.

"Alright...alright! But just one more, I have to get home."

"You're sure being a fuddy duddy, but you're not going to leave until you have dinner. I know you, Aiya, and I'm sure you haven't

had a decent meal in who knows how long. Besides, I made a casserole, and you'll love it. There's a ton of cheese in it."

She was right, again. I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten an entire meal. "Alright, Miss Bossy! I was so busy at work that I skipped lunch, so I guess I could eat."

"Honey! I'm home!" we heard Daniel shout as the door opened.

We started to laugh. "Did I, or didn't I, hit that right on the nail?" I asked.

"Yeah, right on top of it, as usual."

Kay and I had always joked about that, Daniel said it every single time he walked through the door, just like clockwork.

"Hey, Aiya, glad to see you finally made it over, and you're lucky you did. You know your sister. She would have made me go get you and drag you over," he said with a big smile on his strong, striking face, as he walked into the living room. "You know, we've been expecting you all week," he winked at Kay with his big blue eyes.

I had always thought Daniel was a handsome man. He was very muscular and stood six feet tall. He had short blond hair that he combed neatly back, never a hair out of place. I always wondered how his hair stayed in place all day, since by the end of the day, mine was always disheveled.

"Yeah, I know, but it's been a busy week and I just haven't had the energy," I replied.

"How's it going with your new job? Kay's told me a little about it, but I'd love to know more. And what about the drive? It's rather

long, isn't it?"

"It's going just fine." I didn't want to tell him the truth, he would only bombard me with questions, and I didn't want to think about it anymore. "I love the drive actually, it helps to clear my mind. I blast my stereo listening to the Mamas and Papas, and just relax."

"That's great! I'm glad. What about you, honey, how was your day?" he asked, kissing Kaya.

"Boy, are you a glutton for punishment! She's in that mood..." I laughed.

"I'm not in any mood, and my day was just like any other. I took the kids to school, came home, cleaned, washed, cooked, picked them up. Oh wait, there was a change! I got their stuff ready for their camping trip, dropped them off at the Beliers', then Aiya was kind enough to actually come by," she chuckled.

"Alright, I get the picture, babe! You had a fantastic day, a marvelous day, and I'll go up to shower now before you decide to end mine," he said, heading towards the stairs.

They'd been married for ten years, and happily so. They reminded me so much of my parents. I think sometimes I'd actually been a little jealous of that. I wondered if I would ever find someone to make me as happy.

"Oh, honey, you know I wouldn't end your day, not yet anyway," Kaya said with a giggle. "Just hurry, dinner's almost ready. And you, Aiya, get your ass up and come help me set the table. Daniel won't be long," she stood up and walked to the kitchen.

“Of course! I come to relax and you have me working,” I joked, following her. That’s how we were, we teased, we joked, and we told each other everything.

“Hey, don’t forget your glass.”

I hurried back for it. “Yeah, I wouldn’t want to have an empty glass, I wouldn’t be able to keep up with you, and you’d probably end my day. That’d be a horrible twist to my lousy day, to die...so young,” I laughed.

“So everyone thinks they’re a comedian today, huh?” she said, shaking her head.

I finished my glass of wine walking into the kitchen, and no sooner had I reached Kaya then she refilled it. We smiled and rolled our eyes at each other, almost like we knew what the other one was thinking. We’d always been close, but more so after our parents died. We were all we had left, we clung to each other and protected one another. I started to set the table, and Kaya took the casserole out of the oven, then we made a salad with a ton of vegetables. Just as Kaya popped the rolls in the oven, Daniel came into the kitchen.

“Smells great, babe!” he took a big whiff. “Need me to help with anything?” he asked, pouring himself a glass of wine.

“You can bring the casserole, honey,” she answered, carrying the salad to the table.

“I think I can manage that, and with one hand,” he laughed, grabbing the casserole dish in one hand. He held it up in the air and carried his glass of wine in the other, acting like he was juggling.

“Be careful! If you lose dinner, we’ll be having take out,” said

Kay.

“Never! No take out, not when my wife is the best cook ever.”

I shook my head and laughed. How corny these two were, but how wonderful. 'One day, Aiya,' I thought, 'One day that will be me.' I took the rolls out and grabbed a bottle of wine, then we sat down.

“Alright everyone, dig in,” said Kaya.

We ate until we were stuffed, literally. We could not take one more bite, we had eaten more than half of that casserole. We talked about everything under the sun, and nothing, as we usually did when we were together, laughing so hard our guts ached. By the time we finished, we'd drank three bottles of wine, and I hadn't had one single thought. Not one of Dr. Franks, the patients, or what I thought I'd heard, or didn't hear. Not even the shadow lingered in my mind. But such is the way of alcohol. It's pleasing effects cloud the mind, numbs the senses, and hides all worries. Kaya made a pot of coffee, and made me drink half of the damn pot before she finally let me leave.

JUNE 12

It was another day at Coyote Hills and I wondered, with my throbbing hazy mind, the dulling effect that had replaced the pleasing effect of last night's wine, just what the day held for me. What obstacles would it decide to throw my way? I quickly found myself regretting that I'd drank so much as I walked through the eeriness and stillness of the early morning mist. It felt like the darkness knew of my plight, its trickery came swiftly. The shadowy figures that danced about were no longer content with their imploring movements, now they sought to taunt me, to mock me. I wrapped my arms about me tightly, rubbing briskly, hoping it would calm the prickling of my hairs and warm my chills.

I wondered what these new sounds were that pierced my ears so bluntly, so forcefully. All with the speed of an archers bow shooting his arrow precisely through its target. There was a high pitched howl, a sharp yelp that called from the distance. I thought the darkness not only attempted to bring me to my knees, but to take me back to that place I knew so well as a child. "No! I know better, it's just my hazy mind, and nothing more," I tried to speak bravely, but I knew my words were empty. "I don't give a shit if I'm a grown woman, I'm running!" I moved my feet as fast as I could, reaching the door, I pulled it open and practically leaped in. I stood just past the door,

panting heavily, then noticed that the corridor was still dim. Usually Jill turns the lights on at five thirty to start her med pass, I guess she must have had another bad night with the patients and was letting them sleep in.

I caught my breath and headed down the corridor towards the break room. I was still a little shaky, but knew once I had a drink of water I'd feel better. I didn't see anyone, and was glad. I thought it was a good thing nobody saw me, they'd only think me an idiot, a grown woman afraid of the dark and running. I reached the door, grabbed the key, and opened it. Replacing the key, I started down the stairs and only made it half way when the light started to flicker. "Shit," I groaned. "Not again."

It completely went dark. I thought the darkness had followed me, maybe it wasn't done taunting me. My legs trembled uncontrollably, bringing my feet to a dead stop. I felt uneasy, and a tingling sensation crept along my skin. My hairs pricked and jabbed at me, as though they needed to know if I had any feeling left in my numb body. I felt my chest rise hard and fast with my shallow breath. "Hell, there's no way I'm going down there in the dark," I whispered.

I felt for the wall and placed my hand flush against it, and just as I started to turn around, the light came back on. "What the hell...?" I mumbled, then remembered Maggie had said the lights down here were old and hadn't been changed in eons. I shook my head and cursed under my breath as I continued down. I tossed my stuff in my locker and headed back up as quickly as I could, holding my breath

the entire time. “Thank goodness,” I sighed, and let out my breath as I reached the top, then opened the door and hurried to the nurses’ station.

“Good morning, Jill,” I said as I entered.

“Hey, Aiyana. How's it going?”

“It'd be a whole lot better if they'd change those lights!”

“What lights?”

“The ones in the stairwell. They keep flickering.”

“Really? I haven't noticed that.”

“This is like the second damn time.”

“Well, lets count, and after we make rounds I'll put it in the log so maintenance can fix them, alright?”

“Okay.”

We counted, then headed down the corridor. “Jill, why are the lights still dim on this side?” I asked.

“It was a long, horrible night. Mr. Blidsen was worse than I've ever seen him. He would not stop talking about the children, not even for a second! I had to medicate him three times before I got him to calm down and go to sleep. Then Mr. Bentiz started up and...”

“No, not again!” I exclaimed, cutting her off. “What is going on with him? Why has he been doing that so much lately?”

“Who knows. Maybe he's going through a cycle. You know they start up, don't stop, then slow down, stop, then start up again.”

“I've never heard of that before. I just hate that he has to be medicated so much.”

“Believe me, I tried everything I could before I medicated him,

but he didn't give..."

"Oh my god! Jill! Aiyana! I think Mr. Blidsen is having a heart attack!!!" screamed Jackie as she came barreling out of his room.

I felt my heart sink into the pit of my stomach as I began to run. My mind was going haywire, I couldn't believe what she'd said. Not Mr. Blidsen! I wondered if it was from all the medication Jill had given him. It had to be. He'd shown no signs of deterioration since I'd started here. Within seconds I reached the door. I thought my heart had stopped as shrilling, piercing screams rang through my ears. His curtain was pulled closed, and it obstructed my view, but I knew it was him screaming. I couldn't help but wonder why he was screaming so heart wrenchingly, it didn't sound like he was having a heart attack. My god, it was horrible, my entire body cringed with his every scream.

"Why is he screaming like that?!! What the hell is going on?!!" shouted Jill, panic unmistakable in her voice.

"Somebody, help him, please!!! Please help, help!!!" screamed Mr. Bentiz at the top of his lungs. "Get away from him!!! Leave him alone!!!"

"Is anyone going to help him?! Please somebody! Anybody! We need help in here!!" yelled Mr. Franco.

"Nobody cares!!! Nobody...nobody...nobody..." cried the other patients.

I reached Mr. Blidsen's bed and yanked the curtain back. My blood ran cold as every vein in my body ripped right through me. I thought I'd gone into convulsions as much as I shook, and my feet

turned stone cold as I stopped dead in my tracks. “Oh my god!! No...please no!!!!” My eyes, I knew had to be deceiving me with my own fear of the darkness. A face with rotting flesh and yellow, horrid eyes blazed before me. I saw flickers of glistening metal plunging, hacking, into Mr. Blidsen's chest, and blood, blood was spurting everywhere.

“Aiyana! Don’t panic, please!” Jill’s words were a blur in my head, and it felt as though I was suspended in time. I couldn’t move or talk.

“Stop him!!! Stop him!!! Stop him!!!” shouted Mr. Bentiz.

“They’re not going to do anything!! They don’t see, they don’t care, they don’t know!!!” shouted Mr. Franco.

“He’s gonna die! He’s gonna die! He’s gonna die!!” The patients began to shout, and it felt like a drum banging in my head.

“I need all of you to calm down!! I can’t help him by myself and I need everyone in this room to cooperate with me!” exclaimed Jill. “Aiyana, if you’re not going to help me, go call an ambulance,” she swiftly pushed past me. “Mr. Blidsen!! Mr. Blidsen, can you hear me? He’s non responsive and not breathing. I can’t get a pulse!! I’m going to start CPR!”

“He’s dead! He’s dead! He’s dead! He’s dead!” shouted Mr. Bentiz.

“No!! We have to get him away! It’s killing him, please help me!!” I screamed as my feet finally moved and I leaped across the bed. I wasn’t sure if I could stop it, but I knew I had to try. I flung my arms at that thing and with every ounce of strength I had in me, I

pushed it back. I felt its hot breath against my face, and a wet gurgling laugh teased my senses. “Get the hell away from him!!!” I screeched as I quickly grabbed on to Mr. Blidsen and drug him to the floor.

“What are you doing? Have you lost your mind?! Aiyana, stop! If we don’t begin CPR, he’ll die!” Jill screamed.

“Can’t you see it?!” I frantically asked as I laid on top of Mr. Blidsen.

“What’s happening?!” asked Liz as she came running into the room.

“Mr. Blidsen is having a heart attack and if we don’t start CPR, he’s going to die. Now help me get Aiyana out of here!” I felt hands squeeze tight around my arms. “Get off of him!” shouted Jill as she began pulling.

“Aiyana! What the hell is wrong with you? Please, get off of him!” I heard Liz cry, and slowly I rolled over.

I laid there, tears pouring down my cheeks. Everything seemed like a dream, as though I wasn’t there, but I was. I frantically looked around, but didn’t see anything. Whatever I thought I’d seen, was gone. My mind went crazy, was I losing it? My eyes quickly fell on Mr. Blidsen, his lifeless body sprawled on the floor.

Liz and Jill were on their knees performing CPR. I panicked. What if I did this to him? What if he was having a heart attack and I did nothing to help him? I felt sick, my stomach was turning and I knew I was going to heave. I raised my hand to cover my mouth and sat up, tucking my head between my knees.

“Jackie! Jackie!” shouted Jill. “Where are you? I need you to call an ambulance!”

“O...okay...okay....!!”

I heard an awful gurgling, then it sounded like Liz was choking. “There...there’s something in my mouth...” she gasped. “Jill, wha...what’s in my mouth?! I can feel it in my throat!!”

“Blood! It’s blood!!” Jill frantically screamed. “Oh my god! Why is there so much blood coming out of his mouth?”

“No! No!!” cried Liz.

“Now do you believe?! Now do you believe?! Now do you believe?!” cried Mr. Bentiz.

“I don...don’t understand! Wha...what...the hell is happening?” gasped Jill.

My neck, I thought snapped as I quickly jerked my head up and turned. I saw Jill, her face was white as a sheet, her eyes glazed and she was shakily scooting herself away from Mr. Blidsen. Then I saw Liz standing in the middle of the room, she was bent over, one hand held tight against her stomach, the other pulling down on her chin. I wasn’t sure if she was vomiting blood, but it was all over the floor and spewing out of her mouth as she gasped for air.

God, this couldn't be happening. It couldn't be real. I quickly glanced at Mr. Blidsen, he was covered in blood and it was still pouring out of his mouth. I reached over and touched him, he felt like a block of ice. I knew he was dead, and I knew there was no way this could have been a damn heart attack. Every fiber of my being screamed at me, 'It's your fault, it's your doing!' I hadn't felt this

much pain and despair since my parents' death. I just sat there with his hand in mine.

"The ambulance is on the way!" yelled Jackie as she ran back in. "Oh my god...Liz! What...!" her scream trailed off.

"God doesn't have anything to do with it," said Mr. Franco.

"Alright, everybody, that's enough! We need to pull ourselves together and calm down!" said Jill. "I know exactly what happened. Mr. Blidsen's old and frail. I'm sure I broke every one of his ribs with the compressions, and that's why there's so much blood." She slowly stood up.

I looked at Jill and shook my head, then pulled myself up as I answered, "You know damn well that's not what happened!"

"Yes it is, Aiyana! Do you honestly expect me to believe that some invisible person killed him? That's ludicrous."

"I don't know what I expect you to believe, Jill. But I know I saw something, and I know this wasn't a heart attack."

"Why didn't I see anything?"

"You didn't see anything cause you don't care. You've never believed us, all you ever wanted was to give us a shot to shut us up!" answered Mr. Bentiz.

"Liz, are you hurt?" we heard Sue ask, and our attention quickly turned to her as she walked into the room. "You're bleeding..."

"I...I'm fine...it's not my blood..." Liz shakily answered.

"I don't understand. Whose blood is it?"

"I'll go grab some towels," said Jackie as she darted out.

"Mr. Blidsen had a heart attack, he's dead. We tried to perform

CPR but it was not enough. It was too late. I'm afraid we broke his ribs in the process. The ambulance is on the way now, so we need to clean this up. Is Nicki here yet?"

"No! Not poor Mr. Blidsen, he was so sweet. I can't believe he's dead..." Sue cried.

"Sue! He's gone, and there's nothing we can do about it. Now please, I need you to stop crying."

"O...o...okay...I'm sorry. Can I at least see him so I can say goodbye?" she asked.

"No! I told you we broke his ribs, he doesn't look good and I don't think you should have to remember him that way. Now, is Nicki here or not?"

"Yes...she's in the break room."

"Alright. Go get her, and bring back the mop and a bucket so we can get this cleaned up."

"Okay," Sue answered, and ran out.

I stood there in disbelief, biting my tongue, just waiting for Jill to finish telling her lies. I knew she hadn't seen what I had, but she had to know Mr. Blidsen's ribs didn't break. Even if they had, no way would it cause that much bleeding. "Jill, this is so wrong! You know good and well that's not what happened. My god, look at him!" I cried.

"You cover up well, nurse. Why do you hide what scares you?" asked Mr. Bentiz.

"I don't know what either of you are talking about. And, Aiyana, if I were you, I'd watch what I was saying. You're the one who went

crazy and threw him off the bed. For all I know, you could have done this to him.”

“What?! No...no...I don’t care what you believe! I saw that thing, and I know what happened!”

“Here, Liz, I brought some wet towels,” said Jackie, handing them to her.

Liz grabbed them and painstakingly wiped off all the blood, her hands shaking terribly, along with her tiny body. The look of fear on her face took my breath away. “Liz...I’m so sorry...but you believe me, don’t you?”

“I...I...don’t know what I believe...” she cried.

“No one believes because no one cares, but they try to hide it,” said Mr. Franco.

Sue and Nicki rushed into the room with towels, a mop, and a bucket filled with soapy water. “I heard the sirens!” said Sue.

“The ambulance is here! Hurry! Give those to me!” exclaimed Jill.

They hurried towards us and Jill practically ripped the mop and bucket out of Sue’s hands. She began mopping the floor around where Mr. Blidsen lay. “Nicki, I need you to clean Mr. Blidsen as best as you can!”

“Oh my god! What happened to him? Why is he covered in blood?” she frantically asked when she saw him.

“I’m not going to get into it right now! Please, just do it!”

Nicki knelt down by him and began cleaning off the blood. She was trembling so much, I heard her teeth chatter. Her face looked

like it was distorted as she tried not to heave, her eyes watered so much I doubted if she could see clearly.

Sue glanced down at him, and I could swear she turned green as her hand quickly covered her mouth. “No...it can’t be,” she gasped, running to the corner. Then I heard her vomit.

“The paramedics are coming,” said Jackie.

Jill quickly finished, then put the mop in the bucket and pushed it to the corner, almost right into Sue. “Nicki, toss the towels under the bed and cover him quick,” she whispered, and walked to the middle of the room. “Back here!” she shouted, waving her arms.

Two heavy set men, one on either side of a gurney, quickly rushed into the room. “We received a call of a heart attack victim,” said one of the paramedics.

“Yes...down here. He’s on the floor next to his bed. When we came into the room he wasn’t breathing and there was no pulse. We initiated CPR, and I had one of the staff call you,” Jill answered.

I knew Jill had put herself in control and was going to stick to her story, and if I didn’t want the paramedics to think I’d completely lost my mind and take me to the loony bin, I’d keep my mouth shut. I stood at the foot of the bed and watched Nicki throw the bloodied towels underneath it, then cover Mr. Blidsen.

I wondered if Jill really did believe that it was just a heart attack and they’d broken his ribs, causing him to bleed out. If she did, why do this? Why hide it? Nicki shakily got up and walked to where I stood, she glanced at me and the look in her eyes made me feel as though she knew something.

The paramedics reached the bed and Nicki and I stood back, out of the way. “How long has he been dead?” asked the other paramedic as he pulled the curtain back. He didn’t even bother to lift the blanket and look at Mr. Blidsen.

“About twenty minutes,” answered Jill.

“Alright, let’s get him on the gurney.” They lowered it, picked him up and placed him on top, like a piece of meat, and not once did they uncover him to look. “Does he have any family? Or do we just take him to the county morgue?” he coldly asked.

“No family, I’m sorry to say.”

“Alright, do you have the paperwork?”

“No...I forgot! I’ve been in here with him and haven’t had a chance. Come with me to the nurses’ station and I’ll get everything you need,” Jill answered, then gave me a look as she started walking out.

The paramedics lifted the gurney, and as they passed Nicki and I, they nodded and smiled. I couldn’t help but think how awful it was to smile so happily in the face of death, without any concern for this man, who he was, how he had lived, what he did. To them, Mr. Blidsen was just another body being taken to the morgue. “Have a good day, everyone,” they said, pulling the gurney and following Jill.

“Miss Crenshaw...now do you believe us? Now do you see? Now will you listen?” asked Mr. Bentiz. His words were like a humming in the distance. My mind felt as though it was lost in a cloud of fog. I couldn’t make out what he’d said. I just put my head down and cried.

“Mr. Bentiz, I’m really sorry about Mr. Blidsen,” Nicki quickly said. “I know how close you were, and we’re all going to miss him, but I know he’d want everything to go on as normal. Sue, let’s start getting everyone ready for breakfast.”

“Aiyana, come on, there’s nothing else we can do. Let’s go to the nurses’ station and help Jill,” Liz said.

“You did everything you could, Miss Crenshaw. Please don’t forget that, no matter what anyone says,” said Mr. Bentiz.

I nodded my head at him, and slowly, shakily, walked towards Liz. We hugged each other tight, then started out. “We know the truth...we know the truth...” Mr. Franco’s words lingered behind us.

We walked to the nurses’ station without saying a word. When we entered, Jill had just hung up the phone. “That was Mr. Simmons. I told him what happened. Aiyana, I’m sorry, he said for you to go on home, so I need the keys,” she said as she held out her hand.

“What did you tell him, Jill?!” Liz sharply asked.

“The truth.”

“Do you even know what that is, Jill?!” I exclaimed as I tossed the keys on the desk. “What is wrong with you? Why are you doing this? I know you’re not blind. You saw all that blood!”

“No! It was the appropriate amount for ruptured lungs. His ribs were most likely broken when he hit the floor and you jumped on him, causing internal bleeding. When Liz and I performed CPR, the pressure we exerted pushed out the blood.”

“What are you saying?!” gasped Liz. “You know that’s not true! He didn’t have any broken ribs, and we didn’t do CPR long enough

to exert any pressure!”

“Yeah, Jill, and if you truly believe that, then why did you hide it? Why didn’t you tell the paramedics?” I asked.

“Beth is on her way in, Aiyana. You need to leave. That’s all I have to say.”

“Why?! You know me! You know I’d never do anything to hurt him!”

“You’re so wrong, Jill! All that blood, didn’t you see?! It was in my damn mouth!” shouted Liz.

“She’s scared. Aren’t you, Jill? What are you trying to hide?” I asked.

“I...I...don’t have to answer that,” she shakily replied, and I could tell she was scared. “But I think you should probably leave now.”

“Fine! I’ll go get my stuff and I’m out of here,” I answered, and stormed out.

I walked as fast as I could down the corridor. My mind was no longer in a cloud of fog, it was in a complete haze. Was what I saw real? Or was I the one who had hurt Mr. Blidsen, like Jill said? I felt horrible. My stomach was tied in so many damn knots I thought I was going to pass out. I reached the door, grabbed the key, unlocked it, put the key back and headed down. The light flickered with my fifth step. “NO! Not fucking now!” I screamed as the light went out. I couldn’t see anything, it was too dark. I knew I had to get my stuff, hell, my purse and keys were in my locker. But did I dare move? No, I had to. I had to get them and get out of here.

I felt for the wall, and with my next step a cold breeze brushed against me. I froze, like a block of ice suspended in mid air. I couldn't breathe. Voices. I heard those voices, those whispers that had enjoyed taunting me, they lingered all around. "Is someone there?" I frantically asked, but no one answered. I thought about Mr. Blidsen and that...thing. "Okay, okay don't panic...don't panic. Just move!" I muttered just above my breath. Carefully I moved my foot onto the step, it creaked, loud and sharp, then a snap and the light flickered. I caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure at the bottom of the stairs. My skin crawled and I wanted to scream, but I dared not. Another flicker, and I thought that shadow was a little girl pointing straight out.

"Behind...you..." a low whisper seemed to float above me.

"Wh...what? Who are you?" I asked. But as the light flickered again, she was gone. "Wait!" I shouted. "Please come back! Tell me who you are!" I wondered why I said that. Was there someone there? If there had been, did I really want to know who she was?

I was so consumed with grief, and now panic, that my mind couldn't even think straight. All I wanted was to be free from here. Free from the darkness, free from the voices, and free from their trickery. I would be brave, strong, without hesitation or regard for the darkness, and run up the stairs. I no longer cared about my things, I just wanted to get the hell out. I inhaled the biggest breath that I could, held it, quickly released it, and just as quickly I turned around.

I felt my foot touch a step, then the next, and the next, and

thought I'd beaten the darkness as I swiftly made my way up. I felt my next step, and with it a snap, followed by another flicker. My heart felt like it exploded into a hundred tiny pieces as the light shone on a distorted silhouette in front of me. I swallowed so hard I thought I was choking. A face, disfigured, mangled and bloodied, flashed before my eyes. I thought it touched me, grabbed me, I felt an awful clutching sensation against my chest. I closed my eyes and squeezed as tight as I could, my misconception of thinking I'd be safe from the darkness.

I heard raspy breathing, wheezing, a wet gurgling sound, and I knew it was that thing I'd seen attacking Mr. Blidsen. My god, had it come after me now? Was it here to take me away to the darkness, to that place of my childhood nightmares? Why me? Why did the darkness hate me so? I thought it had been after me since I was a child, since my parents died. Had it come to take me to them?

Maybe that's why it hated me so much, because I was still in the world of the living. Maybe it was because I wished I had died along with my parents all those years ago, and I had dared it to take me too. Back then I was just a foolish child who didn't understand death and only wanted her mother and father back, but I no longer wished for that.

"Please! Don't take me away!" I pleaded. My mind was suddenly empty and I felt weightless, as though I was floating, like the bubbles from my bath that I had watched rise to the ceiling. I felt the terror in my scream shred right through my vocal cords, and I knew I was falling.

I frantically reached out my hands and tried to break my fall, but it was useless. I just tumbled, over and over. The creaking of the steps was a loud, sharp cracking that jarred my senses. My body felt like a giant rubber ball being bounced up and down at the hand of someone with vicious intent that kept smacking it as hard as they could with every bounce. I felt pain surge through every inch of me with a slow dullness, a heaviness that traveled meticulously over my body. A loud, horrible thud rebounded in my ears as my tumbling came to an abrupt stop and I felt my head crash upon the floor.

I found myself relieved, almost happy. I was no longer falling, and I was still alive, but that quickly turned to dread as I felt a pulsating numbness and stinging crawling through my head. “Help me...help me...somebody. Help me please!!!” I screamed hysterically. I thought that whatever that thing was, it would come back to finish me off. I hurriedly tried to scoot myself back, thinking I’d be safe if I could hide in a dark corner, but I couldn’t move. My hands just kept sliding, sliding through something wet and gooey.

“Plea...please. Is someone...there?” I called out to the darkness, but there was no answer. “I know you’re there. I can feel you! You...you...don’t scare me! Just tell me what the hell you want!!” I shouted, trying to sound brave. Still, no answer. I felt my heart beating out of control, pumping faster and faster, like a hundred drums banging to the tune of a death march. I knew it was well over what any healthy heart could handle. I wondered how long it would be before an artery ruptured and released its blood. Would it stop my beating heart? Would I die like poor Mr. Blidsen, all alone? My

breathing was becoming more and more shallow and I felt light headed. I saw shadows twirling wildly, like a tornado sifting through my mind. My eyes felt like bricks and I knew I was losing consciousness. "Help...help...me..."

"Aiya! Aiya! Please! Open your eyes already!" I heard Kaya's voice. It sounded like she was pleading, but why? And why was it a dull ricochet in my head? It was as if she were yelling from far away, and I wondered if that's why I couldn't see her, but it was dark, there was darkness everywhere.

'Where are you Kay? I can hear you calling me, but I can't see you...' my words echoed in my head, was I dreaming?

"Aiya, it's Kay. I'm here with you, and so are Grandma and Grandpa," I heard her cry, and felt the softness of her hand squeeze mine.

"Sweetie, we love you so much, now open your pretty brown eyes so I can see them. Please." That was my grandma I heard cry, but I couldn't see her either. I wondered if she was in my dream too.

"Listen to your grandma, Aiya. You've always listened to her before, don't stop now. Please, please just do what she asks," I heard my grandpa plead.

All their voices were calling to me, drawing me towards them, but they were sad, sad voices, and I couldn't see anyone. I was frightened. I didn't understand. Were they all in my dream? I felt my eyes twitch...rapid eye movement? I was dreaming! 'Yes, I'm asleep. That's why it's dark and I can't see them. Open, come on eyes, just

open! Wake up, wake up!' I pleaded and felt them flutter, then slowly start to open, but I saw blurs, odd horizontal blurs.

"That's it, sweetie!" I heard Grandma shout. "You can do it, come on, open them."

Distorted images passed before my eyes and I quickly shut them tight. I blinked several times as my eyes began to adjust and the images came into focus. "Wh...what?"

"How are you, sweetheart?" asked Grandpa.

"I...I...god...my head!" I groaned, and wondered why it felt like a ton of bricks had fallen on top of it.

"What happened, Aiya? How in the world did you fall?" asked Grandma.

"Wha...what...are you talking about?" I asked, surprised by what she had asked. I was confused, my thoughts were cloudy. I couldn't imagine how I would have fallen.

"You fell down the stairs at work and hit your head. The doctor said you have a concussion and you might not remember what happened," said Kaya.

"What?! I fell at work? Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital, but you're awake now and that's all that matters," said Grandma.

"Hospital? I...I..don't understand. How long have I been here?" I muttered. Reaching for my head, I felt something soft around it. A dressing? I must have some type of wound, that's why my head hurt so badly.

"It's okay...that's just the bandage," Kaya quickly said,

reaching for my hand.

“What’s wrong with my head?” I worriedly asked, wondering if the throbbing meant that my head had been smashed. Maybe my face had been disfigured too and that’s why I couldn’t open my eyes. “Mirror...give me a mirror...” I gasped.

“It’s alright, your face is fine. You almost busted your head wide open, that’s all!” answered Kaya.

“How?! What happened? I don’t understand.”

“Jill found you laying at the bottom of the stairs, she said you were unconscious. She called for an ambulance, then called me. I called Grandma and Grandpa. My god, you scared the shit out of us!” cried Kaya.

“Kay, please don’t use that language.”

“Sorry, Grandma...but she did,” Kaya answered.

“Aiyana, you’re awake. Very good. Now, how are we feeling?”

“Dr. Stevens!” I said, surprised to see his shiny black hair and gray sideburns pop through the door. I had worked with him before, he was one of the best doctors I knew. “I don’t remember anything. Kay said I have a concussion.”

“Yes, along with twenty six sutures on that hard head of yours.”

“Sutures!!” I again reached for my head, fumbling to feel around it, but all I felt were the bandages.

“They brought you into the ER around eight thirty, you were non responsive. I must say you had me worried for a while,” he smiled warmly at me. “I’m going to keep you here overnight for observation. In the morning we’ll do another CAT scan, and if

everything is normal, I'll cut you loose."

"Non responsive?" I gasped. "How long have I been unconscious?" My mind was reeling, trying to rewind and recall the events of the day.

"Let's see...it's ten o'clock now...that's about thirteen and a half hours. Speaking of the time, I'm sorry everyone, but visiting hours were over long ago. I'm sure you must all be tired, you've been here all day."

"Oh my god!" I cried. "The last thing I remember is being in the parking lot at work..."

"That's normal with this type of head injury, but nothing to be concerned about. Your memory will return. Now, you need some sleep, and as for the rest of you, please go home."

"Alright. Sweetie, you do as Dr. Stevens says. We'll be back in the morning," said Grandma as she kissed my cheek.

"Martha, let's go," said Grandpa, reaching for her arm. "Aiya's just fine, let her get some rest. Bye, honey." He walked out, pulling Grandma with him.

"We'll be back first thing in the morning, Aiya," said Kay as she followed them out.

"For a while I thought I would have to physically remove them myself," chuckled Dr. Stevens. "How do you really feel?" he asked, checking my pupils with his pen light.

"Except for this massive headache, and a sore behind, I feel fine."

"Why don't I have the nurse give you something for the pain?"

“Yeah, I think I’ll need something. Thank you, Dr. Stevens.”

“You’re quite welcome. I’ll send her in with something as soon as I get to the desk. And I’ll see how you’re doing in the morning. Hopefully, I’ll be in here before your family returns. Goodnight, Aiyana,” he said, leaving the room.

I watched him leave and I thought of Dr. Franks. They were so different from each other, like night and day, and I felt the regret in my gut for ever quitting. I shut my eyes tight and wondered how I came to be in this situation. My decision had turned out to be the worst mistake I’d ever made.

“I have your pain medication,” said the nurse, walking into my room.

My eyes jarred open, and even with all the despair I felt, I wouldn’t shed a tear. That was something I hadn’t done since my parents died, all my tears were shed with them, I had none left. “Thank you...” I shakily replied.

She picked up the tubing to my I.V., inserted the syringe into the port, and pressed the plunger. “Alright, that should do the trick. I’d say about fifteen minutes, and you’ll be out like a light,” she said with a quick smile that almost seemed as if it would crack her face. She looked stern, made of stone, pale with cold blue eyes and auburn hair. I hadn’t seen her when I worked here for all those years, she must be new.

I watched her walk out and couldn’t help but wonder why the hell she would say something like that when I’d been unconscious all frickin’ day. “Shit!” I gasped. “This means I’ll be off work for a

while.”

My mind quickly thought of poor Mr. Blidsen. He’ll be so over medicated by the time I return, he won’t even know me. Hell, he’ll be lucky if he knows who he is. I felt the throbbing in my head ease up a bit and my eyelids start to get heavy as I drifted off to sleep.

A loud noise startled me, and I awoke to the sound of voices. I wondered how long I’d been asleep. Was it minutes, or hours? I wasn’t sure, but I could feel the grogginess in my head. I glanced around, but didn’t see anyone.

I thought maybe it was the nurse, she’d probably come in to check my I.V. and had left. I yawned, rubbing my sore eyes, then adjusted my pillow, tucked my head in, and snuggled. I wasn’t sure if I had fallen back to sleep, or had only closed my eyes for a few moments, when I heard low, muffled voices coming from the hallway. Their intensity began to increase, and I felt the throbbing in my head increase with them. “Is someone there?” I asked, trying to peek through the door.

No one answered, and all I could see was an empty hallway. A droning, almost whimsical sound echoed in my ears. It felt like a bee was buzzing around in my head. I wanted to shake my head, toss it about, but I thought of the sutures and dared not try. I slowly sat on the side of the bed, dangling my feet, hoping that would help clear my mind, when the voices became clear. I thought I heard my name called out from a distance. It reminded me of Kaya’s voice when I thought I slept and she was calling me.

I wondered if she had come back, maybe she was worried and wanted to make sure I was alright. She'd always been that way. I scooted to the edge of the bed, reaching my feet to the floor, I slowly stood up. I felt my head spin along with the room, and I quickly held on to the bed. I wasn't sure how many minutes it was before the feeling passed and I got my bearings. I moved my feet slowly, cautiously, one, then the other, and reached for the I.V. pole. I grabbed it, yanked the cord from the socket, and dragged it along with me as I made my way out of the room.

"Is anyone there?" I asked, pausing for a second in the hallway. I saw something move, a vague silhouette at the end of the hall. "Kay, is that you?" There was no answer.

I hurried forward, as I neared the dark figure it began to change, and I saw the cutest little girl with the blackest hair and eyes. Such sad eyes. I wondered why she was alone in the hall. "Are you okay, honey? Do you need help?" I asked.

"He's here. Remember...you have to remember..." she whispered as she pointed towards the other hall, but it was so low, I didn't understand.

"I didn't hear you, sweetie. You're going to have to speak louder." She didn't answer, she just kept pointing. "What's wrong? Are you lost?" I asked, glancing in that direction. "I don't see anything," I turned back, and she was shaking her head as she slowly walked backwards. "Wait! Don't go!" I began to run down the hall after her. "Please, come back!" I shouted.

"Aiyana...remember...before it's too late..."

“How do you know my name? Please, please tell me who you are! Tell me what you mean,” I pleaded, but she was gone. “No! Where are you? Come back!”

“She can’t help you,” I heard a scratchy voice whisper.

My heart skipped a beat as it swiftly pounded, and my head felt like it snapped in two as I turned towards the voice. I saw the nurse who had given me my medication, she was sitting so still, so stiff. Her pale face resembled ashes tossed upon the ground and scattered about, and her dull, auburn hair seemed to glow under the light. The smile that I thought had cracked her face, was misshaped.

“Did you see that little girl? Is she a patient here?” I asked.

“You can’t help her. Now, don’t be rude. The doctor’s waiting for you...”

“What are you talking about?” I shakily asked.

She turned her ugly face and looked down the hall, “Yes...yes...doctor. She’s here now...”

“Who...who...are you talking to?” My words trembled with my body as I glanced over my shoulder.

“He’s waiting for you,” she said again.

“Who’s waiting for me? Please, tell me. I don’t understand.”

She glared at me with her blue eyes, and I felt the coldness of them pierce through mine. “You know who. You saw him, didn’t you?” she raucously asked.

“I didn’t see anyone, you’re crazy!” I shouted.

“No...no...you know him...” her words lingered.

“Who are you talking about?” I asked, but I wasn’t sure if I

really wanted to know. I felt my saliva scratch the back of my throat as I swallowed over and over, waiting for her to answer.

“You know...you saw him...you saw him. Don’t worry, he knows,” she said with an ugly grin.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I gasped, and felt the fear begin to creep into my gut.

“Oh...but you do. You do know. You know exactly who I’m talking about, don’t you?” she hissed horribly at me.

I couldn’t believe it, why was she talking to me like that? I thought maybe she was just trying to be cruel and frighten me, or maybe she was sick. That had to be it, that was why she looked so horrid, and why she was talking like that. “Is there something wrong with you?” I asked.

“I’m fine...no need to worry about me...it’s you that you should be worried about...”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I no longer wondered if she were crazy. I knew she was.

“He knows who you are. You saw him...you shouldn’t have. Now it’s too late. He wants you...he needs you...he’s going to get you...” she heckled.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, and I’m done listening to your craziness! I’ve had it! And let me tell you, I am reporting you!” I said, trying to sound as brave as I could.

“He’s going to get you!” she shrieked.

“You are crazy, aren’t you? Where’s Dr. Stevens? Is he in his office?”

She didn't answer me, she just stared blankly with that grin on her distorted face, and I wondered when it would crack. "Fine, you don't have to say a word. I don't give a damn anymore. Actually, it's better if you don't! I'll check for myself, and believe me, when I'm done, you'll be looking for another job!" I said, storming off down the corridor.

"He's going to get you. He's going to get you..." her voice lingered around me.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" I yelled. "I feel sorry for the patients if this is how you treat them. For that matter, I feel sorry for anyone who has to have any contact with you!"

I saw a light coming from Dr. Stevens' office, his door was slightly open. I hurried, and as I reached it, I tapped lightly. "It's Aiyana, can I come in?" I pushed against the door, peeking in as it opened. He was sitting at his desk, but his chair was facing the opposite direction with the back towards me. "Dr. Stevens! I'm so glad you're still here." I said, walking towards him.

"Yes...yes..." he scratchily answered.

"That nurse that's on duty is the worst nurse that I've ever seen! I can't believe the hospital would employ someone like that. She doesn't care about the patients' well being at all." He didn't answer. His chair began to rock back and forth and he started to laugh. But it wasn't normal, it sounded like he was gasping for air. "Dr. Stevens, are you alright?" I asked.

"Yes...yes...yes..." he repeated with a wheeze.

"Dr. Stevens, what's wrong? You don't sound well at all."

He began to cough horribly. It sounded so deep, so coarse, so wet. “Are you alright?” I worriedly asked, and wondered if maybe he was coming down with the flu, but it was odd, he had looked fine earlier.

“Yes...yes...yes...” he repeated.

“What’s going on? I don’t understand. First that nurse, and now you!” I yelled.

His chair began to spin slowly around, and I heard the squeaking wheels as they scratched on the floor. It sounded like nails digging into a chalk board, clawing their way down. Every inch of my body shivered.

“You...you...you...” he hissed horribly.

A putrid scent quickly found its way into my nostrils. A scent I knew only too well. I’d smelt it more times than any one person should have to. The sweet, the musky, the rancid scent of death. I gagged and felt the contents of my stomach fast making their way up my throat. I covered my mouth tight, swallowing heavily, hoping I wouldn’t heave. Just as his chair faced forward, the light began to flicker, bringing with it a cold chill that coursed through my veins.

My heart started to beat faster and faster. I felt it slam against my chest, over and over, as though it tried to claw its way out. Then I saw a shadowy face, a warped face that seemed to weave in and out with the flickering light, taunting me, teasing me. Distorted, ghastly images of blood, rotting flesh of ashen and black, then I saw eyes, yellow, jaundiced, sunken eyes.

I screamed hysterically, as though I’d lost all my senses, and ran

out as fast as I could. I barely reached the door when a sharp pain stabbed through me and I felt my skin rip open. I knew as I glanced at my arm that I hadn't grabbed the I.V. pole. I felt my heart expand with the gripping, tightening terror that consumed me. "Who are you? Why are you doing this to me?!" I shouted at the top of my lungs as my trembling hand clumsily grabbed for the burning sensation that now accompanied the pain. I ran through the door and down the hall as fast as I could without glancing back, holding tightly on to my arm.

The darkness came swiftly, as though it followed me from that office, and had now passed over me with its trickery. It moved slowly and viciously in and out, taunting me with only seconds of light. I felt something warm, wet, and sticky ooze through my fingers. "Oh my god...someone help me, please! Please, help me!!" I screamed, and it seemed to echo with the flash of the light. I glanced down at my arm, flickers of bright red shone in my eyes.

"Blood..." I gasped. There was blood everywhere. It was spewing out of my arm. I squeezed it as tight as I could, but the blood just kept oozing through my fingers. "I need help...I need help..." I barely managed to whimper.

I thought I'd just bleed to death, and whatever this thing, this monster was, it would take me to the darkness without a fight, without a word. I'd go with it, not willingly, but dejectedly and defeated. I'd no longer be in the world of the living. I would join the world of the dead. My legs ached and felt like rubber. I wondered how long I'd been running. I didn't know anymore. It seemed as if

time had left me to my fate. No one heard my screams, my pleas for help. I thought maybe the darkness had already taken me and I was no longer in the hospital, maybe this was to be my eternal suffering.

“Who’s there?” I gasped when I caught a glimpse of something white. “Please, if someone’s there, I need help! There’s something after me! You have to call the police!” I didn’t get a reply. “Please! Please. Help me!” Another flash of light came to me, and I saw her. That nurse, she just sat there grinning at me with that same look on her face. I stopped right in front of her, barely able to speak. I was so winded, so scared, lost and alone. “I...I...need help. I’m bleed...bleeding. Please, help. Please...stop the bleeding,” I panted.

She slowly nodded her head, pointing her crooked finger as she whispered, “He’ll help you...”

“Oh my god...oh my god! He’s behind me!!” I shouted. Slowly glancing back, I saw him. His deformed silhouette scurried towards me, moving with each flicker of the light, almost slithering. “Nooooo!!”

“Aiyana, wake up! You’re just having a bad dream, but there’s nothing to worry about. I’ve given you something to help you relax.” I heard the nurse’s voice and my eyes jarred open. I saw her standing at the side of my bed with a syringe in her hand.

“It was just a dream? God, it felt so real!” I sighed, sitting up. I reached for my throat, massaging it. It felt tender, raw, and my mouth was parched. I must have screamed so much in my dream that I hurt my vocal cords. I reached out for the water pitcher on the bed

table, it was empty. “Can I please have some fresh water with ice? I’m dying of thirst.”

“Yes...yes...dying...dying. It was just a dream...just a dream. Now try to get some sleep. Everything will be just fine...just fine,” she said with a grin.

“No, no! Why are you doing this to me?” I frantically asked.

“Just relax. Relax...it won’t hurt. You won’t feel a thing,” she whispered stridently.

“No!!” I screamed, as she raised the syringe in her hand high above her head.

“Don’t you understand? I have to. You’ve seen him. You’ve touched him. He can’t allow that...he can’t let you in. Don’t fight it...just relax...relax. It’ll be over soon!!” she screeched, plunging it down towards my chest.

“Get the hell away from me you crazy bitch! Get away! Get away!” I shouted, grabbing her arms and squeezing them as hard as I could. I tried to push her back, but she was too strong. I was hysterical. It seemed as though my struggling and all my efforts to fight her off were useless. “Somebody, please help me!! Help me!!” I screamed as loud as I could. I felt her strength and thought my arms would break as she brought the syringe closer and closer. She was on top of me and that damn syringe was inches away from my face. “Why are you doing this to me? Leave me alone!! Somebody! Help me!!” I screamed as the syringe came down.

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“Aiyana! Calm down, please. No one’s going to hurt you! It’s just a dream!” I heard Dr. Stevens' voice, but I couldn’t move, it felt as though I was tied down. I tried to kick and swing.

“Get away from me!!” I screamed frantically. As my eyes flung open I saw him sitting on the edge of my bed, he was holding me down.

“It’s alright! It’s alright, Aiyana, please take it easy. I’m going to have the nurse give you something to help you relax. It’s just a mild sedative.”

“NO!! Please!!” I shouted, looking at the nurse. She had a syringe in her hand, but it wasn’t the auburn haired, stone cold faced nurse. This one was around my age, she had blond hair and blue eyes. I was confused, so unsure of where I was. Was I still in the world of the living? Was I dreaming? Or had the darkness taken me? “Please...don't. Dr. Stevens, I’m fine now. I don’t need that.”

“Alright...” he whispered, then nodded at the nurse. She smiled at me and walked out. “It sounds as if you had a bad dream,” he answered as he released his grip on me. “Now that you’ve calmed down, I’ll go call transport and have them take you for that CAT scan before your family arrives,” he said as he stood.

“I don't...I don’t understand,” I mumbled. “I thought we were

going to do that in the morning?”

“Yes, and it’s six thirty now. By the time they’re done with you and bring you back, it’ll be visiting hours, and I’m sure your family will be at the door,” he said with a chuckle.

“Morning, already?” I sighed, reaching for my head. I actually felt it throb. “Ahh...” I moaned.

“Your head will more than likely hurt for a few weeks. It wasn't just a bump on the head and you lost consciousness, Aiyana. You slit your scalp wide open. You were non responsive for almost fourteen hours. You’re very lucky you awoke.”

“Yeah...no...I mean...shit, I’m a little disoriented.”

“It’s alright. Take your time, collect your thoughts. This is all normal.”

“But...I could’ve sworn I just went to sleep minutes ago, Dr. Stevens. I heard something and it woke me.”

“It was just a bad dream. It’s just like the memory loss. Again, it is quite common after head trauma.”

“No, it felt so real! I even pulled out my I.V.! Look,” I said, glancing at my arm, then the I.V. pole. “Oh god, was it a dream?” I asked as I saw everything exactly where it had been, nothing out of place, and no blood anywhere. I was stunned. It was just a horrible dream.

“You see? You’re fine, but if you’d like to talk about it, I have a good ear.”

I shook my head and drew in a deep breath as I tried to rack my brain, tried to see my dream, tried to remember...remember...oh

god! “NO! Mr. Blidsen!! I remember!!” I shouted through my quivering lips. “He’s dead! That thing killed him!!”

“Aiyana, please, calm down. Who's dead? Tell me what happened.”

“Mr. Blidsen! He was one of my patients at Coyote Hills. I saw that thing kill him!”

“What thing?”

“I don’t know, it was a horrid face. I only saw glimpses of it as I pulled back the curtains. It had something shiny and I saw it stab Mr. Blidsen in the chest, over and over. Blood was everywhere!” I began to shake uncontrollably as those images came flooding back to me.

“A face, Aiyana? No body, no hands, only something shiny. It sounds like...”

“No!” I exclaimed, cutting him off. “I know what it sounds like. It sounds like I’m completely delusional! But I’m telling you that’s what I saw! And I saw it again when I went down into the break room to get my stuff. I think it pushed me down the stairs, and I think its come here after me. I saw it again in my dream!” I cried, I thought I hadn’t done that since my parents' death, but as my tears rolled down my checks, I remembered. I knew I cried for Mr. Blidsen. I didn’t think I had any tears left to shed. I was wrong.

“It’s alright, Aiyana. Tears help to cleanse the soul. Cry all you want,” he said softly as he sat on the bed.

I looked into his green eyes and felt the warmth, the sincerity, in his voice. He smiled gently as he reached for a box of tissue from the table. “Th...thank you...” I just about yelped as I pulled a tissue and

wiped my eyes.

“I don’t know what you thought you saw, I wasn’t there, and it’s not my place to question your sanity. I do think I know you well enough to say that your heart is bigger than you are. You’re the type of person that will do anything you can to help someone, regardless of the consequences. I doubt you could lie even if you tried. Anything that you tell me, no matter what it is, I’ll believe. But I also know that when we find ourselves in the face of such tragedy, such heartbreak, our minds have the ability to interpret what our eyes perceive, differently.”

I heard each of his words sharply, clearly, and open heartedly. I knew he was right. I had let myself get very attached to my patients, and lately I’d been overly stressed. I could’ve easily let myself into their world. Dr. Franks did say it’s easy for them to pull you in and have you believe everything they say. I knew how the darkness played tricks on the mind. It had tortured mine when I was a child and made me believe in monsters under my bed and in the closet. I’d even seen them, they were what my mind thought they’d be. This had to be the same thing all over again. I dried my tears and smiled at him.

“Thank you again, Dr. Stevens. I think I just needed someone strong to instill that in my brain. I know how my imagination can get out of control, I remember what it did when I was a kid. Mr. Blidsen died of a heart attack. I think I can believe that now, but let me ask, is it possible to expel blood from the patient’s mouth while performing CPR?”

“Yes, that could happen. I’ve never seen it, but if the force of compressions is way above that required, and depending on body size and age, it’s possible. Why do you ask?”

“It’s not important, but thanks. I feel much better.”

“I’m glad I could help. Now, I’ll go call radiology so we can get that CAT scan done,” he said, walking out of the room.

I stared at the white ceiling, puckering my lips, just blowing in and out, hoping it would help to relax me. When I was a child I would do that, and it helped. I doubted it would now, but I needed something to do. My mind still had hazy thoughts of Mr. Blidsen.

“Miss Crenshaw,” said the nurse walking in, startling me out of my thoughts. “I’m going to disconnect your I.V. so he can take you to radiology.”

“Okay,” I answered, looking to see who was taking me, but I didn’t see anyone.

“Are you ready? I’m here to take you down,” said a voice from behind her.

“Yeah, I am,” I answered, trying to glance over the nurse’s shoulders to see who I was talking to.

“Alright, can you stand and transfer, or do you need me to help you scoot onto the gurney?” asked the attendant who was making his way around the nurse.

No wonder I didn’t see him, as small as he was, I thought, watching him struggle trying to maneuver the gurney. “No. I can stand.”

“Great!” he gulped.

“There, I’m all done,” said the nurse as she capped the port. “I’ll be back later to reconnect you,” she walked out.

“Alright, stand up and sit on the edge of the gurney and I’ll lift your legs for ya.”

I did as he asked, and before I knew it he was rolling me down the corridor, like a bat out of hell. I grabbed on to the side rails looking around, just waiting to crash into a wall. I was nervous enough as it was, and he sure wasn’t helping matters any.

I had seen plenty of CAT scans done before, but I always wondered how it felt being stuck in something that resembled a narrow, metal tomb. Guess I was about to find out. As the elevator doors opened to the second floor, I felt a coldness swiftly sweep over me, like a blanket of snow. It reminded me of Coyote Hills, and I cringed.

“Hello, Miss Crenshaw. It’s very nice of you to join me in my laboratory,” said a familiar voice.

“Jerry! It’s so good to see you!” I excitedly said. I had known Jerry for years, we worked together here at the hospital. He had a crush on me since the first day we met, and had asked me out countless times. Although I found him good looking and was tempted, I thought it would be awkward to date someone you work with, so I’d always decline, but in the nicest way. “I’m so glad you’re the radiology tech on duty today, now I don’t feel as nervous!”

“No need to worry your pretty little head. It doesn’t hurt...much,” he chuckled, rubbing his hands together. “It just looks

scary. You've seen me do them before so you know it's all just loud noises."

"Yeah, but I've never been one of the guinea pigs," I answered, trying to smile.

"Just relax, and you'll do fine," he said. "Now, I need you right here," he patted his hand on what looked like a metal slab.

Damn these hospital gowns, they left nothing to the imagination. Holding it closed, I got off the gurney and laid on that slab. I jerked as my bare back touched against the coldness of it. My teeth were already chattering, along with my knees, from the cold in this room, and now every inch of me shivered. He left the room, and within seconds I heard a loud bang. I began to move into a dark, narrow tunnel. I thought my head was going to explode with the horrible sounds that echoed in my ears. I closed my eyes as tight as I could. God, it felt like I was being crushed! Just as I thought I could no longer endure the agony and was about ready to scream, "Get me the hell out of this thing!" I felt myself being pulled out, as though I was being sucked through a straw.

"Alright, that's it," said Jerry, standing next to me and reaching out his hand.

I grabbed it, pulling myself up. "'Bout damn time," I grumbled.

"It wasn't that bad," he replied, helping me back onto the gurney. "Hey, do you have a fork on you?"

"What?"

"Well, you're done! Aren't you?" he chortled.

"I see you haven't lost your sense of humor since I've been

gone, but then again, you've never been able to find it either," I retorted.

"Ouch! That hurt right here," he gasped, grabbing his chest.

"Oh, I doubt that, but if I had a fork it would!"

"You're vicious," he snickered. "Hey, attendant! Come and get this woman before she kills me."

"I'm coming!" the attendant answered.

I saw him hurriedly come out of the control room towards me. Wow, I hadn't noticed how young he was, not one single hair on his face. He couldn't be any older than eighteen, maybe that's why he was so small, he hadn't hit his growth spurt yet.

"Let's roll!" he said, reaching for the gurney and pushing.

"Guess I have to roll now! I thank you for your gentle touch, Jerry. You really know how to make a girl happy," I joked.

"It sure looks that way. Hey, Aiyana, all joking aside, it was very nice seeing you again," he said with a wink of his blue eyes.

"Well, don't just stand there with your tongue hanging out, get my pictures done!" I shouted when we reached the elevator. Jerry smiled and opened his mouth, but if he'd said anything, I didn't hear. The doors closed, and we were going back up.

When we got back to my room, Kaya and my grandparents were there waiting. "You look so much better, sweetie," said Grandma as the attendant rolled me next to my bed.

"That's good, cause I thought I looked as bad as I felt," I answered as I stood up and got back into bed.

"I don't care what you say. You're always going to be beautiful

to me,” she said walking towards me, then kissed my cheek.

“I second that,” said Grandpa as he joined her side and kissed me.

“I would say I’m third, but I don’t lie. You look horrible, I’d say like shit if Grandma wasn’t here, but she is,” said Kaya with a smile.

“What did I say about using foul language in front of me?” sighed Grandma.

“I’m only joking,” she replied.

“Well thanks, dear sister, for your observation,” I retorted.

“Anytime. Now when are they going to let you out of here?”

“I don’t know. I just came back from the CAT scan. I guess when Dr. Stevens gets the results he’ll look them over and let me know.”

“Do you remember how you fell, dear?” asked Grandpa.

“No!” I quickly answered. I couldn’t tell them. They’d only worry, and think I was as crazy as a cat chasing its own tail.

“Well, give it time, dear. I’m sure you’ll remember,” said Grandma.

“Yeah...let’s not talk about it anymore. Kay, where’s Daniel?” I asked, hoping to change the subject or my grandma would just go on and on.

“He had to work today, they’re working on that shopping center. Don’t you remember? We talked about it. They want to start building before the end of the year.”

“Guess it slipped my mind. They must really be busy. I don’t think Daniel’s ever worked on a Saturday, has he?”

“Maybe once or twice. I know it’s been awhile.”

“I have your breakfast, it might be a little cold. Breakfast was at seven thirty,” said the nurse as she walked in. She set it on the over bed table, then took off the lid.

The smell was nauseating. “I’m not really hungry, thank you,” I answered, looking at the wet, powdery scrambled eggs that were running off the plate.

“You need to eat something, sweetie,” said Grandma.

“She’s right, you need some food in your stomach. You’ve had quite a bit of medication, and I’m pretty sure you didn’t have much to eat yesterday,” said the nurse.

“Alright...I’ll try,” I replied, picking up my fork and poking at the wetness. I played with it and wondered how anybody could eat this stuff, it looked like mustard that had been left out too long.

“Good. Now, I need to reconnect your I.V. so I can give you another dose of antibiotics,” she said as she flushed the port to my I.V.. She then hung a bag of penicillin and connected the tubing from the bag to my port. “All done. I’ll be back in awhile to pick up your tray,” she smiled and walked out.

“Why are they giving you antibiotics? Are you sick?” Grandma asked, worriedly.

“No, it’s just prophylactic. I mean, it’s just to make sure that where I cut my head open and the sutures, don’t get infected,” I answered.

“Hello, how is everyone doing?” asked Dr. Stevens, walking into the room.

“Everyone is fine, and we thank you for taking such good care of our Aiya,” answered my grandpa.

“Well, what’s the verdict? Can I leave? Or did the CAT scan reveal that I’m nuts?” I jokingly asked.

“Nope. No nuts, only a nice strong brain,” he winked at me. “So I guess that means you’re free to go.”

“Oh no! You mean all this time I thought she was nuts, and she’s not?” joked Kay.

“Now, just because I’m cutting you loose doesn’t mean I don’t expect you to get plenty of rest and not over do it,” said Dr. Stevens.

“Believe me, she’s not going to overdo anything! She’s going to our house and straight to bed,” answered Grandma.

“I knew I wouldn’t have to worry,” he chuckled.

“No, I’m the one who has to worry,” I joked, smiling at grandma.

“I’m going to call in a few prescriptions that you’ll need to pick up. I’ll schedule a follow up in three weeks to remove the sutures. If you have any problems before then, and I mean any, Aiyana, please give me a call.”

“Of course I will,” I answered, then noticed Grandma give me that look, the one that implied, 'I know something's going on'.

“Good, now after this last dose of antibiotics finish we’ll discontinue the I.V. and send you on your way,” he said with a smile and walked out.

“Thank you. Oh, Dr. Stevens, just a minute!”

“Yes. Did I forget something?” he asked as he stood by the door.

“Yeah, you forgot to tell me if it’s okay for me to go back to work,” I answered.

“Well, I can guarantee you it will not be tomorrow. We’ll discuss when on your follow up appointment,” he replied as he walked away.

“Crap!” I sighed.

“Good. I think you need a vacation,” said Kaya.

“I don’t think I can remember the last time you took one,” Grandma replied.

“That’s because she hasn’t, Martha,” chimed in Grandpa with a smile.

“I know...I know. But there’s some things that I have to take care of at work...oh shit! Speaking of work, my purse and car are still there and I need to go get them!”

“Aiya! Don’t start talking like your sister,” said Grandma.

“Sorry,” I sighed.

“Yeah, potty mouth, and don’t worry, Daniel and I will go either tonight, when he gets off work, or tomorrow morning,” said Kaya.

“That’s great...but I want to go.”

“You’re not going! The only place you’re going, is to bed,” said Grandma, and more than firmly.

“Grandma, I’m fine, really. And besides, I’m not going to drive. I need to go so I can take care of a few things,” I said, just as firmly.

“Alright, then we’ll all go,” she said.

“No, Grandma! Just understand, I need to do this.”

“Okay, okay, sweetie. Please, I don’t want you to get upset.”

“I can’t eat this, it’s horrible, and this coffee is cold,” I said quickly, hoping my grandma would offer to go to the cafeteria and get me something. I just needed her and Grandpa out for a few minutes, and I knew this was the best way to do it.

“Honey, I’ll go bring you something. How does a nice, hot egg sandwich with real eggs, a cup of coffee and orange juice sound?” asked Grandpa.

“That sounds so good, thank you. Grandma, I think you should go with him and get a cup of coffee for you and Kay.”

“Yeah, a cup of coffee does sound really good,” said Kaya.

“Alright, dear, we’ll be right back,” she said, reaching for Grandpa’s hand, then they walked out.

As soon as they were out of my line of vision I just about shouted, and all in one breath, “My god, Kay! Mr. Blidsen is dead! I saw him die! I thought this horrid thing was ripping him to pieces and I threw him off the bed, but I was only trying to save him! They think it’s my fault, so they...”

“Stop!” she yelled, cutting me off. “What the hell are you saying? He died and they think it’s cause of you? I think you need to slow down and tell me exactly what happened!”

“I’m sorry...I think my brain is still trying to process everything that’s happened. I didn’t mean to sound like a raving lunatic.”

“No, Aiya...I’m so sorry. I know how close you were to him, and I know you’re feeling the pain of losing him. But right now my concern is you. My god, you could have died!” she was teary eyed, and I felt the fear in her voice.

“Kay...but I didn’t...I’m right here,” I answered reassuringly. “It’s almost like Mom and Dad all over...I’m still here, they’re not. Mr. Blidsen isn’t here, I am. You know, they made me go home because of what I did. God, Kay...what if I killed him?!”

“You didn’t kill him!” she said firmly. “Don’t you ever think that...ever! Mom and Dad were taken from us and god that was so unfair, so painful. To leave two little girls who needed their parents more than anything, all alone. But it’s not our fault we’re still here and they aren’t, not just you, Aiya. I’m here too. Don’t think you’re the only one who ever questioned that! The guilt runs deep, but we can’t control that and you know it! You became a nurse because of it. You wanted to help save lives.”

“I threw him off the bed, Kay...and laid on top of him. I could have easily broken every one of his ribs! I didn’t help save him! Jill and Liz tried to perform CPR and he started to bleed. They couldn’t continue...I think he just bled to death!” I cried.

“You must have believed you saw something if you felt you had to protect him. You would never intentionally hurt anyone. I know that as well as you do. What the hell was it?”

“De...death...” I stuttered. “I’ve never seen anything as horrid, Kay. Not even the monsters that used to chase me when we were in the orphanage could compare. It was a face, misshaped with rotten flesh and yellow eyes. I saw it again in the stairwell before I fell, then last night in Dr. Stevens’ office. It seemed so real! I even heard it breathing.”

“How? How could it have been in all those places?” she

fretfully asked.

“I’m not sure...Dr. Stevens thinks it was just what my mind interpreted. Like it was trying to hide the pain of Mr. Blidsen's death. I couldn’t handle it and I saw what my mind made up, or what I wanted to see.”

“That does make sense, Aiya. It’s like what we did when Mom and Dad died. Remember? We said they were abducted by aliens for their hearts, because aliens didn’t have any. They didn’t know how to love, so they had to collect humans with the biggest hearts filled with love, so they would know the joy of what it felt like. We saw them clear as day, and were able to describe every inch of them. What doesn’t make sense to me is if you actually saw this thing in Dr. Stevens' office. I mean, how would it be interpreted as something you wanted to see, if it was something that was there?”

“God...I’d forgotten all about that! You’re right, we saw what we wanted to see. What our minds told us to see to ease the pain. But we were foolish, we thought they’d bring our parents back after they learned how to clone hearts. Kay, I didn’t really see that thing in his office, it was in my dream. I woke up screaming and Dr. Stevens was practically on top of me, holding me down.”

“It’s a wonder you haven’t had bad dreams before with everything that's been happening at that damn place you work at. Shit! It’s all my fault. I pushed you into taking that fucking job. If I hadn’t you...you wouldn’t be here right now!”

“Don’t say that! That’s not true. You know me. I would’ve taken the job anyway. I wished for a life, guess you should be careful

what you wish for, huh?”

“No! You shouldn’t. You deserve every bit of happiness. I’m so sorry...”

“Stop it. None of this is your fault! I don’t want to talk about it anymore. And please, don’t say anything to Grandma or Grandpa.”

“O...of course...I won’t say a thing,” she shakily answered, and I could hear the remorse in her voice.

“Kay, check and see if my clothes are in there please,” I said, pointing to a small closet against the wall. The only thing I wanted to think about now, was getting out of here.

She nodded her head and walked over to the closet, then opened it. “Yeah, it’s your stuff,” she said, fumbling through it. “Are you going to get dressed already?”

“Yeah, this I.V. is almost finished and the nurse should be coming back soon.”

“Okay,” she answered, reaching for my clothes and bringing them to me.

“Pull the curtain,” I said, as I started to put my pants on.

“Knock, knock,” said the nurse. “I’m coming in. Is everything alright? You have the curtain closed.”

“I’m just getting dressed, you can open it,” I answered.

She pulled it back just a little as she came in. “Looks like you’re all done. I’m going to take out your I.V. now.”

“Great, I was just wondering how I was going to take off this gown over that thing.”

“No need to wonder any further. Alright, that’s it. Just bend your

elbow for a few minutes keeping pressure on the gauze, and you'll be set. I also brought a wheelchair for you, so when you're ready just let me know."

"Thanks," I replied as the nurse left, and I finished dressing. "Kay, pull the curtain back, I'm done."

"Looks like your chariot has arrived," she joked as she pulled back the curtain.

"Yeah, I hear it's the latest."

"It may be the latest, but it sure doesn't look like the greatest. Well, if you have everything, hop in and I'll take you for a ride."

I got into the wheelchair and Kay pushed me out of the room. We reached the nurses' station and I signed the discharge paperwork. As we headed for the elevator we heard the nurse shout, "Wait, I need to take her down!"

"That's okay, you don't have to. I can handle it," answered Kaya, wheeling me as fast as she could towards the elevator.

The doors opened and I saw our grandparents getting ready to step out. I heard Kaya take a deep breath, and I knew only too well what she was about to do. She quickly pushed me in and just about ran them over. I don't think I'd ever seen Grandma's eyes pop open like that, she looked like a praying mantis, and I knew at any second we were going to have a scene. The nurse would scream bloody murder, it'd rile my grandma, then she'd bombard us with questions. The entire flippin' scenario flashed before my eyes.

"It's policy, wait! You aren't allowed to do that!" the nurse shouted, as I excepted, walking fast towards us. "I need you to stop!"

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. Did you say something?” said Kaya as the doors closed.

“Is it okay for you to leave?” asked Grandma.

“Of course it is,” answered Kaya with a huge grin.

“Don’t worry, Grandma, everything’s fine. She just wanted to make sure that we didn’t take their wheelchair,” I said, hoping to stop the questions.

“But why would she think we’d steal their wheelchair?” asked Grandma, looking confused.

Grandpa shook his head, handing me a bag and a cup. From the look on his face, I knew he wanted to avoid the one hundred question drill as well. “Here’s your coffee and sandwich. Martha, give Kay hers before it gets cold,” he quickly said.

“With all this commotion I almost forgot I had them in my hands,” she gasped, handing Kaya hers.

“Thanks, Grandpa, I needed this,” I said, smiling at him, then took a drink.

“Yeah, I didn’t have my cup of coffee, or a bite to eat this morning cause the phone kept ringing every five minutes...thanks Grandma,” whined Kaya.

“Well, you were taking forever to come over, and you knew I wanted to get to the hospital first thing in the morning. I don’t drive much anymore, and you know I don’t like Grandpa driving all around town. You’d think when I ask you girls to do something for me it wouldn’t take all day, and you’d actually be on time,” she replied.

“I’m sorry, Grandma. I know you’ve been worried about Aiya and I shouldn’t have joked,” answered Kaya, hugging her.

I knew from the tone of Kaya’s voice she felt bad. Sometimes I think we joke so much that we forget just how sensitive Grandma is. She had always been that way ever since I could remember. She tried much too hard, as though she had to make up for our parents' death, and I wondered if she blamed herself. From the first day we walked into their home she coddled us, and even now that we’ve grown, she hasn’t stopped.

“Martha, it doesn’t matter! You do this every single time to the girls, let it be. It’s over, we’re on our way home with Aiya, and that should be all that matters!” said Grandpa, and rather loudly.

It takes a lot to upset my grandpa, he’s not at all like Grandma. He was the quiet one who never says much of anything, but when he does, he speaks his mind without holding anything back. My grandma on the other hand, can talk until there’s no tomorrow, and not even take a breath in between.

“Well, I know that’s all that matters. I haven’t lost all my senses yet, unlike somebody I know!” she retorted.

I was never more happy to see that big, ugly, green house of my grandparents as I was when we pulled into the driveway. It had always made me think of pea soup. I hated pea soup. Hell, I hated anything that green, and I never understood why, until now. Everything that Kaya had said about the aliens flashed through my mind, and I suddenly knew that was why I hated green. But now, I

saw a warm, loving and inviting sight calling to me.

We got off the car, and of course my grandma held on to me as if I couldn't walk, but I had expected that. I knew how much they loved us and worried about us, and I guess that's what grandparents are supposed to do. But sometimes I felt as if she went beyond that. Beyond trying to make up for our parents' death, beyond feeling guilty, as though she were hiding something. As soon as we walked into the house, I was dragged to the sofa. My grandma waited for Kaya to leave, then sent my grandpa to pick up my prescriptions. She doesn't like him driving? Yeah right.

I knew she wanted me alone so she could drill me to death. She enjoyed doing that, but this time it wasn't her usual barrage of questions. Instead it was, "What do you remember? Do you know how you fell? Why did Dr. Stevens say call no matter what? And what about that look he gave you?" God, it was all I could do to make her believe I still didn't remember anything. When Grandpa walked through the door, I just about screamed, "Thank god you're back!"

I spent the entire weekend on that damn sofa. My grandma didn't let me move. Shit, I was surprised my ass didn't become attached to it. Every second, every minute, every hour, she waited on me hand and foot. She even slept on the sofa across from me. Not once did she let me out of her sight, not even to go to the bathroom, and I felt as helpless as a baby.

JUNE 15

I thought Monday morning would never come. That had to be the longest two days on record. I was just glad it was finally over. I loved my grandparents to death, but there was only so much of my grandma's thousand questions that I could handle. She was exactly like a game show. She'd start off with one set of questions, nothing too serious like, "Did you see my roses? Don't you love that color? Do you think they get enough sun?" Then move on to round two, the serious ones like, "Why haven't you met a nice, young man yet? Don't you want to get married? Don't you want to have any children?" And patience was not one of my best virtues, evidenced by my foot constantly tapping the floor as I anxiously waited for Kaya to pick me up.

"Finally," I gasped as she opened the door.

"Wow! I knew you'd be standing there tapping your foot," Kaya said, nodding her head as she came in. "Here's your purse. We went up there and got everything just like I said we would. Your car's at your hou..."

"I'm so glad! Thank you," I said, cutting her off. "Now, let's go," I grabbed my purse, then her hand and dragged her out the front door.

"Okay, okay," she sighed. "Hi, Grandma, Grandpa! Bye,

Grandma, Grandpa,” she yelled as I shut the door.

Just as we reached Kaya’s car, Grandma opened the door and shouted, “I expect you back here on this sofa in two hours!”

“Alright!” I answered, and wondered how long it would take before she drove me completely mad. I jumped into Kaya’s car, shaking my head. “Wow...if she asks me one more question, I’m going to explode!”

Kaya looked at me and started laughing. “Well, sweetie, have you met a young man yet?” she started the car and was still laughing as she pulled out of the driveway.

“Aren’t you funny? And for your information, I have. Didn’t I tell you, we’re expecting a baby in just a few weeks,” I retorted.

“Talk about your miracles! I thought you had to have sex to get pregnant. Or is there something you’re not telling me?”

“I wish...” I laughed. “Oh wait! Didn’t I say to be careful what you wish for?”

“Now I think you’re the one who needs to stop. Someone is out there just waiting for you. He’s handsome, strong, and rich. Oh...and has a knock out body. It’s going to be love at first sight. I know it is. Just wait, soon you’ll be telling me I was right, as usual.”

“Okay...Miss Know It All! I guess you’ve seen this in that crystal ball of yours, huh?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, I did,” she chuckled.

I just shook my head and smiled. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. She’d always been a hopeless romantic. That was one of the things I loved about her. But I knew that with everything going

on right now, meeting someone was not in my near future. I had no idea what I would be facing with Mr. Blidsen's death if they blamed me, I shuddered at the mere thought.

We pulled into my driveway, and when I saw my car I realized how short I had been with Kaya. "Thank you again for getting my stuff, and make sure you thank Daniel for me."

"Well, you're welcome! But you know how he is, he'd do anything for you, and besides, we enjoyed the drive."

I smiled at her as we got out of the car. "Enjoyed it, huh? I bet you guys made a pit stop," I joked.

"No, we had to pick up the boys. But if we didn't..." she laughed.

"I don't think I want to picture that right now," I shook my head, unlocking the front door. Opening it, I could hear the phone ringing. "You've got to be kidding me. Shit, don't tell me Grandma's calling already," I said as we walked in. "I'll go get what I need, you answer that."

"Great, so she can yell at me? Just what I wanted. Thanks a lot," she answered as she walked to the living room.

"Better you than me," I chuckled, and headed for the stairs.

"Hello, Grandma, how can I help you today?" I heard her ask, and giggled, then she paused for awhile. "Oh...I'm sorry," she gasped. My stomach turned upside down. I felt something was definitely off. I slowly turned around and her face looked like it had turned two different shades of pale. She covered the phone, shaking her head, "Aiya...it's not Grandma, it's Mr. Simmons."

My heart attempted to slowly crawl up my throat. I was nervous, but at the same time relieved. I thought whatever happened, at least it would be over with and it wouldn't weigh heavy on my mind anymore. Maybe I'd be lucky and be able to put it all behind me and go on with a normal life, like I had before. It felt as though I took baby steps as I headed towards Kaya.

She handed me the phone. "Good morning, Mr. Simmons. What can I do for you?" I asked, trying not to sound too worried.

"There are some important issues we need to discuss, and I would like to take care of these matters today," he said.

"Can you tell me what this is about?"

"No. I'd prefer to do that in person. Now, can you be here in, say, two hours?"

"Yes, of course."

"Very good, and please make sure to come straight to my office. I'll be expecting you," he hung up.

I was shocked, he didn't mention Mr. Blidsen. It only made my nerves twitch as I hung up the phone. I wondered why he didn't. Was he trying to torture me? Did he want my mind to go haywire by second guessing his motives? No, he probably knew my guilt would do that for him.

"Well, Aiya, what did he say?"

"Not a damn thing! All he said was that he needed to discuss some issues with me."

"What issues?"

"I have no frickin' clue! But I will soon. He wants me there in

two hours.”

“Alright fine, let’s go.”

“Are you sure you have the time to take me all the way up there?”

“Of course I do. Besides, I couldn’t handle waiting and not knowing.”

“I should’ve known better! Impatience seems to be one of our best traits,” I giggled. “Come on...” I grabbed her hand and we walked out.

We were quiet for most of the drive. We were both pretty edgy, just the fear of not knowing can drive you nuts. Plus, I think sometimes Kaya worries more about me than I do. She kept sighing. We drove into the parking lot and I began to tremble. I had no clue how I was going to explain what I’d done. My mind kept playing over and over the vision of poor Mr. Blidsen, of me grabbing him and throwing him to the floor.

“Do you want me to come in with you?” Kaya asked, and for a second I was lost.

I stared blankly at her, as though it took a few seconds for her words to reach my brain and compute. “No...no. That’s okay,” I muttered.

I felt queasy, my stomach was jumping hoops. I drew in a deep breath and quickly got out of the car, then I felt it tighten as Dr. Franks popped into my head. I paused and looked for his car. I didn’t see it. Good, I wouldn’t have to worry about bumping in to his fat ass. On top of everything, that was the last thing I needed. I started

across the parking lot and suddenly stopped.

Glancing back at Kaya, I nodded. She returned the nod and I hurriedly changed direction, and just about ran up the sidewalk. I needed to talk to Liz and Mr. Bentiz, and I knew this would be the only chance I'd get. I reached the front entrance and not only was I winded, my head was pounding. I felt lightheaded. I pursed my lips and began taking small breaths in and out. The feeling subsided and I pulled open the door, almost falling back. I struggled just to hold on to it. Steadying myself, I glanced around, thinking I had tripped on something.

That sensation I'd felt when I was on the stairs swiftly came to me. I thought I'd been touched, maybe pushed. I shrugged my shoulders forcefully, bravely, and just about threw myself into the corridor when a cool breeze teased me, sending chills up and down my arms. I wondered if I'd hear the voices next. I looked towards the men's ward, waiting for something to happen, but saw nothing, only Nicki pushing Mr. Bentiz' wheelchair. I tried to smile, but it was awkward. She looked at me with a questioning gaze, and Mr. Bentiz, his sad green eyes melted into mine. My heart skipped a beat as their looks trailed off and they entered the day room. I sighed heavily, then hurried towards the nurses' station.

I stopped at the door and peeked in, hoping no one but Liz would be in there. Thank goodness, I thought, when I only saw her. "Liz, can I talk to you?" I asked, bolting in.

"Aiyana!" she shrieked, leaping up from her chair, then hugged me tight. "You scared the living daylights out of me! Look at you,"

she said as she let go of me.

“I’m fine...it looks worse than it is.”

“My god...I don’t think you should be here!”

“Mr. Simmons called and asked me to come. I think he wants to talk to me about what happened, but I had to see you first. Has he talked to you about it?”

“Aiyana, I...I’m so sorry, but I can’t talk about it.”

“What?! Why not?” I gasped. Hell, I couldn’t frickin’ understand why she wouldn’t.

“I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be sorry! Just tell me what’s going on.”

“No. Aiyana...I can’t!”

“You can’t, or you won’t?! Liz, please. I need to know what he asked you. Does he think I had anything to do with Mr. Blidsen’s death?! Tell me!”

“Aiyana, please calm down! You don’t need to get upset right now.”

“I’m not upset, and I didn’t mean to raise my voice. Sorry. I’m just worried. Liz, please, you were there, you saw what happened. I know you don’t believe Jill, and I’m sure you don’t believe me either. But I need to know if you backed her story.”

“You don’t understand. I can’t tell you! Besides, Mr. Blidsen’s dead, so why does it matter how he died?”

“No! You don’t understand. It does matter! It matters to me. If you had seen what I’d seen...maybe it would have been you who did what I did, and you’d be here pleading with me. Liz, please. Just tell

me. I need to know!” I pleaded, clasping my hands in front of me.

“Okay...okay. Sit down,” she shakily answered, then closed the door. “The rest of the staff here were told that Mr. Blidsen had a heart attack in his sleep and died. It was so strange though. Jill told Mr. Simmons and the owners what you did, but they didn’t question us about that. I had the feeling they already knew how he died.”

“What do you mean they knew?”

“I don’t know, it was just a gut feeling. But...they threatened us! They made us swear we’d never say anything, if we did they’d make sure we were the ones held responsible. You have to promise me, please, promise that you won’t tell anybody!”

“My god, Liz!” I gasped. “What in the hell is going on around here? Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know, but they’re rich and they have the power to do whatever they want. And if you don’t go along with them, they’re going to make you pay for it!”

My mind started to go crazy. Did they know what killed him? What if it wasn’t a heart attack and what I had seen was real? Is that why they were covering this up? There were just too many unanswered questions, and none of it made any sense. I knew I was running out of time and had to go to Mr. Simmons’ office, but I needed to see Mr. Bentiz.

“Liz, I promise I won’t tell anybody, but I have to talk to Mr. Bentiz first.”

“Why? Don’t make it worse, Aiyana. Please, just let it go.”

“I can’t do that...I’m sorry. Something is going on and I have to

find out what it is. Liz, when I was in the hospital I had this terrible dream. I don't know if it was because of my guilt for what happened to Mr. Blidsen, or what I'd seen happen to him."

"Oh my god!" she gasped. "Aiyana, tell me what you thought you saw."

"I can't even begin to explain it all. There are so many bits and pieces in my head, and they're all going in different directions. I can only recall a horrid, disfigured face, not even a body..."

I saw every inch of color Liz had in her face completely leave her as she began to shake uncontrollably, and my words stopped cold. Tears began to well up in her eyes and she whispered through quivering lips, "Re...remember that morning in the break room when I startled you? I said I was freshening my makeup, it was because I had...I overheard Mr. Blidsen tell Jill that this thing had come for the children," she sobbed.

"It's alright, Liz..." I whispered as I quickly got up and hugged her.

"It was so horrible! I just ran to the bathroom and cried," she gasped. "I felt so bad for him, but I thought it was just his delusions. They'd gotten worse these past few months, an...and I didn't know what else to do. Jill's been here for years and I just couldn't question her. She told him to shut up, she couldn't handle it anymore. 'Stop talking about it. I'm sick and tired of hearing that. There's no children! It's all in your crazy head!' she said, then she gave him a shot. I...I'm so sorry."

A tap at the door startled us. "Liz, it's Sue. Can I come in?"

“Jus...just a second,” she answered, wiping her tears, then opened the door. “What do you need?”

“Mr. Bentiz said he’s not feeling very well. I was wondering if you could give him something...Aiyana! What are you doing here?”

“I came to speak to Mr. Simmons.”

Sue nodded her head, and from the look in her eyes I knew she wanted to scream, she wanted to tell me exactly what she thought. But she bit down on her lip and answered, “I’m so glad to see that you’re alright, and I hope your meeting with him turns out well for you.”

“Thank you,” I answered as she walked away.

“Sue, let him know I’ll be there in a minute!” said Liz as she quickly turned to face me. “Aiyana, I have to get back to work, so if you’re going to talk to Mr. Bentiz you better do it now.”

“Alright. I won’t be that long, promise,” I answered, and hurried out. I glanced around, and when I didn’t see anyone I darted towards the day room. I made my way swiftly past the patients that were in there, smiling and waving to them casually as though nothing was wrong. When I walked into the patio I saw Anne coming towards me. I wondered if she would ask me any questions, more importantly, how I would answer.

“Aiyana...I’m so sorry. I heard about your accident. On top of that we lost Mr. Blidsen to a heart attack. I know you were close to him. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, Anne, really.”

“Well, I think Mr. Bentiz is taking it pretty hard. For that matter,

I think we all are. Mr. Blidsen was one of the sweetest patients here, we all liked him, and we're gonna miss him."

"I'm going to miss him too. Is it okay if I say hi to Mr. Bentiz? I want to make sure he's alright."

"Of course. I think he'd like that. He's right over there," she pointed.

"Thanks," I said, and headed towards him.

"You're welcome, and I'm glad that you're okay!"

I said hello to the other patients who sat quietly, happily, and contently in their wheelchairs as though they were entranced by the red hills and the beautiful swaying wildflowers. Their expressions were serene, and it made me smile. They looked like they didn't have a care in the world. I thought them damn lucky at this moment to have their minds clouded with senility and void of reality, sparing them the harsh truths of sanity. But I wondered if it was an even exchange. To lose the ability to dress, to feed yourself, and the capability to think clearly without restraint or coercion. They've been thrown into a place such as this and stripped of everything they once had, everything they once knew. Discarded like week old leftovers in a fridge, and controlled by others like puppets on a string.

God, it looked as if Mr. Bentiz had aged ten years as he sat slumped over and helpless in his wheelchair. "Hello, Mr. Bentiz. How are you feeling?" I asked as I reached him.

"Miss Crenshaw...I'm so glad you came!" he excitedly said, lifting his head and perking up. For a quick second his sad, green

eyes gleamed, but as he glanced at my head it swiftly turned to concern. “Wha...what happened? Those bruises on your forehead, and why are you wearing a hat? It’s hot out.”

“It’s just a little bump, its nothing for you to worry about. I’m just so sorry about everything. I let you guys down. I’m so sorry I couldn’t do anything to save him!”

“It was inevitable, Miss Crenshaw. It had to be done before you believed.”

“What are you saying? If I would have believed to begin with, he’d still be here?”

“To listen, you have to hear. To hear, you have to believe. If you don’t, you’ll never see. Maybe at some point he would have gotten through to you. I think It couldn’t take that chance, It had to stop him. I think It knows that you’re the one who can see.”

My entire body shivered with his words, they frightened me. Hell, he frightened me. Just the tone of his voice made me cringe. Had he seen what I’d seen? What about Mr. Blidsen, and what Liz said she heard?

“Miss Crenshaw, are you alright? You look a little pale...” Mr. Bentiz asked, and I jumped.

“I...I’m sorry. I’m just fine,” I muttered. “Mr. Bentiz, see what? What had to stop him?”

“The children need you, why can’t you see that? That’s what you need to believe right now. Please don’t wait for someone else to die before you do.”

“I don’t understand any of this, and believe me, I don’t want

anyone else to die. It's killing me with Mr. Blidsen gone. So why can't you just tell me? What children? Tell me what's going on. Tell me what you've seen."

"Those children. Look," he pointed behind me. "Can't you see them?" God, not again. I knew no one was there. It was just like before. Maybe he really was delusional. I didn't look, there was no need. "I see them. They're there. You just don't look, and you don't listen. How are you going to see them if you won't open your eyes?" he asked.

"Mr. Bentiz, please. I don't have much time. I need answers, not riddles," I answered.

"Remember what Mr. Blidsen said, just because you can't see them and we can, doesn't mean we're crazy."

"Of course not, and I didn't mean to imply that you were."

"You know, some of the other patients in our room can see them. Does that make us all crazy because we see the same things? Or maybe we're as sane as you are because we can see them. We don't keep our eyes closed, because we're not scared. They say the closer you are to death, the more you can see it. You have to believe me, Miss Crenshaw, they're helpless little children that need you."

"I don't understand! You see them because you're going to die? That's why Mr. Blidsen saw them? But then, does that mean I'm going to die before I see them?" I worriedly asked.

"I have lived my life, and I'm at the end of my journey, as was Mr. Blidsen. As is everyone that has come to this place. You can say this is our last stop before we leave. Mr. Blidsen didn't leave the way

he was meant to, he was taken unnaturally from this Earth before his time. Your life is still in the middle, your journey is not over, but you have to believe, you have to see before it's too late and you're taken before your time!"

"Alright...then please help me to believe. I can't do this by myself. Tell me about the children, what do they look like? What do they want?"

"They're small...small little boys and girls not much older than ten years. With black hair, black as night, and so are their sad eyes. Thin, frail bodies, thinner than I've ever seen children look, with brown skin that clings tightly to their bones. They've been here, wandering about, waiting, waiting for you..."

His words chilled me to the bone, there was so much conviction in them, and his descriptions were so vivid. What if it were true? I thought I had seen a little girl in my dream, and she had sad, black eyes. But it was a dream, it wasn't real, and I wasn't sure if I was ready to believe in ghosts. When I was a child I believed in all the things that went bump in the night. The things that hid and waited in the darkness, but was it the same?

"Mr. Bentiz, are they ghosts?"

"I've never in all my life believed in ghosts, Miss Crenshaw, but whatever they are, I know they're here. I've seen them clear as day!"

"D...do you know what killed Mr. Blidsen?" I shakily asked.

"Tell me what happened to your head, and I'll tell you," he worriedly said.

"It's nothing, just a bump."

“When did you bump your head?”

“The other day. I was cleaning and I fell.”

“That’s not what happened is it? You got hurt here, didn’t you? Miss Crenshaw, please tell me. Was it the same day that thing killed Mr. Blidsen?”

“Mr. Bentiz! What are you saying? God...you saw it too...”

“Aiyana!” exclaimed Liz, cutting me off. “Dr. Franks walked into the building. You need to hurry!”

I turned around so fast she looked like a blur coming towards me. My head was not only throbbing, it was spinning. I wasn’t sure what to believe anymore. “Ye...yeah. I was just leaving.”

“I don’t think he’ll make rounds for at least five minutes. Come on, if we’re lucky, he’ll never know you were here,” she reached for my arm, dragging me out. “Mr. Bentiz, I’ll be right back to give you your medicine.”

“Miss Crenshaw, don’t let It get you! Please believe, please just open your eyes and listen, you’ll see them. Believe, before it’s too late!” cried Mr. Bentiz.

I couldn’t answer him, not only was I trembling, but my mind had gone into shock. I just walked out with Liz, arm and arm, my mouth agape.

“Aiyana, what did he mean by that?” asked Liz.

“I’m not sure, but I think he saw what I did. He knows how Mr. Blidsen died.”

“Oh my god, Mr. Blidsen! So he really did see something? And if Mr. Bentiz did, and you really did, does that mean something is

here?”

“I’m beginning to think so...” I gasped.

“I...I don’t understand! How is that possible? What is it?” she shakily asked.

“I wish I knew!” I answered as we reached the corridor. I glanced towards the nurses’ station. “I better go now before Dr. Franks starts his rounds.”

“Aiyana...how do I go to work and not think about this? I don’t know if I can do that! I’m scared...”

“Liz, you have to! You can do it. You’re a strong person, I know you are! I don’t want you to get into trouble for any of this. If they blamed you...I couldn’t handle that. Besides, whatever this thing is, I don’t think it has anything to do with you. I think it wants me...”

“What? My god, why?”

I didn’t answer. How could I when I didn’t know? I shook my head and hugged her tight. “I have to go,” I said, and hurried towards the front door.

I thought my sutures would rip open and my head explode with everything that was crammed in it. I wished I knew what Mr. Bentiz meant. How do I open my eyes? How do I listen? I reached the door, and as I grabbed the bar I heard, ‘*Tap-tap-tap-*’ echo down the corridor. Shit! Dr. Franks! I drew in a deep breath and glanced back, waiting for the attack I was sure would come, then I saw her.

“My god...” I gasped, but I wasn’t afraid. I was astounded.

A little girl stood only a few feet away. I thought it was the same little girl from my dream, but I wasn’t sure, she looked different

somehow. Her hair was in two braids that hung down to her waist. She wore an odd, beige dress with a long belt tied around the waist. It reached down to her knees and just touched the top of her boots, strange looking boots, made out of some type of fur.

“Who are you?” I asked, but she didn’t answer. I wondered if my mind was playing tricks on me. Was she really there? Was she the same girl from my dream? She had to be, her eyes...such sad, black eyes. My feet felt like they were nailed to the floor. My entire being wanted to move towards her, but I couldn’t. “Please, tell me who you are.” She still didn’t answer, she just began to walk away. She moved fast, her little feet seemed to glide upon the floor, but they were quiet, the tapping I had heard wasn’t there. “Wait! Don’t go!” I shouted. “Please come back. Tell me what you want!”

She was making her way towards the men’s ward. I knew I had to follow her. I had to find out if she was real. I took a step, then another, and fast began moving, but she seemed to be fading away. I started to run. I was worried I’d lose her. “Wait! Please wait!” I shouted, my pace quickening. I felt my heart start to beat faster and faster, as though it tried to keep up with my feet.

“Miss Crenshaw!” I heard Dr. Franks call out my name from behind me. But I knew I couldn’t stop. I wasn’t going to stop. “What are you doing here?!” he shouted.

The little girl reached the door, and as she opened it, she turned her head and looked at me. Her black eyes seemed to touch my soul, my heart, my every sense, and I thought there was something familiar about them. “Help...us. Help...us...Aiyana...” she said as

she turned away and disappeared.

“Come back!” I shouted. I reached the door and pulled it open, only two steps did I take when that disfigured, horrid face pushed against mine. I felt its hot, putrid breath and it almost knocked me to my knees. “No!!” I screamed.

“Miss Crenshaw!! What in the world is going on? You’re running around and screaming like a mad woman! I hope you have a very good reason for your behavior.”

“Dr. Fran...Franks...” I panted, almost biting my tongue off as I quickly turned to face him. My heart was racing and my head was spinning. I felt numb, lost, as though I was halfway in a dream and not able to differentiate what was real and what wasn’t.

“You know that you should not be on the premises. You know the rules. No staff are to visit the patients if not on duty!” he said sharply.

“Ye...yes...I do,” I stuttered, quickly glancing back. I was looking for that little girl, that face, any sign to let me know I’d seen something. But there was nothing, only stillness and empty beds, not even a scent stirred in the air. I wondered as I shook my head if I’d only seen what I wanted to see, what my mind hoped to see.

“Miss Crenshaw, did you not hear what I said?!”

“Yes...I’m leaving,” I answered, walking past Dr. Franks with my head hung down.

“I think we need to speak with the administrator, and you can explain what just happened,” he said.

“Of course! That’s why I’m here.”

“Good. Then you won’t mind my company,” he replied, and hurriedly followed me.

We walked down the corridor side by side, as though he were escorting me to my execution, without saying another word to each other. It was more than awkward. I felt my skin crawl with the glare of his eyes on me. Scrutinizing, analyzing, almost dissecting every inch of me, as though I was bare ass naked. I heard his heavy breathing and felt his hot breath. I wondered if the walk, the speed of our steps, was too hard for someone his size, or was it the fact that he couldn’t take his eyes off of me.

We reached the door and I forcefully pushed it open. We headed across the grass and I was surprised as he kept up with my pace. We passed the parking lot and I gestured to Kaya. She nodded, with a confused look on her face.

When we reached the other building, he pulled the door open. “After you,” he said rudely.

“Thank you,” I was more than curt with him.

I hurried down the hall, wondering how I was going to explain this. Getting caught in there was only going to compound my troubles. I knew I had to think of something quick before Dr. Franks opened his big mouth. The door was open, and I knew Mr. Simmons had been waiting for me.

He sat at his desk, and I was taken aback for a few seconds. I didn’t know he was so young, or that good looking. I had only talked to him on the phone and hadn’t met him in person. His dark brown, wavy hair was neatly combed back. His dark blue eyes, darker than

I've ever seen before, were fixed on the door, and he was anxiously tapping his pen.

I knocked. "Mr. Simmons, I'm sorry I kept you..."

"Miss Crenshaw!" he said, rudely interrupting me, his brows arched. "Nice of you to decide to finally show up."

"Douglas, we need to discuss the situation with Miss Crenshaw," said Dr. Franks, barging in right past me.

"Miss Crenshaw, why don't you come in and take a seat," said Mr. Simmons.

I nodded my head and entered. "Of course, and again, let me apologize for my tardiness," I sat down, and as I put my purse on my lap, I tried to think of what to say. I'd lie, and tell him I had to get my personal belongings out of my locker.

Just as I opened my mouth, Dr. Franks blurted out, "I just found Miss Crenshaw in the facility running and yelling like a mad man looking for his brain! She has gone way too far this time, Douglas. First, she questions my orders, not to mention my judgment, and on more than just one occasion. Now this! She has no regard for authority or regulations."

"Miss Crenshaw, I asked you to come straight to my office. I don't believe that was asking too much, was it?" Mr. Simmons asked with his brow cocked high, like a rooster whose feathers had been ruffled. "You had no business in that building, none whatsoever!"

I sat there like an idiot. I was tongue tied. It was again that feeling of being put in a corner with the dunce hat on my head. I didn't know what to say, what to do. I felt like a kid caught with her

hand in the cookie jar. I couldn't tell him what Mr. Bentiz had said, Dr. Franks would just chalk that up to his delusions. I surely couldn't tell him what I thought I'd seen. He would think I had completely lost my mind and have me committed. I'm sure Dr. Franks would take immense pleasure signing on the dotted line, 'Crazy beyond help, needs high doses of medication.' Or maybe he'd just blame me and have me arrested. No matter what I said, I would have to be careful.

"This is a first. It seems as if she is speechless," said Dr. Franks.

"Mr. Simmons, I did have a horrible accident here, in case that slipped your mind. All of my personal belongings were still in my locker and I had to get them. I ran into Mr. Bentiz and I stopped to ask how he was doing. He was rather close to Mr. Blidsen and I was worried about him. You know, in the short time that I've been here, I have become close to them. I like all the patients very much, and I was concerned for their safety."

"Concerned for their safety! If you were so concerned, you would not have been running around and screaming like an imbecile. That is the last thing they need! Especially after losing Mr. Blidsen."

"I understand that, Dr. Franks! I was there when he died and..."

"You do not understand anything!" he shouted, cutting me off. "It takes the smallest of things to set them off. If you understood that, you would not be here."

"I'm here because Mr. Simmons called me to come in!"

"Yes, I did. Let me tell you the reason, Miss Crenshaw. Do not think your accident slipped my mind. I can assure you, that is not the

case. As a matter of fact, as far as I'm concerned, that could have been intentional. Perhaps you did that so we would not blame you! I know good and well what you did to Mr. Blidsen."

"What I did to him! Well, let me tell you what I think, Mr. Simmons. I did everything I could to try and save him. I saw him being attacked viciously, maybe no one else in that room did, but they saw all the blood, and I think..."

"What you think is of no consequence!" he shouted, cutting me off. "Everyone in that room was witness to your inability to react adequately. You panicked, and it was your inexperience with our patients that inflicted the blows that killed him! Do not presume to think otherwise, nor doubt that I will hesitate to file charges against you, or anyone else foolish enough to side with you. He died of a heart attack, and unless you have no desire to ever work again, I suggest you accept that!"

"My god!" I exclaimed. "You do know what happened to him, don't you? What are you hiding?"

"I have nothing to hide. You on the other hand, Miss Crenshaw, have much to worry about. Now, I believe we have exhausted this conversation. I'm sure you have been advised by your doctor to take off a few weeks for recovery due to your accident? That works out perfectly. You will take eight weeks, with pay of course, of personal leave."

"Douglas, please! You are being much too lenient," Dr. Franks interjected.

My mind did a sharp three sixty degree turn around. Liz was

right. I had the same gut feeling Mr. Simmons knew what was going on. He had to, why offer to pay me? What, was it a bribe to keep my mouth shut? That would mean it wasn't my imagination, or the delusions of the poor patients. Maybe that's why they were being so over medicated, so they'd look like they were crazy and no one would believe them.

"Mr. Simmons, that's very generous of you, but I doubt I need that much time off. Two weeks should suffice."

"Douglas, she is most ungrateful! You have offered, out of the goodness of your heart, to pay her to take enough time off to recover, and she throws it in your face! I cannot believe you even entertained the notion, but that's your prerogative. In my opinion, it is that attitude, on top of her insubordination, that I do not need in my hospital."

"No, that's not true. I'm very grateful. I just don't need that much time. I'm a good nurse, and I need to get back to what I enjoy doing, taking care of my patients."

"Taking care of them, or hounding them? Miss Crenshaw, I do not need you making things worse. The patients here have enough to deal with without you adding to their misery. They are here for a reason, and that is because they are psychotic, delusional, irrational, and unpredictable. Do not forget that," replied Mr. Simmons.

"Douglas, you are wasting your breath! I doubt if she understands anything, if she did, she would not have questioned my orders."

"Dr. Franks' only orders are to keep the patients over medicated.

I'm beginning to think he wants everyone to think they're crazy! Did you know that more than half of the patients here have the same diagnosis, same delusions, and the same high doses of meds? Don't you think that's just a little odd? But I'm sure I don't have to ask that, right, Mr. Simmons?"

"It is not your place to question what I do, and you tend to forget that!" exclaimed Dr. Franks.

"Oh, how could I? You remind me every single day!"

"I have been their doctor for five years, and I know what they can do if they are not on the correct dose of medication. Do you want to be responsible if they harm themselves, or others? That is not beyond their capabilities. You understand that, right?"

"They couldn't harm a fly. You keep them so doped up all the time, I doubt if they could even raise a finger!" I retorted.

"Douglas, I think she is in the wrong profession! There is no sugar coating any of this, Miss Crenshaw. It is what it is! Perhaps you would be more suitable for a position as a nanny," he chuckled. "All you would have to do is feed, burp and change a few diapers. Isn't that natural for women? Just like putting on your makeup. Oh excuse me, I'm mistaken. That's not purple shadow, is it?"

I felt the heat of my temper as it rose with Dr. Franks' insult, and my instinct for survival quickly surfaced. "Perhaps your vanity, lack of compassion or sincerity, and your more than obvious enjoyment of food, would be more suited as a circus..."

"Miss Crenshaw!" Mr. Simmons coldly interrupted. "I have sat patiently and let you speak your mind, now it is my turn. My

concern is not only for the patients here, but for the owners as well. We do not need any bad publicity, with the amount of money at stake here, that will not happen! And regardless of what you may think, let me assure you, I am not hiding a thing. You know we are in the process of opening another facility. What do you think the chances of that succeeding would be if it were to get into the news that one of the patients here was slashed to death? Slim to none! Do you think the owners would chance that just because some new nurse thought she saw a grotesque face attacking a patient? Do you know how absurd that sounds? They would think you as crazy as the patients here! You would be lucky if they didn't commit you!"

"I...I never said what I saw, Mr. Simmons," I gasped. This only confirmed my feeling, he did know something, why else would he have said 'face'?

"No, Miss Crenshaw, on the contrary, you told me exactly what you saw. I'm sure it must have slipped your mind. From the looks of those bruises and the bandages tucked under your lovely hat, I would say your injury is rather extensive. Perhaps you should use your eight weeks off to look for a job more suited to you. One that does not require clarity, thinking, or memory. For that matter, any of your missing capabilities. Which, I'm very aware is quite common with head trauma. I hear that brain damage can be irreversible. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting I need to attend," Mr. Simmons said smugly, standing up.

I sat there dumbfounded, his words ripped right through me like a buzz saw. My mouth hung open as my mind desperately searched

to make some kind of sense out of this unbelievable situation. But I knew Mr. Simmons was right, no one would believe such a story. I would either be committed or blamed for Mr. Blidsen's death. I had thought I was as helpless as a baby when I was at my grandparents' house, but that didn't even come close to how I felt now.

"You don't look like you're feeling very well at all, Miss Crenshaw. Would you like me to help you?" Dr Franks rudely asked as he stood and held out his hand.

I glanced at him, the Cheshire cat grin across his fat, ugly face made me sick to my stomach. I shook my head, attempting to look at him as warmly as I could. No way was I going to give him the satisfaction of thinking he had intimidated me. "I can manage on my own, but thank you for being such a gentlemen," I answered sensually, and took pleasure in the effect I hoped would happen. His eyes seemed to pop right out of his bifocals, and his jaw must have hit the floor as much as he drooled. "Now get your filthy hand away from me! I wouldn't let you lay one of your stubby fingers on me if I were bleeding to death and you were the last doctor left on the face of this planet!" I said sharply as I stood up. "Mr. Simmons, it's very clear to me that you have the upper hand, and mine are tied. Hopefully, that will change," then casually, and calmly, I walked out.

I reached the door, pushed it open, and practically ran out of the building. My head was throbbing worse than ever. I wasn't sure if the pain was my injury, or what had just happened. I hurried to the car. Reaching it, I forcefully grabbed the handle, yanked it open, and flopped onto the seat.

“Aiya, what took you so long? What the hell happened in there? I haven’t seen you this pissed in a long time.”

“They’re trying to fucking cover this up! Kaya, something is going on in there. I really don’t think the patients are delusional. Whatever the hell that thing I saw was, Mr. Simmons knew all about it!”

“What?!” she gasped.

“I don’t want to talk right now...I can’t anymore, the pain in my head is unbearable. Please, just start the car and get me the hell out of here.”

“Okay. I’m so sorry, Aiya,” she whispered as she started the car, then peeled out of the parking lot and hauled ass. I actually had to grab hold of the dash as fast as she took off.

I finally managed to calm down after thirty minutes of driving in complete silence. I was sure the three pain pills that I’d taken had a lot to do with it as well. “Kay, just take me home. I really need to be alone for a while,” I sighed.

“Are you sure? You know Grandma's not going to be happy if you don’t come back. She’ll call me constantly, yell at me for taking you home, and then your phone will ring off the hook as she calls you. If you don’t answer, she’ll call me again, and before you know it, I’ll be driving her to your house!”

“I know...but I can’t handle her right now. Do you know it was all I could do to stop her from coming into the bathroom with me and sitting me on the damn toilet!”

Kaya laughed, “That sounds like Grandma alright. You know, if you’re not up for all that attention, just come to my place. I’ll ignore you.”

“I just want to be in my own house and in my own bed. I have a lot on my mind and I need to figure it all out.”

“I wish you’d tell me. Aiya, come on, you’ve never kept anything from me.”

“I’m not trying to keep anything from you. I just need time to sort through it, and as soon as it’s a little clearer in my head, I’ll tell you, alright?”

“Alright. But are you sure you can manage? Will you be okay by yourself?”

“I’ll be fine. Really. I just get these bad headaches, and I have enough pain pills for that. I promise, if anything happens, I’ll call you.”

“Okay...but even if nothing happens you should probably call me and Grandma just to let us know how you’re doing.”

“Of course I will. Don’t I always call you?”

“Hmm...how 'bout no?” she joked.

“Okay, okay, I’ll call.”

“I know you don’t want to talk about this until you sort it out, but I have to know if they blamed you for Mr. Blidsen’s death, otherwise I’ll go crazy with worry.”

“Yes...and no. They won’t as long as I don’t tell anyone what I think happened to him.”

“That sounds like they’re blackmailing you! Did you agree to

it?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice. Besides, who would I tell, the police? They’d think I was a lunatic.”

“If they’re willing to go to these lengths, they must know something.”

“Yeah...I got that impression too. I just need to find out what. I need to piece together everything that’s happened there.”

We pulled into my driveway, and for a second I had to question if I really wanted to be in that big house all alone. I’ve always loved this place, not only for my view of the countryside, which was amazing, but the privacy and the peacefulness it instilled. Being alone never bothered me, I enjoyed it. But now I wouldn’t be alone, my thoughts would keep me company.

“Aiya, are you sure you want to do this alone?”

“I’m not sure about anything right now. Thanks for taking me home, and I’ll call Grandma when I get inside so she doesn’t call and yell at you,” I said, reaching across the seat to hug her, then opened the door and got out.

“I love you, Aiya, and if you change your mind and want to talk about it, call me and I’ll come back. No matter what time it is, alright?”

“Alright, thanks. Love you, see ya later,” I answered, closing the door.

“Hey, your purse! Can’t get in without your keys,” she shouted.

“Shit,” I gasped, turning around and opening the door, then swiftly grabbed it.

She waved, and drove off. Walking in the house I screamed, “Damn! Damn! Damn!” I was tense, hurt, confused, and frightened. I tossed my keys on the table, took out my bottle of pain pills, then dropped my purse. I went into the kitchen for a glass of water and noticed my poor plants drooping. “When was the last time I gave you guys water?” I said, sticking my finger in the soil. “Dry as a bone. I’m sorry, I can’t even take care of you guys.”

I grabbed the watering can, filled it, and gave them plenty. After I finished I grabbed a glass of water for myself and took two more pain pills before heading upstairs. Reaching my bedroom, I kicked off my shoes and flopped down on the bed. “Fuck!” I sighed, picking up the phone and dialing. “Hey, Grandma,” I barely managed to say before she tore into me.

“Where are you and your sister? You should have been back a long time ago! What in the world are you doing? I should have known better. I didn’t want you to leave the house in the first place, and now you...”

“Grandma, please!” I exclaimed, cutting her off. “I made Kay bring me home, so please don’t yell at her. I just need some time alone, alright? Don’t worry, I feel fine. I’m going to get some sleep now. I’ll call you in the morning. I love you,” I said, and hung up.

I must have cried myself to sleep as I woke to the darkness around me. It took a few seconds for my mind to realize that I was home and in my bed. I rubbed my eyes and glanced at the clock on the night stand. “Nine?” I gasped. I’d been asleep for more than six

hours. I reached over, clicking on the lamp. The light went on, followed by a popping sound, and it quickly went out. “Shit!”

Getting out of bed, I walked to the bathroom and flipped the light switch. “Damn. Don’t tell me this light is out too,” I muttered when it didn’t turn on, thinking it odd that two lights had burnt out. “Just my frickin’ luck.” I made my way to the dresser. Fumbling through everything, I felt for my flashlight. “Where is it? Damn it. I know it has to be in here!” I began to panic. I couldn’t find it. I’d have to make my way to the stairs in the dark. I reached out for the wall, trailing my fingers against it as I moved slowly. I felt the door jamb and knew I was coming out into the hall.

I slid my hand up, feeling the switch, I flipped it. “Hell...no way can all the lights be out.” I thought two was odd, but three was cruel. It was like someone playing a vicious trick. I wondered if the electricity had gone out, it must have. Glancing back, I saw the glowing red light of the clock, and knew it hadn’t. I noticed the clock flashing, nine, nine, nine. My skin felt like it had shrunk two sizes too small for my body. “What the hell is going on?!” I frantically asked, as though I would get an answer. My head began to spin and I thought of the darkness when I was in the stairwell at Coyote Hills. That horrid face, my screaming, my fear, and the touch, followed by my body hitting step after step as I tumbled. Goose bumps ran along my skin. They felt like they’d hatched as much as they pricked me.

I shuffled my feet across the floor as fast as I could and headed towards my bed, when the sound of muffled voices quickly entered

my ears. It sounded like a horde of insects trampling through the house. The slow beating of my heart quickly turned to rapid pounding. I felt it against my chest, and with every beat, my breathing became more and more erratic.

“Is someone there? Please answer me. Please tell me who you are!” No answer. My trembling legs felt like a block of cement as I began to move. Step after step I took, yet I hadn’t moved an inch. I thought the floor was moving under me, and I began to run. I felt heat surge through my body and knew my temperature was rising. My blouse clung to the wetness of my perspiration that was pouring down my chest. It felt like my breath was being sucked out of me.

“Help...us...help...us...Aiyana...” low, muffled cries surrounded me.

“Please tell me how you know my name! I can’t help you if you won’t answer me!” My entire body shook uncontrollably and I fell to my knees. I tried to look through the darkness, hoping to see the little girl, but only emptiness surrounded me. I thought about what Mr. Bentiz had said, open my eyes and listen, hear and believe. What the hell did that even mean? I saw silhouettes twirling, they were odd, distorted shapes. I felt vertigo as my head spun with them. They began to turn faster and faster, taunting me as they formed a black hole, one that I thought was here to devour me, a mouth twisting and turning as it opened wide. “Stop! Get away from me! Leave me alone!” I screamed, closing my eyes tight and rocking back and forth like a helpless child. I wondered if it was going to rip me to shreds like it did Mr. Blidsen. God, I didn’t want to die. What do I do? How

do I believe? How do I see? “Help me!!!”

JUNE 16

A loud crash echoed through my ears, jarring what little of my senses remained. I felt something heavy cover my eyes. I thought it was a hand, to hide and shelter me from the cruel darkness, but I knew better. I could not be that lucky. Screaming like a maniac with no purpose, I swung my arms at it, “What the hell are you?!” My body jerked and I sat up, only to find myself on the floor next to the bed, fighting with my blankets. I threw them off, and the brightness of the sun through the window quickly shone in my eyes.

Buzzing, a dull, humming buzz, echoed all around me. I felt my eyes crisscross as they looked around the room, then I saw the phone off the hook. It was next to the broken lamp that was in pieces on the floor. “Why is this happening to me?!!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. “God, just tell me why!” I grabbed on to the bed, pulling myself up, and glanced at the clock, eight flashed. I wondered if everything was just another bad dream. I carefully made my way around the glass and picked up the phone, hanging it up, then placing it on the nightstand.

I walked to the bathroom and flipped the switch. “Damn...it was a dream,” I muttered as the light went on. “Oh shit!” I screamed, startled by the phone ringing. I knew it had to be Grandma, or Kaya. If I didn’t pick it up, it would ring like there was no tomorrow. “Ring

all you want. I don't give a shit anymore!" I slammed the door shut and sat on the toilet. The last thing I wanted right now was to talk. My head was so numb it felt like a swarm of bees had stung my brain. I wondered how in the hell I was going to piece any of this together if I didn't understand it. I no longer cared that my tears had found their way back, I welcomed them. I would shed them gladly, not only for Mr. Blidsen, but for myself.

When I finally opened the door, I realized the phone wasn't ringing anymore. I thought it odd. I knew how my grandma was, and she wouldn't stop calling until she got an answer. Then I heard the door bell, I wasn't expecting anybody. "Oh shit..." I gasped, glancing at the clock. It was ten thirty. I had no frickin' clue I'd been in the bathroom that long, now I had a pretty good idea why the phone wasn't ringing. I rushed to the sink and washed my face with cold water.

Looking in the mirror, my unpleasant and unkempt appearance took my breath away. "Damn, I don't have enough time to change," I mumbled, reaching for my robe. I put it on over my clothes, stuck my feet into my slippers, straightened out my hat, then hurried downstairs, hoping my grandma wouldn't notice. Just as I reached the door I heard keys, and saw the knob turning. I stepped back, waiting for the barrage of questions I knew would come. I wondered if she'd start off slow, or just go for the attack and hit me with one after another. The door opened, and in she stepped.

"Aiya! Are you alright? What in the world is going on?" she asked, coming to a standstill when she saw me. "Why didn't you

answer your phone? I have been calling you all morning, so has Kay. I had to call her to bring me over here because you wouldn't answer. Why would you worry me like that?"

Standing there, it was all I could do not to tap my foot. I was going to be patient, let her get everything out at once. I knew if I did, I'd have a better chance to get a word in. As soon as she spit out her last word and took a deep breath, I knew she was done.

"I'm really sorry, Grandma. I didn't mean to worry you. I was sleeping and didn't hear the phone."

"It's going to be eleven! Are you trying to tell me you just woke up? I've never known you to sleep in this late. What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing! I was just tired when Kay dropped me off, and my head was really hurting. I took more pain pills than I should have, and I fell asleep. That's all there is to it, alright? Now, can you please come inside so Kay can come in and I can close the door?"

"You're a nurse, you know better than to take more pain pills than prescribed. This is exactly why you need to stay with Grandpa and me."

"Coffee anyone? I know I'd like a cup. Heck, I'd be happy just to come inside," said Kaya.

"Alright, smarty pants," said Grandma as she finally moved.

"I'll start the coffee," I said, then headed towards the kitchen.

"No you don't. I'll do it. You sit down," Grandma said as she quickly brushed past me.

"You should have just answered your phone," sighed Kaya as

she came in and closed the door.

I waited for her, and when she reached me I whispered, “I had another bad dream last night, that’s why I didn’t answer the phone.”

“What? Shit, another one? Was it the same?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. The face was different this time, but it started with the same voices calling for help. I just don’t...”

“What are you girls whispering about?” asked Grandma, interrupting me.

“Nothing,” I quickly answered.

“Well then, come into the kitchen and talk.”

“We’re coming,” I said, and we headed for the kitchen.

As soon as we walked in, my grandma looked at me, then Kaya. “The coffees ready. Why don’t you sit down and finish your conversation, and I’ll pour you a cup,” she said.

Sitting down, I replied, “We weren’t talking about anything.”

“Then why were you whispering?” she asked, pouring the coffee.

I reached for the sugar bowl and put two teaspoons in my coffee as I tried to think of what to tell her. Before I could say anything, Kaya blurted out, “It was just girl talk, Grandma.”

“Well, I think I’m a girl, so you can talk in front of me.”

Kaya started to laugh, “Aiya, what was that you were saying about Dr. Stevens? You actually think he’s handsome?”

I was taking a drink of my coffee, and just about spit it out of my mouth. I glanced at her and knew she was attempting to coax me. Her eyes looked like they were bugging out of their sockets as she

nodded her head.

“Oh yeah,” I chortled. “Dr. Stevens really is sweet, and you’re right, he’s very good looking. Don’t you think so, Grandma?”

“He’s a married man!” she gasped, mortified.

Kaya and I started to laugh even harder. “Yeah, I hear those are the best! No attachments, just all the fun,” I said.

“Alright you two, that’s enough! Now, Aiya, how are you feeling?”

Kaya and I winked at each other, we knew that would work. My grandma didn’t like to talk about anything that had to do with sex. “I’m fine, Grandma, really, you shouldn’t worry so much.”

“Apparently someone has to. Now, what do you have in your fridge?” she asked, opening it. “Doesn’t look like you have much of anything. What were you planning on eating?”

“I haven’t been able to go shopping this week, but I was planning on going later.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be out yet. Dr. Stevens did say you need to take it easy, and that’s much too strenuous for you. I’ve been thinking that it would be better for you to come back to my house until your follow up appointment.”

“Grandma, you know how much I love you. I appreciate all that you’ve done, but I can take care of myself. Besides, I can’t leave my plants alone for that long.”

“If you could take care of yourself you wouldn’t have taken all those pain pills. You would’ve answered your phone like a responsible adult and we wouldn’t be sitting here having this

discussion.”

“I took what I needed for my pain. I was just exhausted because of the day I had. That’s the only reason why I slept so much. Please Grandma, I’m more comfortable here in my own bed.”

“Fine. But the next time you don’t answer your phone, I will drive myself out here, and if I have to, I’ll drag you out!”

“Okay, it’s a deal, and if I don’t answer, I’ll let you drag me out.”

“I still think it’s too soon for you to go shopping though, let alone drive. Kay will take me to the grocery store, and when we get back, I’ll fix us a nice lunch. Alright?”

“Alright, Grandma, thank you.”

“Kay, you didn’t have anything to do today, did you, honey?”

“No...not a thing, Grandma,” she answered sarcastically, though Grandma had no clue.

“That’s good. In the meantime, Aiya, you should take a nice warm bath, change those wrinkled clothes that you still have on, and that dirty bandage under your hat. We’ll be back in a while. Ready, honey?” she asked, walking out.

“Yeah, of course,” answered Kaya as she hurriedly finished her coffee.

“Damn, Kay, how does Grandma do that?” I sighed. Standing, I wondered how in the hell she knew.

“Who knows? Maybe she’s a witch,” she replied, then quickly stood up.

I chuckled, “I wouldn’t doubt it.”

We walked out of the kitchen, and when we reached the front door we saw Grandma waiting in the car. “What did I tell you? When have you ever seen her move that fast? Alright, I don’t want to keep her waiting, but we do have to finish talking, and soon, Aiya,” she hugged me tight.

“I know...” I answered.

She left, and I closed the door, then went back to the kitchen. I poured myself another cup of coffee, grabbed the broom and dust pan, then headed upstairs. I cleaned up the broken glass first, then bathed and got dressed. I stood looking in the mirror with my head almost turned upside down as I cleansed my sutures. It was the biggest wound I had ever seen. Damn, it started from the cap of my head and went all the way down to the base of my neck. “Shit, it’s going to take forever for my hair to grow back,” I sighed. I knew I’d be wearing my hat for a while.

I started to put a fresh bandage on, and what Kaya had said about being lucky to be alive popped into my head. She was right, from the look of the sutures, I did almost crack my head wide open. Then I thought of what Dr. Stevens had said, and I realized I really could have died. My god, Mr. Bentiz! He wanted to know if I hurt myself the same day Mr. Blidsen died. But why? Why was it important to him? There must have been a reason.

“Okay, think, Aiya. Think.” I had pulled the curtain and saw that face in the corner over Mr. Blidsen, I saw something shiny, then It saw me. I remembered Its yellow eyes had gazed right into mine. Then, in my dream, that nurse said he knew me and I shouldn’t have

seen him. That's why that thing was in the stairwell, and that's why it was important to Mr. Bentiz. That thing had come after me after I'd seen It, and tried to kill me. "Fuck!" I gasped.

My thoughts quickly scattered and I just about banged my head against the mirror when I heard my grandma shout, "We're back, sweetie!" I grabbed my hat off the sink, stuck it on my head, and hurried down. When I walked into the kitchen there was probably fifteen bags of groceries on the table. More than enough to last a few months, and for three people.

We had lunch and listened to Grandma talk for hours. I wanted to talk to Kay about everything that had happened, I could tell that she was going crazy not knowing, but I didn't get the chance. Grandma didn't leave us alone, not even for a second. By the time they left, I was exhausted.

My head was killing me, but I was afraid to take any more pain pills. I was worried I'd pass out and have another bad dream. That was the last thing I needed. I knew I couldn't handle that, I'd probably snap in two. I had to make sure I didn't fall asleep. I went into the kitchen and made a pot of coffee, then took it into the living room, turned on the television, and sat on the couch.

JUNE 17

I drank more than enough coffee to keep a race horse jittery for a week, and it worked. The sun came shining warmly through the bay window. I was still awake and no bad dreams, just jittery as hell. I jumped off the sofa and went to the kitchen to make another pot, then called my grandma, as I had promised. We were on the phone talking for hours, or should I say she was. I just listened, pretty much our usual. After we hung up I took a shower, then made lunch and my fifth pot of coffee. Taking everything into the living room, I set it on the coffee table and flopped back onto the sofa.

I wondered how long I could actually go without sleep before it caught up to me and took me against my will. How much caffeine could I put in my body before I jumped right out of my skin? I thought I'd soon find out, because I had no intention of going to sleep. Not until I figured everything out. My mind shifted into over drive and took me a step further, deeper than I'd gone before. I thought of the dead. Was there something else beyond the trickery of the darkness? If so, can someone who has died come back? If they could, does that make them ghosts, spirits, or whatever the hell they're called?

If that thing isn't really here...but It is...because I've seen It and so did Mr. Blidsen and Mr. Bentiz, then that must mean It had to be a

ghost. How else could all of us have seen the same thing? And what about the children? Mr. Bentiz said he never believed in ghosts, yet he's seen them. How? Why? I didn't understand. He said they were there waiting for me, waiting for me to help them. Did that really make them ghosts?

I didn't remember the darkness that hid the monsters of my childhood being this brave, this bold, or this cruel. If it had truly come back for me, it must know it's already taken me back to that place. So why must it continue to be this vengeful? This spiteful? Why couldn't it just show me? Show me what the hell it was. I knew there had to be some type of books on ghosts, and on dreams as well. Since I couldn't take the chance of getting caught again at Coyote Hills, I thought the library would be the next best place to look for answers. As I sat up, the phone rang, just about jarring me off the couch.

"Hello?" I said.

"I just wanted to call and tell you how sorry I am about everything. I'm sorry I wasn't as strong as you."

"Liz?" I answered, surprised she was calling.

"Yeah, it's me."

"I'm so glad you called!" I excitedly said. "I was worried about you!"

"Yea...yeah. It's been hard trying to work and act like nothing's going on, but I'm getting by. Jill doesn't seem to be having a problem with any of this. You know, she told me that Mr. Simmons called her, and said he fired you because you were putting the

patients' safety at risk.”

“What?! He’s so full of shit. But I can’t say I’m not surprised he’d say something as nasty.”

“Yeah, because of what happened to Mr. Blidsen he thinks you could harm the other patients. God, Aiyana, why didn’t you just do what they asked, like the rest of us? If you had, you’d still be working here. I don’t think I can handle it without you,” she sobbed.

“It’s alright, Liz. You can do it, I know you can. But you were right, they knew how Mr. Blidsen really died.”

“I was right? They knew?! Oh my god...that means the patients here really have seen things! The children they’re always talking about...” she gasped.

“I think they have. I don’t know what children though, because I’ve never seen them. But...I did see this one little girl, she even called my name...”

“No...how is that possible?” she asked, and I could hear the fear in her voice.

“I don’t know. When I was a kid I believed in monsters, but ghosts? I’m still having trouble digesting that. But I just don’t know what else to think. I mean what else could it be?”

“What about that thing you saw? Why did it kill poor Mr. Blidsen? He was a sweet, little old man that never hurt anyone! He didn’t deserve to die.”

“Mr. Bentiz said it was because Mr. Blidsen was close to making me believe. He said if I believed, I’d see the children. I think whatever that thing is, It’s worried that I will, so It tried to stop me. I

think It pushed me down the stairs!”

“Are you saying if I believe I’ll see them, and then that thing will try to kill me?!” she screamed.

“No, Liz...please don’t even say that! That won’t happen! Okay? I think...”

“But you said it tried to kill you!” she shouted, cutting me off. “It’s already killed Mr. Blidsen! And...and it could kill me too!”

“Liz! Please, calm down! It’s not going to hurt you.”

“You don’t know that for sure! How could you? I could be next, or Mr. Bentiz, or Mr. Franco!”

“Yes I do, because It’s after me! Its followed me! I’ve seen It in my dreams!”

“No...it can’t be real. I can’t believe you. I won’t! I don’t want to die! Aiyana, I’m sorry, but I can’t talk about this anymore!”

“Liz, please! You have to believe me, nothing is going to happen to you! You’re not going to die, and neither is Mr. Bentiz, Mr. Franco, or anyone else. I promise!”

“Whis...whispers, shadows, I thought they were nothing, just an old, run down building. The patients always talked about children, and nothing, nothing ever happened! Then you came to work here and all hell broke loose! They began to talk more about the children, then that thing, that thing that was after the children! Now Mr. Blidsen is dead!”

“Liz, just listen to me. You’re scared that’s all. If you calm down and think, you’ll see that. Can you do that please, and tell me what you mean? Did you see and hear...”

“I don’t have to tell you anything!!” she screamed cutting me off. “This is all your fault! Just stay away from me! And stay away from Coyote Hills!!!” she slammed down the phone.

“Damn, damn, damn!” I shouted as I hung up.

My mind must have grew twice its size. I felt it press against my temples as all my thoughts ran around and tried to squeeze in. I felt bad for Liz. I’d heard the fear in her voice. I wondered if she was right, was it all my fault? Could I have brought that thing out somehow?

“Shit...” I gasped. The caffeine was starting to wear off. I felt my eye lids getting heavy. I could barely keep them open. I poured myself more coffee and took a huge drink, spitting most of it out. It was cold and tasted like crap. I jumped off the couch and stretched, then reached for the phone. I thought if I called Kaya and talked to her for a while I wouldn’t fall asleep. I dialed her number. It rang six frickin’ times. “Damn, she’s not home,” I sighed and was just about to hang up when she answered.

She was completely out of breath. “He...he...hello?”

“Kay, what are you doing?”

“I...just...got back from...picking up the boys...at school. I heard the phone ringing...and ran inside,” she panted.

“I haven’t seen them for two weeks...tell them I love them and give them a hug for me.”

“Of course I will, but don’t sound so damn gloomy.”

“Sorry...I didn’t mean to. It’s just all the shit I have on my mind. I’m nowhere close to sorting anything out. Plus, I just got a

call from Liz. Hell, she thinks all of this is my fault.”

“Shit, Aiya. I’m sorry. You know what I think? I think I need to come over and you can tell me everything and we can try to figure this out together.”

“That sounds good, but I know you have to start dinner, plus the boys are home.”

“I can drop them off with Grandma, that’s not a problem. Daniel can pick them up when he gets off work.”

“No! Then she’ll want to come, and we won’t be able to talk about anything. And I really need to before my frickin’ head blows up. I thought I could do this myself, Kay, but I can’t.”

“Then I’ll come by as soon as Daniel gets home, alright?”

“Great...see you then,” I answered, and hung up. “Alright, now I just have to try and stay awake a few more hours. That shouldn’t be too hard,” I mumbled. I reached for my sandwich and took a big bite. I knew I needed something in my stomach besides liquids. I’d never drank so much coffee before and I was beginning to feel its effect. Not only was I jittery as hell, my bladder felt like it was going to rupture. “Damn...” I sighed, tossing the sandwich on the plate, then headed towards the stairs. I’d only taken four steps when I heard crying. “Shit...not again...” I whispered, stopping cold in my tracks. “Please, if someone’s here I need to know what you want from me!”

“Help...us...help...us...”

“How can I do that when I can’t even see you?!” I shouted, glancing around.

Rustling sounds, like someone struggling, came from the

kitchen and quickly drew my attention. Silhouettes swaying back and forth teased my eyes, and I thought of the shadows I'd first seen in the windows at Coyote Hills, how they reminded me of a ballet. I remembered thinking they were the patients desperately looking for a way out. I had that same feeling now, but I knew it was something completely different.

"Please. Please, just tell me who you are."

"Aiyana...you have to listen...listen with your heart..." I heard a little girl's soft voice linger from the kitchen.

"Are you the same little girl that I've seen?" I asked. "Please, how do you know my name? You have to tell me, I don't understand any of this. If you need my help, then just tell me. Tell me what I need to do!"

"Help...us...help...us..."

"God!" I screamed, my head pounding with the frustration that I felt. "How the hell do I do that if you won't tell me anything?!" One of the shadows scurried through the kitchen, as though I'd startled it, like a mouse caught with no place to go. It went in a circle, over the table, then slowly started making its way out, forming with every step it took.

When it reached the door, I saw the distortion turn into a little girl. It was her, the same one from my dream, and the one in the corridor with the strange clothes on. "Are you really here?" I asked. She stopped and pointed, and that image was so familiar. The little girl I'd seen in the stairwell flashed before me, and I knew it was her as well. "Who are you?!" I gasped, and hurried towards her.

“He’s here, Aiyana...”

“No! Who is? You have to tell me! Are...” My words trailed off as the loud sound of footsteps shook me. Glancing at the ceiling, I came to an abrupt stop. It seemed to moan, as though it was breathing heavily. The vibrations were so forceful, the light was swaying. My entire body shivered as I drew in a deep breath and swallowed so fast, I almost choked. “What the hell do you want from me?!” I frantically asked.

“Help...us...” A heart wrenching cry pierced through me and my eyes jerked back towards the kitchen.

Those horrid, yellow, sunken eyes were glaring right at me. I felt their heat burn right through mine. Teeth, black teeth grinned at me, as though daring me to come closer. Then the little girl was sucked backwards and dragged along the floor until she disappeared through the wall. I didn’t even get a second to react, to think, the footsteps grew louder and louder and swiftly drew my attention back. The ceiling was shaking vigorously and the plaster began to crack. I thought at any minute it would collapse on top of me. Was this just another dream? It had to be! But how? I was wide awake, and there was no darkness. It must be real.

“Alright think...just think, think, think,” I muttered, and reached for the phone. I must have fumbled ten times with that damn phone as I shakily dialed Kaya’s number. It rang once, but it was an odd sound, followed by a loud click. I heard heavy breathing and wondered if Kaya was leaving and had to run back to answer the phone. “I think someone’s upstairs, Kay! You have to hurry! I...”

“You...can’t...help...them...!” a raspy voice screeched through the receiver.

“No!” I screamed, dropping the phone.

I ran as fast as I could towards the front door. I grabbed the knob, turning it, but my hands were trembling so much I couldn’t get a grip. “Shit, shit, shit! Just calm down, calm down!” I gasped. I was frantic, but I knew I needed to steady my hands. If I didn’t, I’d never be able to get the door open and that thing would get me. I drew in a breath, pursed my lips, and slowly blew in and out, then tightened my hold on the knob. Turning it, the door opened. “Thank you...” I sighed, flinging it wide and running as fast as I could. “Oh god no...no!” I cried, coming face to face with the darkness that surrounded me.

It had come as swiftly as I’d ran out, without warning and without any hesitation in it’s cruel intentions. My arms aimlessly searched as I tried to feel my way through, but there was nothing, nothing but emptiness. It felt as though I was trapped in a vast void of black. I felt my chest tighten, crushing my pounding heart. I couldn’t catch my breath. I wondered if anyone would hear me scream. Would I even be able to scream? “Somebody help, help me!!” My pleas sounded like a faint whimper floating in the air.

I heard raspy, horrible wheezing sounds, they were all around me, laughing with the darkness and taunting all my senses. “I’ll help you!” echoed through the darkness.

Then something hot touched against my face, that putrid stench of rotting flesh fast entered my nostrils. I knew that horrid face was

here waiting, It was waiting for me. It was going to finish what It started in the stairwell. I thought I should just crumble, fall to my knees, give in and let It take me away. Just like It did that little girl and Mr. Blidsen. That would put an end to all my torture. I wouldn't have to be scared anymore. I wouldn't have to think about it anymore.

"You have to be strong. It fears you...It knows what you can do," a familiar voice whispered in my ear. I knew that voice.

"Mr. Blidsen! Are you a ghost? Where are you? Please, please help me!" I pleaded.

"No one can help you...it's too late...you belong to me now, and soon you will join us!!!" that raspy voice droned like a cannon fired in the distance.

"Who are you? Why don't you just show yourself?! Show me what the hell you are!! If you're so sure of yourself, if you want me to join you, then come and fucking get me!!!" I screamed.

"Aiya! What are you doing? I've been ringing the door bell for five minutes!" I heard Kaya shout.

"What?!" I gasped, as my eyes flung open. "Shit, not again..." I sat up on the couch. My head was spinning out of control, along with the room. I felt hazy, as though my thoughts were in a cloud and not within reach.

"What's wrong? You're as pale as a ghost. You had another one of those god damned dreams again didn't you?" she asked, walking into the living room.

I placed the palm of my hands tightly against my throbbing temples and massaged them. I thought the darkness had now found its way to me in the light. There would be no mercy on my soul. I felt that whatever this thing was, It was not going to let me go until It got exactly what It wanted. “Oh my god, Kay! I think I’m going insane!”

“What the hell?” she reached over for the phone, picking it up. “Tell me what happened? Why was...”

“I don’t know!” I yelled, cutting her off.

She hung the phone up, placed it on the table, then sat down next to me. “You’re shaking like a leaf, Aiya. Tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“It felt so real...” I cried.

“It’s alright,” she whispered, hugging me tight.

“I was waiting for you,” I shakily muttered.

“I’m sorry. I’m here now, and it’s going to be okay,” she let go of me and wiped my tears.

“I was wide awake! I know it! I made sure to drink enough coffee so I wouldn’t fall asleep. Hell, I was on my way to the bathroom because I’d drank so much. I don’t understand how it could’ve been a dream.”

“Maybe that fall did more damage than we thought. That bump on your head...”

“No, Kay!” I shouted. “It doesn’t have anything to do with my frickin’ head! It’s all connected to the children the patients spoke about, and that thing I saw. It has to be! I just can’t figure it out. And

I saw that little girl again, she was in the kitchen. She said I had to believe. Then the damn ceiling was shaking from footsteps. I thought it was going to fall and crush me. I even called you, but it wasn't you! It was that thing! I even heard Mr. Blidsen! He told me to be strong," I started to cry uncontrollably.

"It's okay, it's not real. It was only a bad dream, that's all. Just like the one in the hospital, and the one you had the other night."

"I know what you're saying! I know they're dreams. They must be, because every time they happen, I end up waking up, and everything I thought happened, really didn't!"

"Do you remember when we were in the orphanage and you thought there were monsters under your bed? I stayed up with you all night to show you that the darkness was nothing. It's just a place without light, and because it's nothing, it can't hurt you. This is the same thing."

"I remember...but this is so different. Come on! Think about everything that's happened. Not only in my dreams, but when I was wide awake! I was at work when I saw that thing kill Mr. Blidsen, I wasn't dreaming. What about Mr. Simmons? Damn it, he pretty much blackmailed me into keeping my mouth shut! Was that a dream? Oh, and let's not forget when I saw that thing in the stairwell and fell! Another dream? How in the hell can you say it's nothing?"

"Okay...so it's a big nothing, but I think Mr. Simmons probably just didn't want to look bad, or have the hospital look bad. I'm sure he's only trying to cover his ass. And remember, Dr. Stevens said it's your mind seeing what it wants to see. The dreams could be your

guilt and your pain because of Mr. Blidsen's death."

"That all sounds like a reasonable explanation, and I might believe it, if it wasn't for the fact that Mr. Simmons said I'd seen a grotesque face. Explain that one."

"Maybe you told him and just forgot, or what about the other nurses, did you tell them? Maybe they..."

"No...no...no...!" I screeched, interrupting her. "I did not tell anyone what that thing looked like! I'm positive about...oh shit! I told Liz!"

"You see, she could very well have told Mr. Simmons."

"I don't know...why would she? He threatened her too. Besides, I told her the same day I met with him, so she couldn't have."

"She could've called Mr. Simmons when you left, when you were on your way to see him. It only would have taken her a minute."

"Shit, I just don't know!"

"It's going to be alright, Aiya, we'll figure this out."

"I...I'm not sure if we can. How do we do that when I don't understand it? Hell, I don't think you even believe me."

"I do believe you! I have never once doubted anything you've said, and you know that! I'm just trying to be logical. I know there has to be an explanation for all of this. It's just like the monsters when we were little. You saw them, they chased you. I remember seeing you run! You were so scared of them, but they weren't real."

"I remember that, but this just feels so different, it feels so real."

"Yeah, and so did the monsters. Aiya, think about it. It's the

same. Everyone has dreams, good ones and bad. I know I have my share of bad ones, but they're not real!"

"You're right, Kay. As usual. I know I thought the monsters were real, and I know you have dreams as well. But I also know that whatever this is, I'm not strong enough to endure it. It's going to rip me apart and I know it!"

"I love you, I would never let anything hurt you, or take you away from me! Hell no, that won't happen! Don't you know that? I'd do anything to keep you safe. And if you truly believe what's happening is real, then tell me what I need to do to stop it, and I will!"

I heard the strength and the love come through in her words. I knew she wanted to be the big sister. The protector. Just like she did when we were small, only this time, I doubted she could. She didn't really believe me, and that made her just as helpless as I was. I believed the darkness had returned, and I was well on my way to believing in this thing that's come for me. I just didn't know how to fight it. How can you fight something that's there, but not there?

We laid back on the couch, and she held on tightly to me as I told her every single thing that had happened. She cried more times than I could count, but so did I. Kaya had always been my Rock of Gibraltar, unwavering, but as the night and our thoughts continued, she began to sway. I saw her strength break apart with her uncertainty, but I knew two things were certain. The dreams would continue, and if I didn't find out why, I'd go crazy.

JUNE 18

Dawn came before Kaya and I even realized the night had left us. It sent flickers of light through the bay window. But they were small ones that teased us, as if to say, “Stop! I’ve had enough.”

One seemed to poke Kaya in her eye, and she leaped off the couch. “Shit! It’s six o’clock!” she gasped, glancing at her watch. “Daniel has to be at work by six thirty today. I’m surprised the phone hasn’t been ringing off the hook.”

“We were in a whole different world last night, Kay. I’m sure our minds shut down and closed off to everything else around us.”

“You’re so right! I think my head is numb from everything you put in it. My mind is swimming around like a fish caught on a hook, trying to escape its fate,” she shook her head, shrugging her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Aiya, but I better call Daniel and let him know I’m on my way,” she reached for the phone.

“Don’t apologize, I’m just glad you stayed and listened, and didn’t run out.”

“Never.” She shook her head. “No, honey, I wasn’t talking to you. I was answering Aiya,” she paused for quite a while. Not a good sign, Daniel must be mad. Kaya had never stayed out all night long without letting him know. He was more of a worry wart than she was. “Okay great, I love you too, see you in a bit,” she hung up.

“Was he pissed?”

“Nope. He said he knew when it was twelve and I wasn’t home yet, that I wouldn’t be. Of course, he got his point across for me not calling. He called his boss and told him he couldn’t be in till seven thirty, so no worries there. Tell you good morning, give you a kiss and get my ass home. So I gotta go, but are you going to be alright? Do you want me to come back later? Maybe with a fresh start we can come up with something, and figure this out.”

“No. My mind is fried enough, and I know yours is too. I think we need a break from talking about it so we can clear our minds. Maybe tomorrow we can get a fresh start. Okay? Now, don’t worry, I’m fine. Go on, get the hell out of here and I’ll call you later.”

“Alright, alright, love ya,” she kissed me, and practically ran out the door.

“Love ya too!” I shouted after her.

I had lied. No way was I fine, and no way did I need, or want, a break until I figured things out, but I couldn’t let her know that. She was going to worry enough about me as it was. Plus, she had the boys and Daniel to take care of, which kept her busy, I didn’t want her to have to keep running back here. Besides, we’d more than likely talk all night again and still not come up with any answers. She couldn’t help me. Hell, I couldn’t even help myself. How could I when I was too scared to even go to sleep?

As soon as I heard the door slam, I called my grandma and made sure we talked for two hours. That way I knew she wouldn’t call me, for a while anyway. I knew I had to sort through my

thoughts, try to connect all the dots and put everything together. I couldn't do that alone. I'd have to get someone who could help, and there was only one way I knew how.

I called Dr. Stevens and told him everything, he sounded frazzled by my words, I knew he didn't believe a single one of them. He tried to convince me that everything was still my mind projecting what it wanted to see. He thought I just needed a little more time. Mr. Blidsen's death and my accident, he said, were two very traumatic experiences. That because they happened hours apart of one another, my brain wasn't dissociating the two. I assured him I didn't need any more time, if anything, I was running out of it. By the time we hung up, he had referred me to my first therapist.

I drove to the hospital that afternoon to meet with him. After two hours of his so called therapy, I left his office, more like I ran out screaming. I was even more confused and unsure than I was before I'd seen him. The only thing that changed was that I now had prescriptions of Valium and Tofranil, which I found if I took enough of at night, I wouldn't dream. And so it went for the next two weeks of my torment, he didn't help. Not one answer did I find, and not one answer did he have.

When my prescriptions ran out, my nightmares returned. I'd thought about going back to Coyote Hills to talk to Liz and Mr. Bentiz, but I knew better. Liz wouldn't say another word to me, she was too scared. And Mr. Simmons, he would be more than happy to have me arrested. Then I'd never get a reprieve, I'd be stuck behind

bars and tortured forever by the ghosts that haunted me, and never find out why.

I returned to see Dr. Stevens for my three-week follow up. He asked about my nightmares. I knew he was genuinely concerned, but I didn't want to tell him anything more. He'd just start on that mind projection crap, so I had said there was no change. He was confused and didn't understand why I hadn't made any progress with three weeks of sessions. I told him I'd only managed two weeks, and couldn't handle the agony of a third. Then, without holding back any punches, I told him exactly what I'd thought about that incompetent therapist. Dr. Stevens then said, and more than firmly, that I hadn't given therapy a chance. That my mind was so fixed on what I wanted to believe was real, that if anything was said to the contrary, I became defensive. By the time I had left his office, he'd removed my sutures, along with giving me another referral to my second therapist.

Who, I thought if at all possible, was worse than the first. He had actually tried his damn best to tie all my nightmares to my childhood. He swept them as far away from himself as he possibly could, as though he was frightened of all my thoughts, all my words, and all my feelings. It was almost like he felt that if he touched me, my torment would jump on him and attack. He was skittish, his words sputtered as he spoke, faster than his mouth could keep up. I thought him the biggest sissy ever, and after our fifth session, I knew he was, and I never returned.

I wondered just how many therapists were in Paradise Flats as I found myself seeing my third one. By far he had been the worst quack I'd ever met, he only lasted two days. He more than eagerly agreed with the diagnosis the other two wanna-be therapists had labeled in big, bold letters across my forehead, "Post traumatic stress."

He had given me more prescriptions, and increased my doses of Tofranil and Valium. I thought that he must know Dr. Franks, since he too liked to over medicate and eradicate what he couldn't explain. But, I didn't mind. I took them just like candy, but the effects of my wonderful sedation quickly wore off. It no longer spared me from my vicious nightmares.

Kaya desperately wanted to help me through them. She'd put herself back in the big sister, protector mode, but it didn't last long. She shut it off and switched to confusion. I didn't think it was possible, but she seemed to be more confused than I was. She couldn't understand how three therapists, plus Dr. Stevens, could all say the same thing and not be right. She had me close to wondering the same thing. After all, they were just dreams. Dreams that continued to bring my torture with them as the days passed slowly and horribly by. I wondered if I would be confined to my fate. To wait like a cowering child for the darkness she knew only too well would come. A darkness that brought that horrid face, that putrid stench, that little girl, and the cries for help.

Dr. Stevens, I felt as bad for him as I did for Kaya, dragging him through all of this. His voice always cracked as I spoke to him. I

knew I'd completely worn him out. He continued to ask about my nightmares, and was always confused as to why I hadn't made any progress. I continued to tell him it was because every therapist he'd sent me to was a fucking idiot. He laughed and said I went through therapists like a change of clothes. He even hesitated when I asked for another referral, but I no longer wondered how many therapists were in Paradise Flats. I now knew, there were five.

JULY 22

My nightmares had grown even stronger this past week, they became darker, uglier, fiercer. I felt evil in the core of that hideous face. It was a deep, heart wrenching feeling, as though a hand had reached down my throat, grabbed my heart, and squeezed. Whatever that thing was, It had completely taken over my nightmares. It'd taken away the light, and that little girl. I was no longer able to see or hear her, and the whispers of the children no longer cried for my help, they'd become vicious heckles.

It was as if that thing were hiding them, and allowed me to see only what It wanted me to see, as though It were afraid I was getting too close. But to what? I didn't know. Hell, I still couldn't understand how they were supposedly only my mind's projections, according to all three therapists, and Dr. Stevens. Not when these supposed projections had brought me crumbling to my knees.

One of the many fears that ran rampant through my mind, and there were quite a few filling it beyond its capacity, was that what little sanity I managed to retain, I'd lose. The grasp on reality that I barely managed to hold on to by a thread, was quickly being devoured by the darkness as it tried to take me to a world belonging to all those in which sanity no longer remained. One that waited for me with open arms and baited breath, waiting for that thread to snap.

I felt that snap as I laid upon the couch of therapist number four, clenching my teeth with every stupid question out of his mouth. I thought I'd sensed something different in him when I first walked into his office, but I was quickly losing that feeling. It was all I could do to stare blankly at the filthy, beige ceiling above, without screaming my brains out. I wondered how long it would take him to join the ranks of those other pitiful, so-called therapists who had failed me.

"Aiyana," I jerked, and almost fell off the damn couch when I heard Dr. Jacobs. "Do you feel a correlation between your dreams and losing your parents? Perhaps the children's cries for help represent in your mind a child that needs its mother."

I thought my face had turned blue, it must have. I'd been here now for over an hour, apparently talking to myself, since he was still asking stupid questions. I turned to face him, and practically screamed, "No! My dreams, as you so nicely put it, have nothing to do with that. Why can't you just stop trying to connect them and listen to what I've been telling you!"

"The subconscious is a very peculiar thing. It may make subtle hints to us, as well as very strong emotional ones."

"You haven't heard a damn thing I've said, have you? I can feel the anguish around me. I sensed something evil..."

"Every word that you speak, not only do I hear, I decipher, then reconnect so that I may better understand them. But evil, Aiyana? That is a bold statement. Do you suggest a subordinate of Satan?"

For there are various descriptions, and more often than not they are taken out of context.”

“You can decipher, connect and reconnect until you’re blue in the face and it still won’t make me believe that my parents’ death has anything to do with my nightmares! It’s evil, pure and simple. I can feel it, and there is no god damned way that I’m taking it of context!” I angrily said.

“There are those who actually believe evil to be its own entity. But for you to even entertain the notion of something supernatural, which I highly doubt is the case here, only opens the subconscious to vulnerability.”

I actually chuckled, though I found no humor in what he’d said, but it kept me from screaming at the top of my lungs. “Dr. Jacobs, if this thing isn’t evil, then can you please explain to me why I sense that? Why has It grown stronger in my nightmares? My god, It’s completely taken over everything!”

“I can not interpret your dreams for you, Aiyana. Everyone has them and perceives them differently. I can promise you though, that evil has nothing to do with it. Together, I am sure we will find the answers. Is that not why you are here?” he asked nonchalantly as he leaned over his desk, clasping his hands.

I thought he was intentionally trying to piss me off, he must be, because he was so good at it. I knew he thought I’d lost my mind. I’m sure if I was in his shoes, I’d think the same thing. But god, he kept harping on my parents’ death. If he thought I was a raving lunatic, then why didn’t he question me about that damn face? I

would think he'd want to challenge my grip on reality, see how far I've gone off the deep end. Isn't that what therapists liked to do? I couldn't believe I actually sensed something in him. I had thought it might even be a need to help. Boy, was I wrong. He was just like all the other idiot therapists, a degree in cognitive behavioral disorders, but no connection whatsoever with the human psyche. He smiled at me, arched his brow, and for a quick second, from the look in his cold, black eyes, I could've sworn he heard my thoughts.

I tried to smile back, to ease my mind. Hell, I wanted to hide, but the damn couch was positioned right in front of his desk. I bit down on my twitching lip and sarcastically answered, "Why don't you tell me why, since you seem to have all the answers."

"Aiyana, how old were you when you lost your parents?" he asked.

"I was ten....why?" I answered, arching my brow just as high as his.

"Who raised you and your sister?"

"After our parents died, we were taken to what me and Kaya came to know as, 'the place for the alone and unwanted children'. I'm sure you know it as Paradise Orphanage. We were tossed around from one foster home to another, but I don't think anyone wanted children our age cause we always ended up back there. That's where we stayed, stuck in that hell hole for over a year before our grandparents found us. But, what does that have to do with my nightmares?" I reluctantly asked, then cringed when I realized what he was attempting to imply.

“To lose ones parents is very traumatizing, even more so at such a young age. Coupled with what you and Kaya had to experience, it becomes unimaginable. Your head injury, and recent loss, could have brought it all to the surface.”

“There is not one word in this world that can describe what that did to us! But, like I told you, that has nothing to do with what's going on! I've been consumed by darkness, that face has been my torture, and now it's grown into something even darker, into evil!”

“You know, the mind has what I call, a built in coping mechanism. You can say it's like a safeguard which gives us the ability to continue functioning after trauma such as yours. Dormant memories, so to speak, and they can be dark as night without any regard for the pain they inflict. But they are memories, and at some point they do resurface to play havoc upon the mind. I have only made reference to your recent trauma, because that could very well have been the trigger.”

“Dr. Jacobs!” I said sharply. I'd had enough. No way was I going to let him continue with his text book bullshit, or whatever bullshit he was trying to throw my way. “Not only have I come to terms with my parents' death, I've adapted and gone on with my life. That accident, if it was one, did not bring back any memories of my childhood! I don't know how you could even compare the two! What you're implying is that my memories are bad, and that is not the case.”

“Sometimes our minds may lead us to believe it is one thing, when in actuality it is the other. You can see good as bad, and vice

versa.”

“What I believe is that our grandparents opened up their hearts, as well as their home. It was with their love and guidance that I overcame my, “dormant memories, so to speak”! And I can assure you that face is not a damn memory! There is no vice versa period!”

“Love is the best way to overcome tragedy, it strengthens us, shapes us, points us in the right direction. I’m glad you found that with your grandparents, and were not lost in the idiocies of foster care.”

“That’s the first thing you’ve said since I got here, that I agree with, Dr. Jacobs.”

“At least there is one thing we can agree upon. Aiyana, tell me how you felt being lost and waiting for your grandparents?”

“It was the worst feeling in the world! Kay and I were so scared and alone. If it wasn’t for them finding us...I...I...don’t know what would have happened to us...” I could hear the fear in my voice, and not only did it make me shiver, it made me wonder if there actually could be a connection.

“I’m a little confused as to why your grandparents had to find you, and how you ended up in that orphanage for so long if you had family.”

“Our parents moved away before we were born. Our grandparents didn’t know where we were.”

“Can you tell me why?”

“I really don’t want to get into that right now. It’s a long, sad story, and it doesn’t have any bearing on what’s going on. My

parents have been gone for twenty years, if these nightmares had anything to do with that, I would've had them long ago. They started after I saw that thing.”

“Aiyana, I know you think you saw something kill one of your patients, but you are associating that with evil, and with your dreams. Believe me, I can understand how you would think that. With any tragedy, we can automatically assume it to be evil. That is due to the pain it inflicts deep in our hearts. But if you talk about the past, the hurt, the fear, it will help you to see the bearing they have on your dreams. You’ll be able to see it’s not evil.”

“You don’t understand, you don’t even believe me. All you’re trying to do is find a way around them!” I irritably said.

“No, Aiyana. That is not my intent. My goal, let me rephrase that, our goal, is to explore every possible cause. There is always a reason for something, and once we find it, your dreams will stop.”

I hesitated. “Alright...fine...I’ll tell you everything, if you promise that when I’m done, you’ll stop trying to connect something I know has nothing to do with my nightmares.” The sadness I felt when my grandparents had told Kaya and I about our parents had never left me, and I had chosen not to ever talk about it. But I knew I could do it, and I would. I’d pacify him.

“Fair enough.”

I drew in a deep breath, “According to my grandparents, my mom and dad met when they were very young. It was love at first sight. They were inseparable, but her family wouldn’t allow them to be together. They decided to move away without telling anyone

where they were going. They wanted to get married, and that was the only way they could.” The tears that I’d come to know again welled in my eyes. With all the idiotic questions the other therapists had asked, Dr. Jacobs had surpassed them.

“It’s alright, Aiyana. I’m sorry. Perhaps I should not have asked such a personal question. You do not have to continue,” he said softly.

“No...I already started, and I want to finish.”

“If you’re sure, please continue.”

“My grandparents said that my dad always wrote letters telling them how happy we were, and for them not to worry. They sent tons of pictures of Kaya and I, but wouldn’t tell them where we were. They were afraid of what my mother’s parents would do. My grandma said that my dad had told her, if my mom’s parents ever found them, they would have killed him and taken us away forever...” I stopped to take a breath.

“I do not think there is one person on this earth who lives their life unscathed. At some point in time, pain finds its way into the souls of all. There is no exception to that rule, not for you, nor I. If you feel up to it, Aiyana, I’d like to hear the rest.”

“Yeah...and Dr. Jacobs, what you just said, I find myself agreeing with. I know my grandparents felt that same heartbreak when they lost my dad, he was their only child. They didn’t even know until a year after it happened. Can you imagine how they must have felt? To not hear from your son for that long, to not know why, just the thoughts that ran through their heads...then to find out he’s

dead, his wife is dead, and your grandchildren are in some orphanage?” My tears now poured as I sobbed. I thought my nightmares had control of them with the fear it taunted me with. But as I heard my own words, words that I had not spoken in years, I knew no one had control of my tears, not even me.

“I’m so very sorry, Aiyana,” Dr. Jacobs said as he quickly reached for a box of tissues from his desk, then just about ran towards me.

“Thank you...” I said as he handed the box to me. As I reached for it, our fingers touched, and I remembered that time in the hospital when I had cried. Dr. Stevens handed me a box of tissues then as well, and I had felt that his concern was genuine. It felt the same way now with Dr. Jacobs, only stronger.

“To have gone through all that pain at such a young age. I could never begin to imagine,” he said as he walked back to his desk. “But the subconscious can bring out past memories, fears, and regrets in many ways, dreams being one of them. The tragic loss of your patient, the loss of your parents, the pain, the guilt they left you with, and being lost in that orphanage. Do you not see that you are connecting these things?”

“The only regret I have is that my parents aren't here. What little memories I have of them...are the best. My guilt is that I couldn't do anything to save them...or my patient...” I shakily whispered.

“The recesses of our minds are wide open spaces with more than enough room to hide that which we can not accept. It is like a mirror, and at times will show you what you are not ready to see.”

“How do I make you understand? I accepted their death long ago. I’ve seen my mother and father in my dreams before, but they were happy dreams, and never have they been dark, ugly or filled with evil.”

“Dark, ugly, evil. You constantly use those words to describe your dreams. The accident is the darkest and ugliest memory that you have of your parents. You connect the two, and you perceive them as evil, and that is what you see in your dreams now.”

“Dr. Jacobs, my parents' death was very hard for me and Kaya. But those memories don't have anything to do with my nightmares!”

“Children calling for your help. A little girl alone and lost. You describe a horrid face, but no body. That implies helplessness, for without limbs you can not help. Your parents taken from you and no longer able to help you, or give you what you need. The close correlation between these factors is unmistakable. Do you not see that?”

“No! You're trying to connect my parents to my nightmares so that you can easily dismiss them. 'Poor little Aiyana lost her parents when she was only a child. Now she sees a floating face, a little girl, and hears cries in her nightmares.' Why is that Dr. Jacobs? Are the implications that I need help? That I’ve lost my mind?”

“Aiyana, I am the fourth therapist that you have seen, to me that implies you need help. There are numerous reasons why people from all walks of life come to me for help. It can be something as simple as wanting to quit smoking, to marital problems, job related stress, everyday stress, and dreams. Does that imply they’ve all lost their

minds?”

“No...of course not.”

“You are not the only person to ever have recurrent bad dreams. I have dealt with quite a few, and I have found that they are often related to childhood trauma. And you have had more trauma than anyone should have to endure.”

“No, Dr. Jacobs! There's nothing you can say that will make me believe that 'childhood trauma' has anything to do with my nightmares,” I answered sharply as I sat up, questioning my sanity for still being here.

“Aiyana, it is not my place to question what you believe or do not believe. It is my place, to help you find answers and bring an end to your nightmares. Please, lay back down and continue,” he said with a polite nod of his head.

Against my better judgment I laid back, but that seemed my only recourse. I was running out of therapists. I knew he'd be the last one. I couldn't do number five. “It's not my parents' death, and I can't be any clearer on that, Dr. Jacobs! It's pure evil that hides in the face of my nightmares, as if it bides its time. That thing is after me, I know It is! The voices that I heard and the little girl I saw, are not Kay and I desperately searching for our parents!”

“Evil after you? No, evil does not chase you, but dark, ugly memories do.”

“I'll agree those memories are horrible, but they don't chase me, evil does! That rancid smell, that distorted face, and that breathing! They echo through the dark sending shivers down my spine. If that's

not evil, then what the hell is it?”

“The mind is very capable of showing you what you want to see. It can play tricks on you, confuse you, and cloud certain memories.”

“Maybe that accident was meant for me, what if I was supposed to die, not my parents? What if the evil that took them has come back for me?”

“Aiyana. Evil did not take your parents, it was a tragic accident.”

“How do you know? You weren’t there!” I shouted, hoping I’d grab his attention. I wasn’t sure what kind of reaction I wanted, but I knew I wanted him to feel something.

“No, I was not, but I know your heart is filled with enough pain, you should not torture yourself with questions to which there are no answers. Who should have died or who should have lived?” he answered in such a sad tone.

The look on his face was even sadder. I wondered if that was the reaction I’d wanted, but maybe it wasn’t. I didn’t want his pity! I wanted him to believe me! So, I took it a bit further. “Yes, Dr. Jacobs! Maybe I was supposed to die, or maybe Kay was. She was in the car too. Hell, maybe we were both supposed to...”

“Aiyana!” he quickly cut me off, his voice sharp, one I wasn’t used to from a man. Not only did goose bumps run over my skin, but I felt like I’d jump out to join them. I wondered if I had gone too far, that wasn’t the reaction I’d wanted from him either. “Those thoughts should not be in your head. Those words that should not be spoken,

and certainly not questioned, flowed much too easily from your mouth! That accident was just that, an accident, not evil, not malice, just a horrible accident!”

“Yeah, that’s why my parents aren’t here, but Kaya and I are! That’s why that thing has come back for me, to make things right!” I retorted.

“You cannot honestly believe supernatural forces dictate the time we have on this earth. That is impossible.”

“Maybe they do, Dr. Jacobs. Haven’t you ever wondered why bad things happen to good people?”

“They most certainly do not. Nor do they pick and choose who lives or dies anymore than we do. But it is our birth right to live the time that we have to the best of our abilities. It is what we do with the time we are given that defines who we are. If we waste that precious time attempting to second guess death, what does that make us?” he said his words with precise clarity, as though he wanted me to attack.

He wanted me to say something else, something just as foolish. I wasn’t going to. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. He knew just how much his words had stung, I saw it in his face, and they did. They stung my body like a thousand bees protecting their hive, in rapid succession. I felt pain, anger, frustration, helplessness and guilt. I couldn’t believe he had the gall to talk to me like that, not when he didn’t even look old enough to wipe his own ass. But I knew deep in my heart he was right. It was just a horrible accident. I’d always known that, just as much as I wished it had never

happened, just as the darkness knew my weakness, my fears and my remorse. I became a nurse so I would have a better understanding of death. My words had only been meant to get Dr. Jacobs' attention and make him listen to me. I had to make him react, make him understand that he was wrong. I wanted him to know, in no uncertain terms, that my parents' death wasn't the cause of my nightmares. But it backfired in my face.

“Dr. Jacobs,” I finally worked up enough nerve to say. “You’ve made it more than clear that you don’t believe in evil. That’s fine. But explain to me why I’ve had these nightmares since seeing that horrid face? Because prior to that, I assure you, I was fine.”

“That face was more than likely your minds perception of what you assume evil to look like. You associate evil with death. That is how you coped with your parents' death, and now the loss of your patient. Your guilt for not being able to save them could be the catalyst.”

“Alright then! Explain why the administrator blackmailed me into keeping my mouth shut.”

“Coyote Hills is a psychiatric facility. Human nature dictates, to accept something, you must understand it. Do you realize how many people are scared of places like that? Because they do not understand behavioral disorders, they automatically think, insane asylum. What do you think they associate with that? I’d say dangerous and out of control patients! Any type of bad publicity would have the public in an uproar.”

“I understand that, but Mr. Simmons even knew what It looked

like, and he tried to hide it. Believe me when I tell you something is going on there, and I think it's evil. That thing knows I saw It and now Its come to me in my nightmares, lurking, waiting for me."

"If you believe that this evil you sense has come for you in your nightmares, how do you think it is going to get you?"

"I don't know...maybe the same way it took Mr. Blidsen."

"Tell me how you interpret evil? What do you think it is? What do you think it looks like?"

"I think it's anything that takes pleasure in death. It enjoys killing, torture, and inflicting pain. It has a black, empty soul, a decaying body and that rancid smell."

"Throughout history there have been numerous powerful figures that fit that description. Off the top of my head I can name a few; Hitler, Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun. Do you perceive them as evil, or just very horrible men with dark, empty souls?"

"I...I'm not sure. I know they killed thousands of people, they were ruthless...but that thing is different. I know It's evil!"

"You said you have seen it kill, you believe it caused your accident and you've seen it in your dreams. So do you think it's real, or an apparition?"

"I...I don't quite know what that thing is. I haven't been able to figure it out yet. But I know if I've seen It, and the patients have seen It, then It has to be real."

"Aiyana, you have only seen a face, has anyone else besides you or your patients seen it? Now, if it were real it would have a body. You witnessed your patient dying and it brought back all your

memories of your parents. Your mind interpreted a face, one you associated with evil, and that's what you saw. Because of the guilt you felt for not being able to save him, or your parents, it has grown into your dreams."

I didn't know how to answer that, it made so much sense. How could that thing be real? Even if It wasn't, and It was a ghost, why did I only see a face? Where the hell was the rest of Its body? Maybe Dr. Jacobs was right. Hell, for that matter, so were Dr. Stevens and the other therapists. My mind projected what it wanted to see.

"Aiyana, I'm sorry, our time is over. If you'd like, we can schedule an appointment for tomorrow morning, say around eight? And perhaps we can try something different."

"Yes, Dr. Jacobs, I can actually say I'd like another appointment, but can you tell me what it is you'd like to try?"

"Have you ever heard of relaxation therapy?"

"Yes, but isn't that the same as hypnotizing someone?"

"Not exactly the same. I focus on the mind and body as a whole. I attempt to restore the balance, bringing the two together. When your entire body is in a normal rhythm, you can see with clarity, which perhaps may have become clouded with misjudged thoughts."

"Okay...but if you're going to try and hypnotize me, I have to tell you, I doubt it'll work. I don't believe in that crap. I think it's designed for the weak minded."

"You believe in evil forces, but not in hypnotism? You are a contradiction in itself, Aiyana." he chuckled. "Alright then, until tomorrow, and please make sure to get enough rest. We will have a

busy day,” he answered, standing up.

“Thank you, Dr. Jacobs. I’ll see you in the morning,” I said as he walked to the door and opened it.

“Good night.”

I nodded my head and actually smiled at him, it was a little one, but nevertheless, I had finally smiled at a therapist. I walked out and hurried through the small office, down the hall, and to the elevator. The doors opened to the parking garage and I ran to my car.

As soon as I got home, I called Kaya. I told her I thought I’d finally found the person that could help me, instead of just another moronic quack. She was ecstatic and screamed in my ear, “Oh thank god! It’s about fucking time! I hope this means your nightmares will stop.”

“Yeah, me too.”

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I made it through the night without a nightmare. I thought that had to be a good sign. There was no darkness, no face, no fear and no running after what I couldn't see, but I wouldn't let It trick me. I wouldn't let It lure me into a false sense of security. No, I knew better. The darkness would come for me again. It wouldn't stop, not until I found a way to stop It. But for now I had a sense of reprieve, and as much as my nightmares had been torturing me, I would gladly take it.

I quickly got dressed, and as I pulled my hat over my head, I noticed my dull eyes in the mirror. I had only been wearing foundation to hide the bruising, but now that it was gone, I thought I'd put all my makeup on. It was seven forty five when I arrived at Dr. Jacobs' office, and he was just unlocking the door.

"Good Morning, Dr. Jacobs," I said as I approached him.

"Aiyana! You look well rested. I'm glad. You're a little early, my receptionist isn't here yet," he answered, and I noticed he sounded a bit less formal than he did yesterday. "Well, why don't you just come in and we can get started."

"Alright, thank you."

"Just lay down and make yourself as comfortable as you can," he said as he walked to his desk and sat down.

I laid on the couch and tried to get comfortable, but I was just too nervous. “Dr. Jacobs, do you really think this is going to help?” I asked reluctantly. “I don’t really understand how it’s going to end my nightmares.”

“This method is one that I’ve been using for years. It is more of a relaxation state that will help your mind differentiate between what is real, and what is not.”

“So, are you saying you’re going to hypnotize me so you can determine if I’m crazy or not?”

“No, of course not...” he chuckled. “This has been highly effective with eighty five percent of my patients who have had recurrent dreams. I believe it will help us get to the heart of the matter very quickly.”

“Alright...I just hope it works,” I sighed.

“All I ask is that you keep an open mind, and we’ll begin.”

“I desperately want answers, so...I’ll keep my mind as open as I can. At this point, I don’t have anything to lose,” I answered, shaking my head.

He actually smiled. A warm and caring smile that eased my apprehension, a little anyway. He then reached for what looked like a dark brown, triangular shaped, large clay brick. It was on top of a messy stack of files. I thought it was just there to keep them from falling. As he held it in his right hand, I noticed odd looking ridges curved along the top. An opening that resembled a miniature door was right in the middle. It was weird, I’d never seen anything like it before. He lit a match and stuck it into the small door. Five seconds

later, he brought out the match, held it up to his lips, and blew it out, letting it fall to the floor. He then set the object on the desk, perfectly in the middle.

I watched, almost mesmerized as gray smoke began to swirl out of the tiny door and quickly spiraled to the ceiling. I wondered what the heck this odd, but amazing, thing was. The smoke began to form different shapes, outlines of silhouettes, and I envisioned people dancing around a fire.

He stood up and slowly walked over to the window, next to the couch I was on. “Our objective, Aiyana, is to understand the human psyche, not evil, and with it hopefully the underlying contributors of your dreams,” he said as he closed the blinds and dimmed the room.

I cringed as his words echoed in my ears, how the hell? No flippin' way could he have heard my thoughts from yesterday. Then a familiar scent entered my nostrils. I was taken aback as my mind reveled in reminiscent fragrances of my youth, but ones I couldn't identify.

“Relax, Aiyana. Close your eyes and breathe in...through your nostrils...out...through your mouth...inhale the soothing pinon and sage...hold it deep and let the mist fill your body and clear your mind of all worries,” he said, his voice just above a whisper.

I closed my eyes like he asked, but my body paid no heed to his words. I was stiff as a board. I repositioned myself over and over, fidgeting like a nervous school girl, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't relax. I thought he had to be crazy. Honestly, did he believe this was going to work? Already I found myself disappointed. Just

from those few words I knew it wasn't going to happen.

“My words are all that fill your mind, listen to them, Aiyana. Listen...as they sing you a lullaby to sleep...restful...peaceful sleep. Sleep...Aiyana...sleep that shall take you into your dream. Your dream...Aiyana...that you will control...you will control...”

I heard his words like a dull throb in my head, but I was still awake and still stiff. 'Okay remember, open mind. I have to keep an open mind,' I repeated over and over in my head, hoping it would work.

“Your eyes are heavy...you feel them cover you like a soft, warm blanket...you are in your dream...relaxed...relaxed...and in control. Remember. Remember...the darkness that surrounds you is but an empty shell that only hides the fear you place in it. Fear that survives on weakness, and you will not allow it any! Control...Aiyana...strength...and you will see what is there...”

His words became a sweet whisper that lingered in my ear, and suddenly my thoughts stopped as my body fell limp. My breathing slowed, almost to a stand still. “Dark, it's so dark. I can't see anything but shadows. They're waiting to devour me, I know it! That face in the darkness, It wants me, It sent them for me. I won't let them take me. I have to get out of here!” My words echoed as if I stood next to my limp body and shouted in my ears what my eyes saw before them.

“No...the face will not harm you. The darkness is empty, it has no power. You have all the power, use it, Aiyana!” I heard Dr. Jacobs' words in my mind. I felt he must be here, he must be in the

darkness with me.

“My feet! I can’t move. There’s something wet, sticky, it has a hold and won’t let me move! It feels like I’m slipping!!”

“Do not run away. Steady yourself and you will not fall. Remember...it is your dream, and you control it. Fear is only as strong as you allow it to be. You will not allow it that courtesy this day. Now, look into the darkness...”

“I...I...can’t! I know that thing is there waiting for me! It lives in the darkness. Dr. Jacobs, where are you? I can’t see you!”

“I’m here with you. There’s nothing to be frightened of. Remember, darkness is but an empty shell with nothing to fear.”

“It’s too dark. I can’t...please help me!”

“The darkness quickly fades and it is being replaced by warm sunshine that lights the way. Embrace the light, Aiyana, it is stronger than the darkness. Look at the beauty that now surrounds you. What do you see?”

“Hot...so hot...I can’t breathe. There’s a horrid smell. It’s getting stronger and stronger. Feces...urine...no! I have to get away!” I felt myself heave.

“Aiyana, hear my words. Control your breathing...smell the pinon and sage...let it take over your senses. There is no other smell. There’s a breeze that stirs around you. Feel the coolness as it touches upon your skin.”

“That scent! Where have I smelled it before? My...my grandmother. I remember it’s so...so...calming.”

“Yes, Aiyana...your grandmother holds you tight in her arms.

As long as her strength surrounds you, no one can harm you! It is through her eyes that you will see. You will see everything!”

“Blood! It’s blood under my feet! Oh my god, it’s everywhere! Just like with Mr. Blidsen! My god...It’s going to rip me apart!” I felt my hands quickly move over my chest, trying to protect it.

“Aiyana, please...relax...let your hands fall...you are not hurt. It is not your blood. Now, carefully look about your surroundings. Remember, your grandmother shields you, and she will not let anyone hurt you. Where is the blood coming from?”

“I don’t know...all I see is blood!” My head jerked frantically, up, down, side to side. “Wait...I see something. Some type of room at the other end.”

“Walk to the room, Aiyana. Find where the blood is coming from.”

“I can’t...I can’t move! If I do, I’m going to fall into the blood. All this blood...It wants to drown me!”

“No, you’ll not allow it to! Now steady yourself, slowly take one step at a time.”

“There’s too much blood. It’s sticking to my feet, trying to hold me down. It won’t let me move! It’s trying to keep me here so I can’t see.” I felt panic as my chest tightened.

“It’s alright...remember, you control it. It does not control you! Now lift your feet, Aiyana, let your strength guide you!”

My foot felt as though it weighed a hundred pounds as I slowly picked it up. “That sound! That horrible wet, gooey sound under my feet. Help me, please!” I felt my chest expand rapidly, almost to the

point of exploding.

“Relax...slow your breathing. Slow and easy...the sound you hear is a crisp, cool, flowing river. It’s going to help you. Let the water take you away, Aiyana...”

I felt the sticky, slurping, swishing sound release its hold on my feet as it turned to a splash. I saw soft, soothing blue and my feet began to move with an easiness, almost sliding as they took me further into the light. A foreboding then swept through me, and I felt my expanding chest tighten its hold around my heart. Crushing and twisting it with every step I took.

“Aiyana, where does the water take you?”

“I...I’m walking down a long corridor. There’s lights, big, bright lights hanging along the ceiling. There’s a door to my right,” I felt myself reach for the knob. “It won’t turn...”

“Aiyana, leave it, and continue towards the room.”

“Yes, the room...there at the end!” my arm quickly pointed straight. “I...I see some kind of big boxes inside.”

“Keep moving...calmly...slowly...”

“I...I’m almost there. Voices...I hear voices, getting louder and louder. It’s the children’s voices! They’ve come back to me! They’re calling me, ‘Aiyana...Aiyana...’ Why won’t you tell me how you know my name? Please, just answer me and tell me what you want from me?!” I asked.

“Did they answer you?”

“No...they won’t answer me. Why don’t they answer me?”

“Are the voices familiar to you?”

“No...no...it’s just the children. Crying, I hear them crying, 'Help us...help us...' They need me!”

“Aiyana, who needs you? What children?”

“No!! Oh my god, no!! There’s cages!! Hundreds of them against the wall, filled with children! I have to get them out!!” I heard the desperation in my voice echo in my head as it rebounded from one end to the other. I ran towards the cages.

“Easy...slow yourself down...what do you see?”

“Thin, bloodied little fingers, holding tightly to the bars. Ragged, filthy hospital gowns barely cover their frail bodies. Oh my god...they have tiny, tiny, faces. Big, black eyes poking through the spaces between the cages, looking at me!” I felt the horror in their eyes, it pierced right through me. I thought my heart had stopped beating.

“Aiyana, please remain calm. Calm and relaxed. Control your breathing.”

I barely heard Dr. Jacobs' words as I hurried from one cage to the other, frantically struggling with the bars. The children's hands, such small hands, desperately grabbed through. “Who did this to you?” I asked, but they didn’t answer. “Why are you in these damn cages? Please answer me, tell me who did this!!”

“Are the children answering you? Why are they there?”

“No, they won’t answer me! They just stare. Stare at me with those sad eyes!”

“Alright, slow down, maybe they can’t talk. Try to gesture with your hands and see if they respond.”

“They won’t, they just stare! They just stare! I don’t understand! I heard you call my name. I know you can talk. Why? Why won’t you talk to me? Tell me why you’re doing this?”

“Aiyana, it’s okay, they’re just frightened. Now look at the cages. Can you get them out?”

“Locks! There’s locks on them. I can’t get them off. Help me, help me get them open, please!” My hands shakily pried at the locks, and as they began to throb, panic sank deeper in my gut. A noise, a terrifying noise, I thought more horrifying than the sound of the blood under my feet, sent shivers up and down my spine. “Wh...what’s that?” I gasped as my entire body jerked and my eyes searched aimlessly.

“Aiyana, what’s wrong? Is it the children?”

“No...I hear something...” *Clink-clink-clink*, getting louder and louder. *Tap-tap-tap*, getting closer and closer. “I think It’s coming...”

“Stay focused, calm...can you see what it is?”

“It’s too late!! I can feel It. The evil that hides in the darkness...It’s here! Taunting me...coming through the corridor towards me! I hear It’s raspy breathing. I smell that rancid stench. It’s white! I see white. No...it’s so bright, it hurts my eyes. Red! Red! It’s covered in red! What the hell do you want from me!? Stay away from us. Don’t come any closer!!” I screamed, and felt my heart pounding against my chest.

“It can’t hurt you, you control it!! Look at it and tell me what you see.”

“That deformed face, rotting flesh, Its yellow eyes are laughing

at me. It's coming closer, I have to get away. But the children, what about the children? I can't leave them!" I thought my strength had completely left me, my legs had turned to melting rubber. I felt my knees buckle. "No!!!"

"Calm...and relaxed...you will wake up refreshed, Aiyana. You will remember everything...now!"

I felt my back painfully flop against the couch, and thought I'd been dropped from thirty feet. My eyes jarred open to the beige ceiling above. My body trembled uncontrollably as my head bobbed, desperately searching for safety. But all I saw were beige walls, blinds, doors, carpet, and a horrid blinding red that flashed in my eyes.

"Get the hell away from us! Don't come any closer!!" I screamed, bolting to a sitting position.

"Aiyana, you are safe in my office and no one can harm you. Listen to my words, let them guide you," Dr. Jacobs whispered softly. "Relax...control your breathing..."

I heard Dr. Jacobs and my head quickly followed the comfort of his voice. The horrible contrast of red against beige began to fade from my mind and I saw the bottom of his black loafers. He sat with his feet on top of the desk, a notebook on his lap and pencil in his left hand.

"Welcome back, Aiyana. How do you feel?"

'How the hell do you think I feel? Look at me! I can't stop shaking and my heart feels like it's going to explode!' My thoughts ransacked my head as I sat there without saying a word and looked

helplessly into his eyes. Then it hit me, it had really worked! I was out. My arms quickly wrapped around my shoulders. I rubbed briskly, hoping it would stop the trembling.

“It’s alright, Aiyana. Please take your time and gather your thoughts. When you are ready to answer my questions, let me know. I have no further appointments today, so please lay back down, relax, and try to make yourself comfortable,” he said without even blinking an eye as he stared into mine.

I stared back and thought he was much too calm, sitting as comfortably as a baby swathed in a warm blanket, while I trembled like an earthquake. He scooted his legs off the desk as he placed the notebook and pencil down, then stood up and turned around. He opened a door behind him and reached for something, then walked around the desk towards me with something dark clutched in his arms. My eyes felt as if they pulsed as I watched his every step, and before I was even able to blink, he stood to my right. He began to unfold what he held in his arms, then gently placed it around my shoulders, it felt so good as the warmth and softness touched me. I grabbed the blanket and clung to it, just like it was my lifeline, my separation from the darkness. Then slowly I sat back and pulled my legs up tight against my chest, covering them.

“That should help to ease your shaking a bit,” he said with a smile.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Now, once you warm up you can do whatever you’d like. You can go home, or we can talk and attempt to decipher and put together

what you saw. The choice, as always, will be yours, Aiyana,” he spoke very softly, and I could feel his sincerity, his concern.

He was the one I had told Kaya he was. I sensed his need, his want to help, and now I sensed it even more so. I warmed up quickly, and as my body stopped shivering, my thoughts became crystal clear. I focused on what I’d seen, my nightmares had never been like that before. God...the horrifying visions of the children chilled me to the bone, but I managed to remain calm. It was like that light at the end of a dark tunnel that you see, and sigh a breath of relief when you come to the end of it.

“Dr. Jacobs...” I barely whispered. “I’m not crazy, and I know what I’m about to say is going to sound completely insane. If anyone had said this to me, I’d think them crazy too. But after what I just experienced, there is no way that you can make me believe otherwise. I know why the children are calling for help.”

“Why, Aiyana? Tell me, why do you think they are?”

“I think they need me...they need my help because that thing has a hold on them and they need me to save them,” I answered just above my breath, as though I were worried It would hear me.

“You said they did not answer you, yet you think they need you to save them?” he asked, arching his brow.

“Yes, I do. That’s why they’ve been calling for me. And I think the children that I saw in the cages are the same ones my patients at Coyote Hills have seen.”

“Lets just say, for arguments sake, that they are the same. Do you think they are real? Or are they apparitions? If they are real,

where are they? If they are apparitions, how are you to save them?” his brow remained arched as he began to stroke his chin, and by the look on his face, I knew he thought me a delusional fool.

“Dr. Jacobs,” I said firmly. “You are the first of four therapists to actually make an effort and try to help me...”

“That is what I am here for, to...”

“Let me finish, please,” I said cutting him off, just as he did me.

“Of course, please continue.”

“You experienced severe trauma with your accident, combined with the loss of a patient, it increased your stress levels. As a result, your suppressed childhood memories resurfaced in your dreams, causing your obvious lack of sleep. Which in turn caused a chemical imbalance of serotonin in the brain.' Post traumatic stress, right? Well, that's what they all said, and along with it, nice, heavy doses of Tofranil and Valium. Is that how you're going to sweep them away too?” I asked, arching my brow as well.

“Aiyana, it is for the well being of our patients, not only mind, but body and soul as well, that doctors attempt to heal.”

“There's nothing wrong with my mind, nor my body. I'm not sick, and I'm not crazy, and no amount of medication you give me will change that! I don't know if they're real, or ghosts. I don't know what that thing is, but I've seen them, and that's real enough!”

“You misunderstand me, Aiyana. To heal does not necessarily imply sickness. I referred to healing the body as a whole, not a specific part. As doctors, we must remain rational, as well as scientific, so that we may analyze all information gathered in

therapy. If we did not do that, and just gave in to every patient who claimed to see supernatural forces, over half the worlds population would be seeing ghosts everyday. There would be no need for doctors, for that matter, logic or sanity.”

“That was so...not the answer I was hoping for.”

“Aiyana, I do not think you are crazy in any way, shape or form. I do think your mind has seen more heartache than it can process, allowing you to perceive in your own way what it can not. Do I believe your dreams to be supernatural? Of course not. Do I believe you have seen unnatural forces kill someone? Of course not. With that said, let us continue,” he answered with a big smile, then walked to the window.

'How in the hell are we going to do that if you don't believe me?' I thought, as I watched him casually open the blinds. The light quickly shone through the window, pushing out the dark, as though it vied for my attention and knew the trickery of the darkness. I had to cover my eyes for a few moments from the blinding glare. Then I noticed that weird object in the middle of his desk, it reflected awkwardly through my fingers. I thought it called to me, and I couldn't stop myself from asking, “What's that on your desk? And those scents you were burning?”

“That is called a Horno Oven, a miniature one anyway,” he replied as he returned to his desk.

If that was a miniature one, what does a regular one look like, I wondered.

He picked it up and emptied the ashes into the trash can. “The

Navajo have used them for centuries in various rituals. The potent scents are pinon and sage, which they believe to have healing properties,” he said as he sat down and placed it back on the stack of files. “I hope I did not offend you in any way by using them in our session, but I find they help with relaxation, and to open the mind.”

“No...no, of course not. I was just curious. There’s something familiar about them, that’s all,” I practically mumbled after he said Navajo.

“If there is something that you would like to know, please feel free to ask. This is not just a one way street. You can ask me anything, and I will try to answer to the best of my ability.”

“You said Navajo, and I was just a little confused. I remembered, it reminded me of my grandmother.”

“Is she Navajo?” he asked.

“I’m not sure...I mean, I don’t even know.”

“She raised you and your sister, yet you don’t know?”

“No, not my father's mom. I meant my mother's.”

“The Navajo are a very big clan, they settled in parts of this region long ago. She could very well be of the lineage, and I do believe they still frequent the high plans.”

“I didn’t know there were Navajo here in Paradise Flats.”

“Not too many here do realize that. I suppose it’s because the Navajo pretty much keep to themselves. Can you tell me a little more about your grandmother?”

“My memories of her are vague...and that's the first I’ve had in years,” I answered, afraid to go any further, knowing that what I

said, he would try to connect to my nightmares.

“Aiyana, I am truly sorry for all the hurt that has touched your heart. I know my questions must seem harsh and insignificant, but I must look for rational answers.”

“Thank you for your compassion, Dr. Jacobs. I sincerely mean that,” I answered, and truly did appreciate his sincerity. I felt as if he wanted to believe me, but for reasons of his own, he couldn’t.

“Sometimes being a doctor is not easy. We tend to be more physiological, than personal. But being one dictates that I find logical causes of your nightmares. From what I have seen and heard, it leads me to believe it is the traumatizing events of your childhood.”

Just when I thought he was actually trying to help, he throws me for a loop. Was no one ever going to believe me? “I understand that probably more than you know, but that doesn’t mean I agree with you.”

“Aiyana, you’ve said that you have accepted what’s happened to you, but are you happy with your life?” he asked.

“I know my parents wanted Kaya and I to be happy. With that imbedded in our minds, we managed to go on with our lives, for them.”

“Of course, that’s exactly what your parents wanted for you. Do not ever question that. I only questioned a possible connection with your dreams, and you didn’t answer my question, you managed to go around it.”

“Dr. Jacobs, there is no connection. Granted, I have a lot of bad

memories, as well as missing pieces of my childhood, but I've had those for years, and yes, have managed to be happy. I know whatever unresolved feelings, or hell, for that matter, dormant anything that you think I may have, are not the cause of my nightmares."

"I'm sorry. I seem to do that every time."

"I don't need anymore of your apologies. I've accepted it long ago. What I need is your help, not your pity."

"That is exactly what I intend to give you. Now, let's get back to your nightmares. We were talking about the children."

"Yeah...the children...they were so scared and alone, they needed me. I felt the terror in their eyes, and I know it's that thing that has them so frightened."

"As you and your sister were when you lost your parents?"

"Yes...no! Damn it! I thought we were past this, Dr. Jacobs! Now you're trying to confuse me."

"I am not trying to confuse you. I just want you to hear what you are saying, Aiyana. Do you not see the similarity between what you have told me, and your dreams?"

"I know how similar it sounds. I'm not stupid. If it wasn't for the strong sense of evil that I felt in them, seeing that thing slash my patient, seeing that little girl, maybe I'd agree with you. But please, just for once in this damn session, can you listen to me?"

"What kind of therapist would I be if I did not question my patients? Don't answer that, it's a rhetorical question. But since you were willing to keep an open mind, I will attempt to do the same."

Tell me, you said they need you to save them. Do you know where the children are?”

“In some sort of building. I’m not really sure, but I felt the same evil from my nightmares hiding in it. I think that face is somehow growing stronger. It seems to have control over the children.”

“What kind of control do you think it has?”

“I’m not sure...but It does. Maybe that’s why they don’t answer me. When my dreams first started I saw the same little girl, she knew my name. I think she was trying to communicate with me, and that thing knew. It must have stopped her, I haven’t seen her in my dreams for weeks.”

“That does not mean it has power over your dreams. All dreams are different, they may be recurrent, but they are not exactly the same every time.”

“No, It does! I know it! My nightmares are always different, but that thing is always in them. It’s always there waiting for me in the darkness. It taunts me, telling me I’m going to join them soon,” I shakily answered.

“Join who, Aiyana?”

“I think It’s talking about the children. Whatever Its doing to them, It wants to do the same to me.”

“You said the children were scared, and that thing was coming. Was it coming for them? Did they look like they were hurt?”

“I don’t know...there was blood all over their hands. I saw red on that thing too...maybe it was blood. My god, what if It’s torturing them?”

“But you didn’t see any wounds on them, just blood, so I don’t think they’re being tortured. But you also said they were locked in cages, so they’re being kept against their will. Maybe...”

“My god! That has to be it!” I shouted, cutting him off. “My patients had said the children were there waiting for me, they’ve been waiting a long time. The building, the corridor, the room I saw! That has to be Coyote Hills. That must be where the children are! They said that thing was scared of me because I could see the children. That’s why It pushed me down the stairs, It had to get rid of me, It needed me out of the building!”

“Aiyana, you said you didn’t see the children, only a little girl calling for you. If this thing has that much control, why would it be worried about that? If you hadn’t seen them, why get rid of you? Why would it push you down the stairs if you said it needed you to join them?”

“I...I...don’t know! That’s why I’m here. That’s why I need your help! I don’t understand any of this! I’ve never believed in the supernatural, Dr. Jacobs. I don’t know if they’re ghosts or if they’re real, or my minds projections. All I know is, if I don’t find any answers, the nightmares will continue, and I’ll lose what sanity I have left.”

“No you will not. I can promise you that,” he said firmly.

“Wait!” I gasped. “I hadn’t seen the children until now, but that little girl, when I was in the hospital, I saw her in my dream. She had on a gown just like the other children. Maybe she’s one of them.”

“When you were in the orphanage I can only assume there were

hundreds of children. Maybe there was a little girl that stuck out, maybe an abused one that you couldn't help?"

"No, they all stuck out, Dr. Jacobs, as well as Kaya and I. Believe me, this little girl was far different than any of the children in that damned orphanage. And if you're going to connect the children in the cages to the ones at the orphanage, don't. You're wasting your time."

"No, I was not going to connect them. I know that whatever this is, you truly believe it to be real, and if I am going to help you, I need to treat them as such. But, Aiyana, that does not mean I believe they are. Now, let's move on to the locks that were on the doors you could not open."

"Thank you, Dr. Jacobs. Okay...the locks were odd looking. They were big and rusty, not like any I've ever seen before. They were on every door of the cages, and I couldn't get them off. The children's small hands were poking through the bars, reaching for help...and...I couldn't. I couldn't help!" My words were scratchy, shaky. I felt them creep into my gut. It was that sensation of the trapped dragonfly, helpless with no place to go. I quickly covered my eyes as they began to well up with tears.

"It's going to be alright, Aiyana. I will not give up until we find the answers, nor will I prescribe you medication that you do not need," he gently said.

"Thank you..." I sniffled.

"The sounds, what do you think they were?"

"It was like the sound of metal hitting against metal."

“Metal? Heavy or light sounds? Maybe some type of tools?”

“Sounded like...like keys! Heavy keys hanging on a chain!”

“Perhaps the keys to the locks you saw on the cages?”

“Yes...yes! Dr. Jacobs, you’re right! That’s what it was, keys to those odd locks! My god...It was coming for the children, that’s why It had keys!” I excitedly said. “The 'tap-tapping'...I know that sound! It’s the echo in the corridor of Coyote Hills!”

“Good. Now, white was coming, bright red. Was it some sort of light?”

“It was very bright, my eyes hurt, but I don’t think it was a light.”

“Alright. We have keys on a chain, if It held them, that stands to reason that It has hands. As for the tapping, if it were footsteps, we know It has on shoes, so of course, feet. We have now put a body onto your face, with something white moving. It could be some type of coat, maybe...”

“Yes!” I screamed. “It was a white lab coat covered in blood!”

“Very good, Aiyana. We are going to assume It to be a person, a man, or even a woman. If It wore a white lab coat, let’s assume It to be a medical professional. What about the face, was it the same?”

“Yes...It had rotting flesh with horrid, yellow eyes...and the stench of death!”

“Rotting flesh, yellow eyes...hmm,” Dr. Jacobs arched his brow, scratching his forehead. “It sounds as if this thing is rather sick. Yellow eyes could mean jaundice.”

“I...It...is sick! The horrible wheezing and coughing...and the

rotting flesh is an ashen color, almost black..." I practically stuttered.

"Aiyana, are you alright? You look very pale. I think the length of this session has been too much. You have not fully recovered from your accident and it is not good for you to push yourself. I think perhaps we should end this session and continue tomorrow."

"I'm fine, really, just a little tired...but I don't want to stop. This is the first time I've been able to piece so much of this together."

"I understand your hesitation, but my first concern is your health. You've been here for five hours, that is much too long. Even if you hadn't had a head injury, it would still be much too long. I usually only allow my sessions to last up to three hours."

"I do appreciate that...but there's something else...that little girl. I saw her as clear as day, and not in my dream, at Coyote Hills! That would make her a ghost. That's the connection to my nightmares, Dr. Jacobs. The children!"

"I know you desperately want answers, and I'm going to do everything within my power to help you. I know that I cannot sway you, that is crystal clear. But I do not believe in ghosts, nor do I believe in evil. I can promise you that there is a rational explanation for your nightmares. Do you know the saying, 'For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction'?"

"Who doesn't know that saying? But my reactions have nothing to do with the actions that have happened in my life. Or the actions that are occurring now, and I can promise you that."

"Aiyana, since I was thirteen, the human brain has intrigued me.

Only three pounds of what could be considered a jelly fish. Yet it is a complex organ with so many intricacies, that we could never understand them all.”

“Dr. Jacobs, I think it’s my turn to ask a question. If you don’t mind?”

“Of course not. I have said this is a two way street. Please ask me whatever you'd like,” he politely said.

“Have you ever felt a breeze, even just a slight one, that brushed against you, and you felt your hairs stand straight up as shivers ran down your spine? Your stomach feels like it’s doing flip flops and your entire body just jerks, then you wonder if someone touched you. You look around, you don’t see anybody, but you know someone was there. It’s like the cold wind blowing from the north, you can feel it, you can’t see it, but it has the power to knock you down.”

“I became a doctor because I wanted to decipher, tap, so to speak, into the mind to unlock all the secrets that it hides, and I’m nowhere to even being close. I doubt I ever will be. It’s astounding what our brains are capable of. Although mine is open to nature’s forces, it has yet to believe in supernatural ones.”

“Of course, Dr. Jacobs. My mind knew you’d be scientific about it. I thank you for your honesty, and for today. I actually feel like I’m close to finding answers. So I guess that puts you closer to unlocking the hidden secrets of the mind,” I said with a quick nod.

“I’m glad that I could help, and did not let you down as the others did. By the way, Aiyana, with our minds working together, we

will find the answers, no matter what the source.”

“I actually believe that,” I answered.

“Great minds do think alike, and also need rest. There’s only so much they can talk about before they exhaust themselves. We’ll pick up tomorrow morning, say about ten?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Now, make sure you give your mind plenty of rest, tomorrow will be just as busy for us. Would you like me to prescribe a sleeping pill?” he asked with a mischievous smile.

I knew he was attempting to be funny for my sake, must be an inside joke with therapists to prescribe unnecessary drugs to their patients. He was right though, not only was I exhausted, my mind was numb. It had been much too long of a day. As I stared into his black eyes, I couldn't help but wonder, if I were in his position, would I believe me? Hell, I wasn't even sure if I believed myself. Yet, I desperately wanted him to believe. Ghosts and evil, yeah...that was quite a mouthful to digest, but other than me being delusional, there was no other explanation. I knew the darkness was close to sending me over the edge, but I wasn't quite there yet.

“No thank you, Dr. Jacobs. I’m sure I’ll be fine without the sleepers. If not, I still have a whole bottle at home, from one of my previous visits to a therapist,” I said as I shakily stood up.

He hurried around his desk, I think he thought I was going to fall flat on my face. For a minute, I had thought so as well, my legs felt like rubber. He grasped my hands in his and a warm smile lit up his face. I smiled back, and this time it was a real one. A genuine

smile for the person I knew was finally going to help me find the answers I desperately needed. Although I knew he didn't believe me, and probably never would, at least he'd made an effort and attempted to help me. That was good enough, more than anyone else had done.

“Are you alright?” he worriedly asked.

“I'm fine. I guess I'm more tired than I thought,” I answered.

“If you're sure, then I will see you in the morning. Goodnight,” he sweetly said.

“Goodnight, Dr Jacobs, and again, thank you,” I replied, walking out the door.

JULY 24

I woke up to the continuous ringing of my phone, one eye popped opened and I glanced at my clock. Six forty five! I wasn't sure if the clock was right, and I wondered if I were dreaming. I rubbed my eyes and glanced around. Seeing the dawn break through the window, I knew I wasn't dreaming, I was awake. I had actually slept another night without a nightmare. I couldn't believe it. Had Dr. Jacobs been right? Was it my childhood trauma, my parents' death, my mind seeing what it wanted to see to hide the pain? I didn't know what to think anymore, but at the moment I didn't care. My mind was clear and free of the darkness. Damn, it felt good, then it quickly shifted to irritation. The phone was still ringing. Only one person I could think of would call this fucking early.

"Kay, this better be an emergency," I said as I picked up the receiver.

"Damn right it's an emergency! You didn't come over or call yesterday after your appointment with Dr. Jacobs. You're lucky I'm not banging on your fucking door! Hell, you're lucky Grandma isn't!" she yelled.

"Sorry, don't bite my head off. I was just so exhausted when we finally finished. I was there for hours! When I got home I was just going to take a short nap, then call you and tell you how the session

went. I guess I fell asleep.”

“I can’t believe it! You knew I’d be waiting! I even called you all night long and you didn’t answer the phone. I wouldn’t be surprised if Grandma called too.”

“I must have been more tired than I thought. I really didn’t hear the phone...but best of all, no frickin' nightmare. You know how good I feel right now? Wow, that’s two whole nights of sleep!”

“That has to mean something! He is the one, just like you said. I’m so glad, Aiya. And I didn’t mean to scream at you, I was just so worried. You always call me after your sessions and when you didn’t...I...I...” she sniffled.

“Kay, I’m fine. Please, you worry too much. I’m sorry, I should’ve called as soon as I got home.”

“It’s fine, I’m glad you’re alright. Now, tell me what happened!”

“Well, it was awkward at first, he did that relaxation therapy. I didn’t think it was going to work, but it did. Not only did he help me to piece together my nightmares, but...I remembered something about Grandmother.”

“Like what?”

“Kay, you have to listen carefully, this is really important. I know it’s going to sound stupid, but do you remember Grandmother having a funny smell?”

“What the hell are you talking about, Aiya? Like, she doesn’t shower or something?”

“Quit being stupid! It’s hard to explain. When Dr. Jacobs hypnotized me he used this thing he called a Horno Oven. The scents

he burned made me remember Grandmother for some reason, but he said they were Navajo.”

“You were hypnotized? I don’t believe it. I would have never thought...”

“Kay, come on, this isn't the time. I really need you to think.”

“Okay...I was just kidding. But hypnotized, really?”

“Damn it, Kay!” I shouted.

“Okay...okay. That’s crazy. I don’t think Grandma or Grandpa are Navajo. Unless they dyed their hair blonde and changed their eyes to blue so nobody would know.”

“No! You’re not listening to me, not them. I mean Grandmother, from Mom.”

“Hell, Aiya! How could you have remembered something about Grandmother? I barely even remember her. It’s been forever since I even thought about her.”

“You have to try, this is important. I know that smell has something to do with her. It was an odd smell, but it was really calming.”

“Wait!!” she screamed so loud I almost dropped the damn phone. “I do remember this one time, cause Dad didn’t come with us. Remember? We thought it was odd since the four of us went everywhere together.”

“Yeah...I even asked Dad why he wasn’t coming and he said, ‘This is Mom’s alone time with her girls.’”

“Wow...he did say that, huh? Then he kissed us...god...I miss them so much,” she shakily said.

“I miss them too. I still think about them all the time. But right now, we can’t. I need to find answers.”

“I know. Mom took us for this long drive, there were trees, really big ones. I remember passing a beautiful river right before we came to this really funny looking house.”

“Are you being serious? Come on, a funny looking house? I don’t remember that.”

“No, I’m not kidding, let me finish please.”

“Alright, go ahead.”

“I said funny cause I don’t know how else to describe it. It was such a weird shape, okay?”

“Weird? That’s nothing compared to everything that’s happened.”

“I know...I’m sorry. I shouldn’t joke right now. Alright...we’d just gotten there and Grandmother was outside. When she saw us drive up, her face lit up so beautifully it made me think of our Christmas tree. Remember how there were so many lights and we’d help Dad string them around the tree? He’d plug them in and it just glowed.”

“Oh my god...I think I remember that day!!” I screamed just as loudly as Kaya had.

“I don’t understand, Aiya, we used to talk about them all the time when we were small. Remember in the orphanage? Then we stopped after Grandma and Grandpa brought us to live with them. Why?”

“I don’t know...but right now all I want to talk about is

Grandmother, okay? I think we spent the night and she was telling us all these weird stories. I remember Mom and her singing together. That smell, it was everywhere..."

"Yeah, it was! I remember the strangest smell ever...yet it was the most soothing. I felt so loved and protected..."

"Kay, you're crying? I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"No...I'm glad. It's been so, so long..."

"Hey, do you think that Grandma and Grandpa remember anything about her?"

"I don't know, why?"

"Never mind. I need to get ready for my appointment with Dr. Jacobs now. I'll come over after the session so we can talk more about it, okay?"

"Okay, just make sure you come over here right after your appointment, don't go home. Or this time I will be banging on your door, and with Grandma!"

"I won't, I promise, and I'll call her right now. Alright, gotta go, love ya," I said quickly as I hung up the phone.

I didn't call my grandma. I knew she'd talk forever, and I couldn't tell her I had things to do, she'd drill me to death. I jumped out of bed and headed for the bathroom. I turned on the shower and put the setting to hot, hoping it would help to relax me, to ease my mind that now had more thoughts to contend with.

I was stunned. I actually remembered that day and that smell, and as clearly as if it were yesterday. Thoughts of my grandmother

that I hadn't had in years seemed to be returning. But if she was Navajo, I didn't remember. I wondered if that had anything to do with my nightmares. Why else would she be coming to mind after all this time? "Alright, I can worry about that later," I mumbled, getting out of the shower. I dressed, a little nicer this time, and grabbed another hat. I'd been wearing the same one and thought it needed a wash. Once again I found myself in front of the mirror, putting my makeup on. It was after nine thirty as I backed out of my driveway.

Standing in the middle of an elevator you get this feeling, not the dragonfly, but as though your stomach is churning and turning topsy turvy. A big knot tightens, then comes undone and travels upwards as it gets ready to crawl out of your mouth. That was exactly how I felt now, and I wasn't in the middle of the elevator when the doors opened to the fifth floor. Walking out, I headed right, and down the hallway. It was a short walk, five doors and I was there. I opened the door and walked in, surprised there was no one in the waiting room. "Hmm," I mumbled, heading towards the window.

"Hello, Aiyana. How are you this morning?" asked the receptionist.

"I'm fine, thank you. I have a ten o'clock appointment," I answered.

"Yes, have a seat and I'll let Dr. Jacobs know you're here," she replied with a smile.

I sat down, glancing at the magazines scattered on the table, they were boring as usual, but one caught my eye. Reaching out, I

pulled it from the mess, *'Dreams, are they trying to tell you something?'* in big, bold, black letters across the top. I laughed loud and hard, for the sake of not crying.

“Good morning, Aiyana, please come in,” said Dr Jacobs, nodding his head.

“Hello, Dr. Jacobs,” I replied, dropping the magazine. Standing up, I headed around the table and noticed the receptionist looking at me, and by the look on her face, I’m sure she thought I was crazy. If I had seen someone laugh like that, I’d probably think the same thing.

“You look even more rested than you did yesterday. You must be following your doctor’s orders,” he smiled, reaching for my hand. “I have no appointments until this afternoon, so my morning belongs to you.”

“Thank you...” I shakily said as I quickly let go of his hand and walked through the door. His touch had made me quiver. I felt weird, but I didn’t know why.

“Today I thought we’d skip the couch altogether. Please sit on that chair by my desk and make yourself comfortable,” I heard him say as he closed the door.

“Tha...that’ll be fine,” I nervously replied, walking towards the chair.

I sat down, fidgeting as I looked at the stack of files on his desk. I wondered which one was mine, then cringed thinking of what the hell he wrote about me.

“Shall we begin where we left off?” he said, sitting down and

reaching for one of the files.

I jerked with the sound of his voice, and as I wiggled my back against the chair, my eyes quickly met with his, and I was taken aback. My stomach flip flopped. I hadn't realized he was that handsome, but then I hadn't been in a normal state of mind either. His black eyes were not as cold as I'd thought, they were bright, sexy, and his black hair set off his fair, smooth complexion. My mouth was dry and it felt like I'd swallowed my tongue.

"I'd like to start off with the connection. You think the children and Coyote Hills..."

"Dr. Jacobs, I'm really sorry, I don't mean to interrupt you, but I have to tell you what's on my mind before it explodes."

"Please don't apologize, Aiyana. Feel free to interrupt me anytime that you want."

"Those scents that you burned, my grandmother had them in her home, that's why it was so familiar to me. Her voice was soft and gentle as she spoke to Kaya and I, telling us stories and singing. I just don't understand, you said the scents were Navajo, I don't think my grandmother was, but she had them. Why would I remember that now after so many years?"

"Aromas trigger the oldest part of our brain, and our memories. The olfactory sense is strong and connects at the instinctual level of our behavior. Thus, suppressed memories will always find a way to come back. It doesn't matter if they're good or bad. Memories play no favoritism. I am just glad this was a very good one. By the way, the Navajo are not the only people to use those scents. I use them as

well.”

“I know, that all makes sense, but I think it’s weird that I would remember it now. Maybe it has something to do with my nightmares?”

“It has nothing to do with them, Aiyana, and it is not weird. It is a memory of someone that you loved, triggered by a familiar scent, that’s all. Do you remember your grandmother’s name?”

“I don’t...I barely remember her, and yesterday was the first time since my sister and I were in that orphanage that I’ve even thought about her.”

“She has passed away as well, correct?”

“Yes, she did. We were on our way home from her funeral...oh my god!” I gasped as my heart began to beat uncontrollably.

“What is it, Aiyana, are you remembering something?”

“The accident!” I shouted. “It happened right after my grandmother died!”

“Easy, Aiyana, take it slow and tell me what you remember.”

“We were driving down this long, curvy road...shit...Kay! This morning she described a road with big trees and a river. I think it was the same one! The car went over the side and everything went dark!” I cried.

“It’s alright, Aiyana, you can cry all you want,” he said softly, handing me his handkerchief.

I couldn’t stop myself from crying even if I wanted to, my body was shaking and I felt like I was freezing to death. My mind wanted to explode with all the thoughts that were quickly filling it. I

couldn't believe it. I remembered. I remembered everything.

"Aiyana, what happened after it went dark?" Dr. Jacobs asked, and I jumped right out of my skin.

"I...I...don...don't..." I panted. I couldn't collect my thoughts, there were too many of them jumping around in my head.

"Breathe, Aiyana. You can do it," he whispered, and I felt his hand touch mine.

I pursed my lips and blew in and out. "It...was so dark...and ugly. Oh my god. Dr. Jacobs, you're right! It is the cause of my nightmares, isn't it?" I fretfully asked.

"Do you believe it to be, Aiyana?" he asked.

"I don't know anymore. I thought I'd come to terms with their death a long time ago. I never forgot the accident and I'd seen it in my dreams, but never the road, or any of this. And now I remember driving home from my grandmother's house after she died, but...but we never made it!!"

I wondered how, why? After all these years to suddenly remember everything. How in the hell was that possible? I didn't know, and I didn't care, and I didn't care about my nightmares anymore. I would put them aside and not worry about them until they came back for me. The only thing I wanted to concentrate on were my new memories, my new thoughts.

"What happened after the accident?"

"I woke up in a room, scared and all alone. I screamed, 'Mom! Dad! Where are you?!' But they didn't answer..." I sobbed.

"Take your time, Aiyana..." he whispered tenderly.

“A voice I never heard before said, 'It's alright, sweetie.' I looked around and saw someone dressed in white coming towards me. My god, you are right! My fucking nightmares!”

“You woke up in a hospital frightened, and the white was a nurse answering your screams?”

“Yes! She told me I had been in an accident and that Kaya was alright and in another room. I asked her where my parents were, but she didn't answer, she just walked out.”

“Aiyana, I believe we have found the cause. Everything that you are saying now is just as you describe your nightmares to be. Do you see the connection?”

“But why didn't I see it before? I don't understand. I felt evil, not pain.”

“The evil you felt was your own interpretation. Your mind blocked out all of your painful memories. You remembered only what you wanted to about the accident. You just said it yourself, you'd seen the accident, but never where, when or how.”

“But my grandmother, I hadn't remembered her until now.”

“Aiyana, your last memories were of your grandmothers death, driving home, the accident and your parents' death. Do you not see that they're all connected? Triggered by the death of your patient. To you, in your mind, death *is* evil.”

“That would be so simple, Dr. Jacobs. Could it be?”

“I believe so. The hospital, nurses, doctors, all in white. They are suppressed memories finding their way back to you. Tell me, when you woke up in the hospital, did you know your parents had

died in the accident?”

“No...after the nurse walked out, a social worker came in, she told me she was taking me to see Kaya. It was horrible...” I shakily answered.

“What happened after that?”

“She told us that our parents were killed in the accident, and that we had been in the hospital for three weeks. She asked if we had any family, Kaya said no. She said if we had no family to care for us she’d have to take us to that damn orphanage.”

“I’m sorry, Aiyana, please excuse me for a minute,” Dr. Jacobs said as the buzzer on his phone went off and he pressed it. “Yes, Ms. Rogers?”

“Dr. Jacobs, I’m sorry to interrupt, but it’s one o’clock and your next appointment is here.”

“Yes, of course, thank you,” he answered, then with a nod of his head he stood up, reaching out his hand. “Aiyana, the time has slipped right by me much too quickly. I must apologize.”

I quickly stood up, placing my hand in his. “I didn’t realize we had talked so long. Thank you so much for everything,” I politely said.

“I have no plans for this weekend,” he replied, reaching for something. “This is my card, if you need to talk, I am just a phone call away. If you’d like, I can have my receptionist schedule an appointment for Monday at eight, and we can continue where we left off.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” I answered, taking his card and glancing at it

as I placed it into my purse. “So, I’ll see you Monday morning.”

“Have a pleasant weekend,” he said, walking me to the door.

I walked through the waiting room, and of course I looked at the woman who was sitting, oddly enough, where I had been, with that same damn magazine in her hands. I smiled, heading towards the door, and I heard Dr. Jacobs say, “Please, come in.”

I quickly walked down the hallway to the elevator, pushed the button, and as the doors opened I practically jumped in. Dr. Jacobs had made so much sense, and I desperately wanted to believe he was right. But there was an ounce of doubt lingering in my gut. I would never have thought to question the accident. Had I really blocked all of that out? Maybe my suppressed memories were my nightmares, my mind's projection, my version of everything that had happened, and now they were all coming back to me. All my memories of that horrible day, and being in the hospital. But what about the children, that thing, and poor Mr. Blidsen? For that matter, what about the other patients who had seen them?

“Hell, I don’t know!” I yelled, just as the door opened to the parking garage. I ran out, clumsily looking through my purse for my keys. All the tension in my head must have ran down to my hands, as much as they shook.

I reached my car, opened the door, and jumped in. Starting it, I hauled ass out of there. I think I ran every yellow street light there was. I didn’t remember stopping once as I pulled into Kaya’s driveway. I hurried to the front door, grabbing the knob I pushed, but the door was locked and I smacked right into it.

“Shit!” I yelled. “Kay, open the frickin' door!”

“I’m coming!” I heard her yell, then the door opened and I pushed through. “Aiya, what’s wrong with you?” she asked.

“What isn’t wrong with me? I’m surprised I haven’t gone completely wacko!” I retorted.

“Well, calm down, and don’t bite my head off. Go into the living room, sit down and relax, and tell me what the fuck is going on!”

I hurried towards the living room. Flopping down on the sofa, I screamed, “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

“Aiya...what’s the matter? I’m confused, you sounded so good this morning, so hopeful that Dr. Jacobs was helping you.”

“He is...I connected everything in my nightmares to Coyote Hills. It all fell in place perfectly with everything that’s happened. But then I remembered what happened the day of the accident, and now my nightmares connect perfectly to that!”

“What did you remember?!”

“That road you told me about, going to Grandmother's house, well that was the one it happened on. We were coming back after she had passed away!”

“Shit...Aiya, you’re right! She had been sick! That day...Dad actually went with us to see her. We spent the whole day there and...watched her die. Then we left, but never made it home...” she sobbed.

“I know, Kay...I remembered everything! I also remembered a lot of people being there, they had to be family. So I don’t understand, if we did have family, how come no one came and got

us? Why did we go to that fucking orphanage?”

“I don’t know...”

“Well, I know who does, and I think it’s about time we ask them! Don’t you?” I shouted.

“Okay, just relax...I’m going to get a glass of wine, I really need one right now, and we’ll talk about it. As a matter of fact, I think you should just spend the night,” she said, walking to the kitchen.

“I don’t know what we have to talk about. You know who we need to call...but damn, that glass of wine sounds really good. I’ll have one too. What about the kids, don’t you have to pick them up?”

“Nope, Daniel’s picking them up from school today. I told him you were coming over after your appointment. He’s going to take them out for pizza so we’ll have the house to ourselves.”

“That’s good, cause we’re going to call Grandma and Grandpa, and I’m not going to hang up until we get some answers.”

“What do you think they know?” she asked, handing me a glass before taking a seat.

I took a big drink and almost finished the glass, then looked Kay right in her eyes. “Do you ever wonder why we don’t know anything about Grandmother? I mean like, who she was? Or any of her family?”

“No, why would I? She died when we were young, so we wouldn’t remember much about them.”

“I know, but come on. It happened the same day of our accident, and we remember Mom and Dad.”

“That’s different, of course we have more memories of Mom and Dad. My god, Aiya, you can’t compare that, they raised us. We spent every single day with them until the day they were taken from us! But there are a lot of things we don’t remember about them too.”

“I know...I was just stunned today when the memories of Grandmother dying, the accident, the hospital and that fucking lady who took us to the orphanage, came back.”

“Yeah, I hadn’t remembered any of that either. But then, think about what we did in that orphanage, we replaced all of our bad memories with what we wanted to see. We couldn’t handle the truth, so we came up with the aliens.”

“Yeah...I’m really beginning to see that now, but I want to remember more. I want to know about Grandmother, hell, for that matter, Mom and Dad. Do you even remember their names?”

“Of course I...wow...that’s odd. I can’t think of them...I don’t know, Aiya.”

“That’s so sad, I don’t remember them either. Hell, I barely remember Mom’s name, well, just what Dad used to call her anyway.”

“Yeah, ‘Aba, my Angel.’ I remember how Dad used to tease us, ‘Ya mama,’ he’d say, ‘Where’s Ya mama?’ and we laughed so hard.”

“I know...we did. But what was Mom’s real name?”

“Shit...I know it. Give me a sec. I know it sounds really close to Ya...ya mama...Yanaba! That’s it!”

“You’re right! Such a funny name, now I remember why Dad called her Aba!” I actually laughed.

“Yeah, me too,” Kaya giggled.

“I think we should call Grandma and Grandpa and ask them. They have to know. Don’t you think it’s about time we knew more about ourselves? I know it would help me. Dr. Jacobs thinks that my childhood trauma is the cause of my nightmares, and from the looks of everything, I’m starting to believe that as well. But Grandmother’s death, I didn’t remember until today, and he said they were all connected, so I want to know.”

“Really, why? I mean, remember what Grandma told us about them? They didn’t like Dad, that’s why they had to leave. Hell, Aiya, if it wasn’t for that, maybe we would’ve known them. Maybe Mom and Dad would still be alive!”

“I know what you’re saying, I just think it’s odd. We really don’t know anything except for what Grandma and Grandpa told us. Shit, everything I’ve remembered was cause of Dr. Jacobs.”

“Why is it so important to you? Mom and Dad are dead, and Grandmother is dead. Does it really matter now?”

“Yeah, it does! I can’t explain why, and if it wasn’t for that scent in Dr. Jacobs’ session, I probably wouldn’t be questioning it. But I just feel like there’s something more. And if it’s truly the reason why I’m having these nightmares, I want to know everything!”

“We could call them. But I thought you didn’t want them to know about your nightmares?”

“I’m not going to tell them, Kay. I’m just going to ask them about Grandmother, maybe Mom and Dad too.”

“Alright, let’s do it,” she said, reaching for the phone on the end

table.

I sat there nervously, polishing off my glass of wine. I heard Kaya stick her fingers in the rotary. One, then another, and another, by the fifth number I jumped up and hurried into the kitchen. I grabbed that bottle of wine, poured myself another, and took it with me into the living room. I stood, more like hovered, over Kaya.

“Hi, Grandma, it’s Kay, are you busy? Oh good, okay, Aiya wants to talk to you.”

She quickly handed me the phone, and as I grabbed it, I rolled my eyes at her and whispered, “Coward.”

“You know it,” she chuckled.

“Hey, Grandma, what’re you doing?” I politely asked, making small talk before I blurted out my questions.

“I was just making Grandpa a sandwich, dear. Now, why didn’t I hear from you yesterday? You know our deal was you call me everyday. Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No, no, Grandma. Nothings wrong. I was just really busy yesterday and didn’t get the chance to call.”

“Too busy to call me? You know you haven’t fully recovered, and you shouldn’t be out and about. You need to take better care of yourself.”

“I’m actually filling out some paperwork, I wasn’t running around. I’m thinking about remodeling my house and I’m applying for a loan. But there’s some questions about my family that I didn’t know how to answer.”

“Remodeling! I didn’t know you were thinking about that,

sweetie. You never mentioned that to me or Grandpa. What are you planning on doing?”

“I was thinking about a patio. I thought that would be really nice.”

“You do enjoy the outdoors, you always have. I think that’s why you bought that house. Well, tell me, what kind of questions, sweetie?”

“Well...they want the names of my parents, which I barely managed to fill out, but it asks for my Mother’s maiden name and her parents. I don’t know them, so I was hoping you’d tell me.” I lied about everything of course, but I didn’t know what else to tell her.

“I don’t know why they would want that kind of information, it’s none of their business!” she said in a raised voice.

“Grandma, it’s really not a big deal. They have to ask. You know how banks are.”

“No! If you need money, we’ll give it to you.”

“Grandma, I don’t want your money. I’m getting a loan with my house. Please, just tell me their names.”

“Well, I don’t remember,” she quickly said.

“How can you not remember? You knew them.”

“No, no...not very well at all.”

“Okay fine...you said they never liked Dad, and that’s why he and Mom had to move away. They must have lived around here then. If you can’t remember their names, just tell me where they lived.”

“I don’t know, it’s been a long time. You can’t possibly expect

me to remember!”

“Yes, I can! There’s nothing wrong with your memory. Why don’t you want to tell me?! What are you trying to hide?!”

“Aiya!” Kaya shouted. “Stop! If she doesn’t remember, don’t push her!”

“I don’t know what you think I know, or why you would even ask me those kinds of questions! I don’t remember anything about those people, and what I did know, I’ve already told you and Kay. Now, if you need money, we’ll give it to you, so you don’t need to fill out that stupid paper! It’s time for my nap, I’ll see you girls on Sunday. Goodbye,” Grandma said, and hung up.

I stood there holding that damn phone in my hand, more than surprised by my grandma’s tone. She had never sounded like that before. I wondered what was going on, she’d always drilled me to death about every single thing, and now she didn’t. Not at all like her. I knew she was hiding something. I slammed down the phone, then my glass of wine.

“Aiya, I know you’re going through a lot of shit right now, but did you have to raise your voice with Grandma?”

“You don’t understand, Kay, you didn’t hear her. I didn’t raise my voice. Grandma actually did. She didn’t want to tell me anything.”

“Maybe she doesn’t know.”

“Come on, you know she does. There is no way in the world that she doesn’t. Mom and Dad were seeing each other for a long time before they left and got married. Plus, she didn’t ask me her

usual barrage of questions, you know better than that.”

“Well then, she doesn’t remember. She is up there in age you know, and she probably didn’t want to badger you, in case you’ve forgotten, your head!”

“No, my injury hasn’t stopped her badgering, if anything it’s made it worse. She’s hiding something. I could tell by the tone of her voice. But why? I don’t understand. I mean, Grandmother’s dead, so why should it matter?”

“Maybe it’s the fact that Grandmother didn’t like her son, and because of that they had to leave and get married. Grandma never got to see any of us. Then to find out your son’s dead and you have two grandchildren in a fucking foster home? That would be more than enough reason for me not to want to talk about her.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but enough time has passed. We’re the ones who lost the most, and if we want to know, I think we have the right to.”

“We’ll give Grandma some time, you know how she is. Tomorrow we can both go over there and talk to her about it, okay? Right now let’s just try and enjoy the peace and quiet. Daniel will be home soon with the kids, and you know I never get much time alone, let alone with you here. So let’s finish this bottle of wine and not think anymore, just sit back down and try to relax. Please...”

“My head really hurts. I don’t even want to talk anymore. I think I’m just going to go home.”

“Oh no you’re not! You’re going to finish this bottle with me!” she said sharply, then arched her brow when she noticed the bottle

was empty. “Damn, Aiya! You already finished it?”

I glanced at the empty bottle, surprised. I hadn’t realized I drank it all. I guess my grandma really threw me for a loop with her change in attitude. Then I thought I’d fool with Kaya for a second. After all, she was being the bossy big sister that she enjoyed so well, and I knew she wasn’t going to let me leave. Maybe it would make me feel better, and if not, I’m sure another bottle would.

“What are you talking about? This is my first glass, you poured it yourself. You’re the one who polished it off. Or don’t you remember? Hmm...have you had a CAT scan lately?”

“Funny, Aiya! Beyond words, but since I finished it, I’ll get another one to replace it, just for you, with a couple of aspirin to go with it,” she said, walking into the kitchen. “I don’t hear anything...you’re way too quiet. I know! We’ll talk about something else for a change. Tell me about Dr. Jacobs. What does he look like, short, tall, fat, skinny, ugly or good looking?”

“Damn, Kay...you would go there.”

“Yeah, I would. Don’t act shocked,” she answered as she came back with another bottle and filled my glass.

“Nothing you say shocks me anymore.”

“And it shouldn’t, but I also know if he’s good looking, you’ve noticed. So tell me, is he, or isn’t he? And what about his body? He has to have one. What does that look like?”

“You’re ruthless,” I chuckled. “And for the record, I didn’t notice his good looks until today, but damn...he is handsome.”

“And his body? Come on, I want details.”

“He wasn’t naked or anything, so how would I know what his body looked like? He had clothes on you know, and as a matter of fact, it was a very nice fitting suit. I think it hugged every one of his muscles perfectly.”

Kay started to laugh out loud, and I wasn’t far behind. Before I knew it I was actually feeling much better, of course the wine probably had a lot to do with it. I thought about the last time we did this, and what had happened, and my gaiety came to a standstill.

“What’s wrong now? Why’d you stop?”

“Nothing I was just thinking about the la...”

“Kaya, honey, we’re home!” I heard Daniel shout, and I didn’t finish.

“We’re in the living room, babe,” Kaya answered, rolling her eyes at me. “Yeah, go ahead and say it, I know you’re thinking it.”

“What? ‘Honey, I’m home?’ No wait, he actually said ‘we’re home’,” I laughed.

“Auntie Aiya!!” my nephews yelled as they ran in, jumping on top of me.

“I’ve missed you guys so much! Did you have fun?”

“Yea, we ate a bunch of pizza and even had ice cream! You should’ve came with us cause we miss you too.”

“I wish I could have, but next time for sure I’ll come with you guys. Alright?”

“Alright! Yea! We’ll have so much fun, Auntie Aiya!”

“Well, with all that ice cream you’ve put in your mouth, I expect the two of you to brush your teeth a little longer than just ten

seconds!” Kaya laughed.

“Alright guys, let’s leave your mommy and auntie alone. It’s late, so give them a kiss and let’s go up and get ready for bed,” said Daniel, smiling at us.

The boys wiggled all over me like little caterpillars as they smooched my cheeks. “Wow, those are such big kisses for such little guys! You really did miss me, huh?” I laughed.

“Yea we did!!” they screeched in my ears.

“Aiya, you look like you’re feeling a lot better. I’m so glad,” said Daniel.

“Yeah, a lot better than I have been anyway, and I think my hair has actually started to grow back.” I slipped my hand under my hat and rubbed the stubs that were coming in.

“I never even noticed you had a bald streak down the back of your head,” he answered with a chuckle.

“Real nice...thanks. Goodnight, guys! I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You’re going to be here in the morning when we wake up? Good, it’s Saturday and Mom always makes pancakes, you can eat with us!” They gave me another fat kiss on the cheek, then ran up the stairs.

“Alright, you two, don’t have too much fun without me. I’d love to join you, but I know you want some alone time. So, I’ll see you in the morning,” Daniel said, kissing Kaya.

“We’ve only just begun, dear,” she replied.

“Yeah, and besides, you know we’d drink you under the table

anyway,” I said.

“Really? Hmm, is that a dare?” he asked.

“Nope, just a sad fact,” answered Kaya.

“Okay...okay...by the looks of things I have a couple of sad facts. A couple of bottles of wine on the table, and I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before there’s a couple of women on the floor under the table!” he laughed, running up the stairs.

“You better run, chicken!” Kaya shouted, throwing a pillow at him.

My last glance at the clock and it was eleven thirty. Three empty bottles of wine were on the table. I’d lost all track of time after that, not to mention the number of bottles we’d drank, watching Kaya fall asleep on the sofa, and I wasn’t far behind her.

“Help us...help us...” my eyes jarred open to those familiar cries.

“Stop doing this to me, please! I can’t take it anymore! If you’re real, then tell me who you are...I need to know!” I shouted, leaping off the couch.

“Help us...help us...Aiyana...don’t let him keep us...”

“Who? I don’t understand. What’s happening? Where am I?”

“You are with us now...” a deep, raspy voice echoed.

“Who are you?!” I frantically asked as my head jerked and my eyes worriedly searched. “Show yourself, damn it!” Everything was dark. I felt lost, as though my sense of direction had left me. My equilibrium was completely gone. I thought I was being pulled apart.

“Oh my god! I’m in the room with the children...the cages! How did I get here? Blood! There’s so much blood! Why? Why?”

“They are my salvation...soon, you will be too...” It answered, and suddenly a tall, thin figure stood in front of the cages with Its back towards me. Blood covered the white lab coat that wrapped around Its body. Black, shiny leather boots reached up to Its knees. In Its bloodied right hand hung a set of keys.

I knew It was that horrid thing from my nightmares, and I was with It. I felt my words scratch the back of my throat as I shakily asked, “Wha...what...do you mean?! What the hell are you doing to them?!”

The jingling of the keys grated against every nerve I had. My body violently wrenched as It opened one of the cages and brutally grabbed a small, helpless little girl by her hair. I felt like I’d been taken to that other world where sanity no longer remained. I stood and watched, empty, weightless, as though I were floating away. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t talk. I couldn’t even move. I didn’t know what to do. It turned around, and my mouth sprung open, but only a whimper escaped me. My god, I thought, It had to be real. Rotting flesh peeled off Its ashen face, blood dripped from Its mouth as Its decayed, black teeth snapped at me with Its grin. I felt the glare of Its yellow, sunken eyes deep in my heart.

Its putrid stench mixed with a familiar scent, a scent that teased my senses as It dragged her out of the room, right passed me. Her frail, partially clothed little body jerking with Its every tug. The sound of her skin grinded hot against the floor as It took her down

the corridor. The smell of burnt flesh flowed in the air, in my nostrils, with the sound of her skin scraping off on the floor. 'Tap-tap-tap-tap-' echoed with her screaming and horrible screeching cries. The sharpest, coldest shivers ripped through every bone in my body and I felt my stomach turn inside out. I tasted the contents, mixed with the foulness that surrounded me.

"Lea...leave...her alone...let her go..." I tried to scream, but only a shaky whisper squeezed through my quivering lips. My feet felt like they were melting into the floor as I followed them.

"They are my salvation. You know that I need them...." It scratchily answered, and disappeared through a door.

"No! Bring her back!!" I cried.

I reached the door, and looking through the window, I saw It walking down decrepit, wooden stairs, dragging the frightened girl behind. I recognized that stairwell. I knew it only too well. Her poor little body was thrashing up and down every step, just as mine had. Coyote Hills...I was right. That's where they were. I saw her sad, black eyes gazing into mine, begging for help. The anguish I felt was unbearable. I shakily reached for the knob and it easily turned. Opening it, I hesitantly walked through, only to stop dead in my tracks. I felt terror seep through me as I came face to face with the darkness. Screams surrounded me with such immense intensity, I was pushed back. Then horrible, horrible shrieking sounds echoed, unlike anything I'd ever heard before.

Cra...rck...cra...rck...gur...ish...gur...ish...gur...ish...

My body shook uncontrollably, my heart thumping louder and

louder against my chest. I thought it would drown out my pleading whispers, but then I doubted if I could even get them out. My mouth was dry and heavy with the taste of salt. "Please, God give me strength..."

I slowly moved my feet down, and as I came to the bottom of the stairs, I could see light, a dull yellow that consumed me. "No way in fucking hell can this be happening! It can't be real! It just can't be!!" I screamed so loud I felt my ear drums bust. The stench of death was so overwhelming that it took my breath away, and it felt like my lungs had exploded. My eyes welled with tears and I heaved as the light shone upon the small bodies that were sprawled upon the ground. There were piles upon bloody piles. My heart felt such sorrow, I thought it had collapsed. Never could I have imagined all the horror that now filled me.

"I am a doctor...I know what I need to do...she gladly gives to save me..." It heckled, and my head spun violently in that direction. It grinned, revealing those nasty, black teeth, gasping for air as though that horrid laugh took Its last breath away. Blood spewed out of Its mouth, and a gravelly, foul smelling cough spread throughout every crack and crevice in the room. Yellow eyes glared at me, glowing with what I felt to be immeasurable gratification as It hovered over a metal table. Bones protruded through Its arms, down to jagged, bloodied fingers. One hand held down the little girl as she screamed and squirmed desperately, the other held a scalpel.

"What kind of a fucking doctor are you?! Why are you doing this?" I frantically asked. "She's just a child! Let her go!!!" I felt my

body leap towards It and I began to run, faster and faster, but I hadn't moved, not even an inch. I was terrified, standing in what felt like a frozen pool of ice, as I watched helplessly.

It plunged that scalpel deep into her chest, splitting it wide open. My entire being shook me beyond the brink of sanity as I heard the sound of her flesh tear and her bones crack. Her screams and cries pierced my heart as Its frothy cough pierced through my soul. If this wasn't a nightmare, I was trapped in fucking hell. Its deformed hands reached inside of her, ripping her frail, little body apart as though she were a sheet of paper. That sound, that horrible, wet, swishing sound consumed me. I felt as though my life was being taken from me.

It brought Its hands out and held her lungs tight within them. "Look...at my salvation..." It hissed.

Tears, more than I'd shed in my life, seeped from my eyes, filling them beyond their capacity, as though they wanted to cloud, to hide, what I'd seen. Sadly, it was only enough to drown me in my own anguish as I screeched, "No, you son of a bitch!! Leave her alone!! Get your filthy hands off of her!! Get away from her!!! Get away you monster or I'll fucking kill you!!!"

It submerged the organs in some type of liquid, throwing her lifeless body on top of the others, and not once did It take Its yellow, soulless eyes off of me. Shadows quickly began to shift before me, teasing my eyes, then It was gone. I frantically began to search, but all I saw was blood, and little, little, bodies that were ripped wide open. Then I heard wheezing and felt Its hot, putrid breath, and we

were face to face. Its black, vile mouth opened, blood drooled down the sides as he raucously whispered, “Help me, Aiyana...”

I closed my eyes and thought I had to be asleep, this was just a nightmare. “Please let me wake up, just wake up!” I opened my eyes and It was so close that I could taste Its blood. I screamed, “Get the hell away from me!!!” and felt every single nerve in my body quiver. I thought my skin was on fire and I was melting, it felt like it was falling off piece by piece. Then Its arms grabbed hold of me, squeezing me like a vice. It lifted me up and threw me back onto the floor, like a rag doll. My head rebounded and I felt the throbbing pain, just like when I’d fallen down the stairs. I thought my wound had opened.

“Join us...” It hissed as It grabbed my leg and dragged me along the floor.

I tried to scream, but I couldn’t. My mouth was parched and my lips were sticking together, as though I’d gone weeks and weeks without a drop of water. My tongue must have swelled five times its size, I could feel it in the back of my throat blocking my airway. I couldn’t breathe. My terrifying screams echoed in my head as I felt wetness underneath me. Then I felt warmth and softness, followed by thumping sounds. I felt the weight of my body on top of something. I frantically reached out, grabbing for it, hoping I could break that things hold on me. I felt something thin, cold, I ran my hands along it and my heart came to a stand still. I fearfully turned my head and came nose to nose with those little faces, their arms and legs clutched in my hands. God, I was being dragged over their

bodies! Suddenly, I was jerked up, and slammed against something cold and hard.

My body must have gone into convulsions. I felt it slam up and down against the metal table I was thrust upon. That thing stood over me, Its yellow eyes glaring with contentment. A smirk crossed over Its rotten face, and blood began to drip out of Its black mouth, splattering on to me. With every ounce of strength I had within me, I finally managed to open my mouth and shout, “Let me fucking go!!!” I forcefully jerked up, grabbed hold of Its lab coat, wrenching it in my hand. I let out a gasp as I felt something sharp prick me. With my other hand I clawed at Its peeling flesh, then brought my knee up and jabbed it into that vile thing.

It pushed down on my chest with Its filthy, disgusting hand, slamming me back down on the table, and with the other It reached for the scalpel. “You are mine now!!” It screeched, bringing the scalpel down towards my chest.

“No!!! No!!! Never!!!” I screamed.

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“Aiya...Aiya! What’s wrong? Wake up! Please, please just wake up!!” I heard Kaya’s voice desperately crying out.

My body was kicking and fighting viciously with every breath I took, as I felt hands clutching on to me. “Get the hell away from me!!!” I screeched.

My eyes jarred open and I saw Kaya’s pale face. Tears poured down her cheeks, and her brown eyes had turned a dark red, as though they were on fire. “Aiya, it’s me! What the hell is happening to you?! Please don’t do this to me...please!!” she pleaded.

Her words were just a numbness in my head as I stared blankly into her eyes. I felt my mouth open wide, but nothing came out. I swallowed over and over, and felt the pain as my saliva coated my dry throat. My body was empty, yet felt like it was weighed down by a five-hundred pound slab of cement. I couldn’t move, not even my fingers.

“Aiya...please...tell me what’s wrong?” she continued to plead. “Talk to me god damn it!”

“Kay, are you alright?! I heard you scream. What’s going on?” I heard Daniel ask. Hell, I had even heard him run down the stairs, but it was as if my entire body was paralyzed.

“I...I’m fine, it’s Aiya. I think she had one of her nightmares.

My god, Daniel, look at her!”

“Aiya, can you hear me?” he asked as he dropped to his knees next to me.

I couldn’t answer. I tried and tried, but my words wouldn’t come out. I felt his hand on my eyes, then some kind of pressure.

“Why won’t she fucking answer? What’s the matter with her? Look at her eyes. What the hell, do something!” Kaya screamed.

“We need to be calm, Kay, it’s going to be alright. Her pupils are reacting to light, she’s responding to my touch, and her breathing is even. Her heart’s beating a little fast, but nothing to worry about. I think she’s just scared. Move please, so I can get her back on the couch,” I heard Daniel, then I felt him pick up my limp body and lay me down.

What the hell was happening? Why couldn’t I move or say anything? ‘I’m scared, Kay! Daniel!’ My words kept echoing in my head.

“Baby, tell me exactly what happened!”

“We fell asleep, I don’t know for how long. I heard her crying, and when I woke up, her body was thrashing violently, then she started to scream and fell on the floor.”

“Aiyana, if you can hear me, nod your head,” said Daniel.

I felt my head start to move, but I still couldn’t speak. I wondered if I were still alive, or if that thing had really killed me.

“I think we should take her to the hospital, Daniel. She doesn’t look right,” Kaya panicked.

“That’s probably a good idea. Call your grandparents so they

can...”

“No...no...” I interrupted him as I finally managed to get out a scratchy whisper.

“Aiya, are you okay?!” asked Kaya.

“Ca...call...Dr. Jacobs...” I stuttered.

“I think we need to get you to the hospital,” answered Kaya.

“No...just call him. His card...is in my purse. Please...”

“Are you sure, Aiya?” asked Daniel.

“Yes...yes...just call him.”

“Alright...” cried Kaya as she stood up, frantically looking around. “I don’t see it. Where is it? Shit! Shit!”

“Kay, it’s alright. Look, its right there on the table, honey,” said Daniel, soothingly.

“I see it! Okay...come on, Dr Jacobs, where are you? I can’t find it! Daniel, it’s not in here.”

“Let me see,” he reached for the purse, dumping everything out as he began to rummage through it all. “Here it is, Dr. Jacobs.” he handed Kaya the card.

She picked up the phone and dialed. “Dr. Jacobs!” she shouted. “Please, you have to help, you need to come over here right now!!” she paused for a few moments. “What? Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Aiya’s sister, you have to help her!” she was quiet again. “Aiyana, god damn it!! What the hell’s wrong with you?!” she screamed.

“Baby, give me the phone please,” said Daniel, reaching out. “Dr Jacobs, I’m sorry to call you at this hour. My name is Daniel. I’m Aiyana Crenshaw’s brother in-law. She’s had another one of her

nightmares, but this time it was really bad. She's pretty shaken up. Yes, thank you, its fifteen eighty six Stoney Oaks Drive," he hung up the phone.

"What did he say?" Kaya impatiently asked.

"He's on his way, he said he doesn't live that far from here and it should take maybe ten minutes. I'm gonna go get dressed and check on the boys. I'll be right back down, okay?" he hurried upstairs.

"Did you hear that, Aiya? Dr. Jacobs will be here soon," Kaya said as she sat down on the floor in front of the couch, then laid her head on top of me. "You're going to be fine."

I felt like I was outside, peeking through a fogged window, watching everything that was happening inside. I desperately wanted to scream, "No! I'm not fine! That fucking thing is a monster, It killed the children, and It tried to kill me!"

The door bell rang and I felt Kaya jump right out of her skin. She quickly got up and ran to the door, "Dr. Jacobs! This way...hurry!"

"Aiyana, are you alright?" I heard Dr. Jacobs' voice, then saw his face in front of mine. I felt something cold on my chest, then something tight around my arm.

"What's wrong with her, Dr. Jacobs?" Kaya worriedly asked.

"Her heart beat is regular and her blood pressure is fine."

"Look at her! Does she look fine to you?!" Kaya shouted.

"Aiyana, can you tell me what happened?" he asked.

I tried to answer, but just started to cry uncontrollably. I heard

Daniel's voice, "You must be Dr. Jacobs, thank you for coming. Aiyana has been in a state of shock for about an hour since she woke from her nightmare."

"Thank you for calling me," he answered as he stood up, reaching out for Daniel's hand.

"I know doctors don't usually make house calls, and given the hour, let me just say, it's greatly appreciated," said Daniel as they finished shaking hands.

"Not at all. I'm just glad she was with family and not alone. I have seen many episodes of suppressed memories resurface and cause distress in my patients. But this is unlike anything I've ever seen before."

"I know you think they're suppressed memories, Dr. Jacobs, but if you would have seen her...she was freaking out! I don't understand, we experienced the same trauma growing up, yet I don't have nightmares like that!" said Kaya.

"Suppressed memories, no matter if they are exactly the same for two individuals, can resurface in a hundred different ways."

"But you said you've never seen anything like this!"

"No, not to this extent, but that doesn't mean it can't happen. If her memories are hidden deep in the recesses of her mind, it is most likely because she is too afraid to face them. Fear is..."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not fucking here! And Dr. Jacobs, you couldn't be more wrong! It's not any god damned hidden memories!!" I screamed as loud as I could, interrupting them and quickly sitting up.

“Aiya...” gasped Kaya. “Are you okay?” she flopped down next to me, wrapping her arms around me.

“I’m fine...really. Don’t worry. I was just so scared. It was real, Kay...that thing is real! I saw It. I touched It!”

“Wh...what did you see?” she shakily asked.

“Evil...” I whispered, looking around. I was afraid It would hear me.

“Aiya, I know you’ve been having these nightmares for quite a while. Kay’s told me all about them. Hell, I’m not blind, I can see the toll they’ve taken on you, but evil? Come on, you can’t really believe that,” said Daniel, worriedly.

“Look at her, Daniel. What kind of nightmare can do that?” asked Kaya.

“Aiyana, can you tell me what you saw in your nightmare?” asked Dr. Jacobs.

I nodded my head, drew in a deep breath, and with all the strength I could muster, I calmly said, “I was in that room...the one with the cages filled with children...I was right Dr. Jacobs, they’re at Coyote Hills! They kept crying, calling out for my help. I asked them what they needed me to do, but they didn’t answer. That thing did!” I trembled.

“Aiya...” Kaya barely whispered.

“Aiya, it’s only a dream. They can’t be real!” said Daniel firmly, as if he were trying to convince himself.

“Collect your thoughts, Aiyana, try to relax.” said Dr. Jacobs as he sat down across from me. “Take your time and remember, control

your breathing.”

I nodded my head and continued, “It said that I was with them now, that the children were Its salvation. I was horrified! I...I couldn’t move. I watched that hideous thing drag one of the little girls out of the cages and down the corridor to a door, then down the stairs where It...” I felt my chest tighten, and I was having trouble breathing. I felt like I was going to pass out.

“Slow and easy, Aiyana. Daniel, can you please get her a glass of water?”

“Yea...yeah, of course,” stuttered Daniel as his body jerked, startled by Dr. Jacobs' voice. He leaped out of his chair and hurried into the kitchen.

“I’m so sorry, Aiya. I didn’t think...I...I...just never realized they were this horrible. I even teased you about them! I’m sorry, so...so...sorry!” cried Kaya.

“It’s okay, it's not your fault.”

“Drink this, Aiya,” said Daniel, handing me a glass, then a wet towel. “That should help to cool you down a little.”

“Thanks.”

“Its seven thirty, the boys will be up soon. They’re gonna want to have breakfast with you. What would you like me to do?” asked Daniel.

“Oh my god, I forgot! I don’t want to scare them, and if they see me like this they’re going to be worried.”

“Aiyana, if you’d like, we can go to my office,” Dr. Jacobs said.

“No!” said Kaya firmly. “Aiya, I want you to stay here with me.

I'm the one who's supposed to protect you and take care of you...and I haven't."

"I agree with Kay. You need family around right now," Daniel quickly added.

"I'll call Grandma and ask her if she can watch the boys for the day. I'll say that I have a lot of errands to do and that Daniel has a conference he has to attend. You know how much she loves to have them over. Then together, just like it's supposed to be, just like I promised, we'll figure out what the hell is going on."

"That's exactly what we're going to do! Baby, give her a call and I'll go get the boys ready," said Daniel as he headed towards the stairs.

"Wait!" I quickly said. "I need to talk to Grandma, now more than ever!"

"But don't you think it's just a little more important to find out why you're having these horrible nightmares, instead of talking to Grandma?" asked Kaya.

"Right now, this is the most important thing I need to do. That little girl in my nightmare had the same smell that we remembered from Grandmother's house."

"That's impossible, Aiya..." said Daniel as he came back into the living room.

"Aiyana, listen to me, please. You remembered the scents from your grandmother because you smelled them in my office. That is why you're..."

"No!" I cut Dr. Jacobs off, rudely this time as I glared at him. "I

need you to believe me. I know deep in my heart that whatever's happening in my nightmares, it's real. That thing...It was a man! A very sick man. Some sort of disease riddled his thin body, he was horribly disfigured! Blood was coming out of his mouth and he had a nasty, foul cough. I think he was using the children, looking for something...I'm not sure what, but he desperately wanted it! My god, he fucking ripped them apart!!!" I screamed.

"Wh...what are you saying? My god, Aiya!!" screeched Kaya.

"Aiya! It was just a dream. You saw what your mind wanted to show you. I've had dreams. Come on! Everyone has them, and they feel real as hell, but they're not," said Daniel.

"No! I know it sounds horrid and unbelievable, but I need you, all of you, to believe me! The children have something to do with my grandmother!!" I said as forcefully as I could.

"Very well, Aiyana. If you feel that strongly, then I'll go with you," said Dr. Jacobs.

"Thank you...but I think this is something that Kay and I need to do together. Please. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not. I'll head home for now, but after you're done, give me a call. I can come back and we'll talk."

"Yes...thank you so much, Dr. Jacobs. Kay, I'm going to get cleaned up a bit, then we'll leave," I headed for the stairs.

"Alright, Aiya. Whatever you want me to do, I will. Daniel, just stay with the boys and we'll be back as soon as we can," said Kaya, following me.

"You know I will, but I honestly think this is a waste of time.

Dr. Jacobs is here, and Aiya should be discussing her nightmare!” he shouted at us.

“Daniel, it’s alright. This is something Aiyana feels she needs to do. I believe if she doesn’t do it, she’ll never make a breakthrough. I’ll be waiting for your call,” said Dr. Jacobs.

As I reached the top of the stairs I heard Daniel walk him out the door, “Thank you again for coming over, and I’ll call you as soon as they get back.”

I tip-toed into the bathroom, trying not to wake the boys. I hurriedly washed my face and brushed out my hair, pulling it back in a pony tail. I tried to pat down my wrinkled clothes, but it was no use. When I came back downstairs, Daniel was standing in the middle of the living room, and by the look on his face, I knew he was disappointed.

“Why are you doing this, Aiya? After what I saw, you should be here, laying on that damn couch trying to resolve whatever is going on in that head of yours,” he said sharply, but worriedly.

“I can’t explain it anymore than I already have. Please just understand. I need answers, and I know my grandma has them. I know I looked bad, Daniel, but really, don’t worry. I’m fine now, and my head is clear. We’ll be back as soon as we can. Alright?”

“Aiya, I’m ready if you are,” said Kaya as she came down the stairs.

“Yeah, let’s go,” I answered, grabbing my purse and tossing everything on the floor back in, then headed for the door with Kaya behind me.

“Give me your keys, I’ll drive,” she said, holding her hand out.

We walked to my car without saying another word, and the entire drive to our grandparents' house was in silence. It wasn't until we pulled into their driveway and parked, that Kaya looked at me and asked, “What happens if we don't get the answers you're looking for?”

“I don't know. All I do know is that I have to try,” I answered and got out of the car, hurrying towards the front door.

I rang the door bell, after about twenty seconds, I heard my grandma ask, “Who is it?”

“Aiya, Grandma, and Kay is with me,” I answered.

The door quickly opened and my grandma stood there with a huge smile on her thin, wrinkled face. Her gray hair was swept behind her ears, and her big, blue eyes sparkled with excitement. My gut twisted as I thought of what I was about to do to her.

“Oh my, what a nice surprise!” she squealed. “I wasn't excepting you girls until tomorrow. Well, don't just stand there, come in.”

“Hi, Grandma,” said Kaya, as she kissed her on the forehead and walked in.

The door closed behind us, and I jumped. “Don't think you're walking away without a hug,” Grandma said as she grabbed me tight.

I hugged her back and drew in a deep breath, “Grandma, I hope you know how much I love you.”

“Why so serious? What's wrong? Is it your head, dear? Did

something happen?”

“No...no...everything’s fine. I just need to talk to you and Grandpa.”

“Well, I hope this doesn’t have anything to do with that stupid loan. I’ve already told you we’ll give you the money, and I’m not going to talk about it anymore. Now, go into the kitchen, Grandpa is having his coffee,” she said, releasing her grip on me and walking to the kitchen.

I looked at Kaya and shook my head, then we followed her. We entered the kitchen and Grandpa was sitting at the table. He saw us and his eyes lit up as he smiled and said, “My girls,” he stood and hugged us. “Sit down with me and have something to eat. Grandma made blueberry muffins.”

We sat down and Grandma placed a cup and plate in front of us, then poured us some coffee. “Come on now, you know how much you love my muffins, eat, eat. Aiya, you’re much too thin, you better eat at least three of them!” she laughed.

I took a big drink and burnt my damn tongue as I just about finished the whole cup, but they were her small rose tea cups. I was desperately trying to figure out a way to bring things up, all without hurting them, or telling them about my nightmares, but I knew there was no way that was going to happen.

“Aiya, did you hear me?” Grandma asked, and I jumped.

“I’m sorry. No, Grandma, I was thinking,” I answered.

“Well, you must be really deep in thought. We’ve been talking for at least fifteen minutes, and you’ve yet to join us. That’s not like

you. What's wrong, sweetie? You're not telling me something, I know it. It is your head isn't it?!" she worriedly asked.

"No...please, just listen. Grandma, Grandpa, I will tell you both right now how very sorry I am...but I have to know about my mom's mother."

"How many times do I have to tell you we'll give you the money? There's no need to bother with all that ridiculous paperwork!" answered my grandma.

"I lied!" I blurted out.

"What are you talking about? Why would you do such a thing? That is..."

"Grandma, stop. Please," I interrupted her as I rubbed my temples. "I'm not getting a loan! I just wanted to know about her. What's wrong with that? She was my grandmother after all. I don't understand why you just can't tell me."

"I have nothing to tell you, cause I don't know anything!!" she shouted.

"Grandpa, please...I know this has to be hard, that's why Grandma's doing this. But I know you have to know her. You didn't forget anything! Just tell me her name, please, please...that's all, just a name," I pleaded.

"We probably should have told you girls..."

"No!!" Grandma cut him off. "We should have done nothing. Aiya, you're begging your grandpa to tell you something he knows nothing about! Now leave it be!"

"Okay, Grandma, what's going on? Now I know Aiya's right.

You're scared, and hiding something. I can hear it in your voice," said Kaya.

I started to cry, and as my tears poured down my reddened face I shouted, "I'm having nightmares about children being ripped to pieces!! I know they have something to do with Grandmother, and you can't tell me her fucking name?!"

"You will not speak to me using foul language! Not in my home!!" yelled Grandma.

"That's all you have to say after what I just told you?" I answered.

"Since this is the first time I have ever heard of you having nightmares, yes. For all I know you're lying again just to see if you can get answers from me," she said calmly, which not only surprised me after the way she had just yelled, but now I was positive she was hiding something.

"Grandma, Grandpa, you raised us, and I love you both so much for all you've done, that will never change, no matter what."

"I feel the same way. There is nothing in this world you could tell us that would change that," said Kaya.

Grandma began to cry. I couldn't believe it. I hadn't seen her cry since the first day we met her at the orphanage.

"We need to tell them, Martha, it's been long enough. The truth needs to be told," said my grandpa as he stood up and hugged her.

"Wha...what truth, Grandpa?" I shakily asked.

"Who you are," he answered.

I looked at Kaya, she was shaking, and small tear drops began to

fall down her checks. I knew she was scared, but I wasn't. How could I be after everything I'd seen?

"Wha...what...do you mean who we are? I...I...don't understand..." wept Kaya.

"I have something to show you," sniffled my grandma, then she walked out.

I started to get up to follow her when Grandpa said, "You just stay right where you are. The both of you stay with me, please...your grandma will be right back. I want you to know we only did this because we love you, so please, don't think badly of us."

"That could never happen," I answered.

"Grandpa, don't you know how much we love you? What could you possibly have done to question that?" Kaya worriedly asked.

He didn't answer, he just shook his head and lowered it. The look on his face was one I'd never seen before. I knew that whatever this was, it was something big. My mind shifted through every gear and jumped into overdrive. I couldn't imagine what could possibly have been so bad that they felt they had to hide it from us. The more I thought about it, the more anxious I became. I had this terrible sensation deep in the pit of my stomach, twice as bad as the dragonfly. God, it felt like Grandma had been gone for hours. I wondered what in the world she was doing that was taking so long. Just when I couldn't take it anymore and was about to get up, she walked back into the kitchen carrying a box.

She set it on the table in front of us and said, "Inside this box are your mom and dad's most treasured possessions. All I ask is that you

forgive us for what we've done...and remember...we only did it to protect you."

Kay and I looked at each other, our eyes welling with tears. We were more than anxious to know what was inside, but neither of us reached for it. We were frightened. It was like whatever secrets hid in it, once we let them out, they'd never find peace again.

"I...I...thought that everything, all of their belongings, had been lost," Kaya barely whispered.

"No...I'm so sorry..." cried my grandma.

I was tired of all the unanswered questions. I'd had enough. Standing up, I took the lid off the box and reached inside. "Oh my god, Kay! There's picture albums, books, old flowers, Dad's grooming kit, Mom's jewelry box and a bunch of old letters," I gasped as I started taking it all out.

"What? How? I don't understand," Kaya mumbled, reaching for the picture album. "Look at the writing on it! 'Yanaba Crenshaw', this is Mom's album!" she slowly opened it. "There's baby pictures of us, Mom and Dad. I can't believe it!"

I dropped what I had in my hand and sat back down next to Kaya. I eagerly looked at the pictures with her. "Oh my god! I don't remember being that small!" I laughed.

"Yeah, you were pretty tiny, but then again, you're still not that big," Kaya chuckled.

"I wouldn't talk!" I retorted. "Look how happy Mom and Dad were. This is so great, Kay. I never thought we'd be sitting together and looking at pictures of them."

“It’s so good to see you girls laugh like that. I’m so sorry,” said Grandma.

“Why would you think we’d be mad at you for this?” I asked. “It’s unbelievable, and just what I needed right now.”

“Yeah, Grandma, why would you think that? Hmm...I can’t think of any reasons, but then, I can’t think of how you’d have this either,” said Kaya in a doubting tone, one that I hadn’t heard before.

“How did you get this, Grandma?” I asked, my curiosity peaked by Kaya’s tone.

“That’s not important right now. You girls just look through that album, and we’ll talk about it later. Martha, lets give them a moment alone,” answered my grandpa, reaching for Grandma’s hand and walking out.

“Kay, what are you thinking?” I asked after they were gone.

“I’m thinking, if they didn’t know about Mom and Dad’s accident, for what was it, months and months they said? They didn’t know where we lived, hell, they didn’t even find us for how fucking long? So how in the hell did they get this stuff?” she angrily said.

“I don’t know. Those are pretty good points, but I’m just happy that we have this. So let’s look at everything, and like Grandpa said, they’ll tell us later.”

“You’re right...this is great! Look at all these old pictures! Hey, look at these,” she said, pointing to pictures of an old woman sitting in a big chair. She had black hair and eyes.

“Who is that?” I asked. “Look, here’s another one with her holding a baby...and look at that little girl next to her.”

“I think that’s Mom’s mother...oh my god...Aiya, it is her!” she gasped “I think the baby is you, and that little girl is me.”

“What?! No way...are you sure?”

“Yeah...pretty sure. Here’s another with her and Mom, and some strange man. Wow, look how long his black hair is! He looks odd...and here’s some with us and him. And look! It’s that funny house I told you about!”

“Okay...you weren’t kidding, that is a funny looking house. I’ve never seen a round house before! And that man, kind of scary isn’t he? This is a lot of pictures, not only of us as babies, but as we started to get bigger. I don’t know...that’s too weird. I think we’ve been there more than just a few times.”

“Yeah, me too,” she answered, turning the pages. “What’s this?” she asked, taking out an old, fading envelope. I was sure it had once been white, but it was now an odd, yellow color.

“Wow...it looks like an old letter,” I answered. “Open it!”

“That’s what I’m trying to do, calm down!” Kaya opened it and brought out papers that were just as old and faded as that yellow envelope. “It’s some kind of letter, the writing is the same as on the album. It has to be Moms.”

“Well, are you going to read it or just stare at it?”

“Hold your horses, Aiya, don’t be so snippity. I’m going to read it. I’m just nervous, that’s all.”

“I know...sorry. So am I. This is just so strange. All these pictures, and a letter from Mom after all these years. Why now? Why does it coincide with my nightmares?”

“The only reason they gave this to us now is because we badgered them to death. I don’t know if that has anything to do with your nightmares, but we came over here to do this because of what you remembered.”

“Yeah...” I sighed. “No doubt that’s the truth.”

“Alright, I’m going to read it,” she drew in a deep breath, her hands shaking as she read.

“March of 1864. My people, the Dinè, were taken from their homeland within the four sacred mountains. Atrocities that none could ever begin to imagine were forced upon them. Over 300 miles of suffering on their trek to Hwèèldi.”

“What is this?” she gasped.

“I don’t know...just keep reading,” I answered, my voice just as shaky as her hands.

“Bloodied feet, broken bodies. The sound of the wind crying.”

Kaya paused and swallowed so hard that I heard it, then shook her head. “Aiya, this feels really strange. My stomach has that damn dragonfly of yours in it, butting its head all over the place and trying to escape.”

“I know, I feel it too. Just keep on reading.”

She heartrendingly continued,

“Their clothing, blankets, and moccasins were worn to but a thread and no longer provided protection. Not from Mother Nature’s elements, or the white man. The heavy snow came, bringing a frozen death to many, the treacherous rivers were not far behind its sister snow and claimed many more. The sickness of the white man fell

upon them, ravaging many. Scarce rations brought starvation. Murder came for those too weak to continue. It was genocide in the guise of relocation.”

I began to shake even more. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Genocide? That meant that those people were forced to die, but what people? I'd never heard of the Dinè before. The only genocide I'd ever heard, or knew about, was the Jews and Gypsies that were forced into concentration camps by Hitler. As soon as I thought about that, what Dr. Jacobs had said about my perception of evil, his reference to Hitler and the others, popped into my head. And I had the same sense of evil.

“A General they called Bishop...” she continued, and I jerked so hard I almost fell out of my chair. “...arrived with more soldiers as they neared Fort Sumner, none of them understood why. My mother said his eyes were cold, empty, as if he had no soul. Just a mere look from him made her body shiver uncontrollably, and she'd come to tears. She said the next day, when they awoke, the General and the soldiers were gone, and so were more than one hundred children. My mother's twin sister, Nashota, was one of them. My grandmother's screams were silenced by the blunt end of a rifle. In the midst of death they were just shadows that faded away. Ones not seen, and ones certainly not missed by the Calvary. To them, it was just one less Navajo.”

“Navajo! Oh my god, that's who all those people were that were killed. That means Grandmother was Navajo!” I shouted.

“Wh...what does this mean?” Kaya asked nervously, placing the

letter on the table.

“It means that we’re part Navajo. Mom was Navajo...”

“I get that!” she shouted, interrupting me. “I’m talking about this damn letter. I don’t understand. It has people dying horribly, children missing, Grandmother’s sister...”

“Kay, the children! Is that the connection?” I asked, cutting her off. “I bet it has to be! Maybe that’s why after all this time I started to remember Grandmother. Hurry, finish the letter! Or do you want me to read the rest?” I anxiously asked.

“No! I started it, and I need to finish it. Alright?” she sighed, picking up the letter.

“Yeah...” I shakily answered.

“On their long trek to Fort Sumner, they passed some sort of army based facility. Your grandmother, Nascha, believed that was where they had taken the children. She said they were frightened of tales that were spoken. Whispers that chilled them to the bone about a man unlike any other. A man who wandered the halls searching for those he deemed worthy, the pure and untouched. It was said he was deformed and riddled with disease. ‘Dr. Heilbronner wants you...he’s coming for you...’ the soldiers taunted them.”

“That thing in my nightmares!” I gasped. “He was deformed and looked deathly ill...and said he was a doctor! What if it’s the same person?”

“Bu...but...how could that be?” she fearfully asked. “I don’t understand...how could you have nightmares about something that happened over a hundred years ago?”

“I don’t know, but I am. Think about it, the children, the man riddled with disease...wait. Dr. Heilbronner? In my nightmare, that monster had me on this metal table as he stood over me. I grabbed hold of his lab coat and something poked me. I remember...it was some sort of badge...and that was the name on it!” My entire body shook uncontrollably as I wondered if something like this could really happen. Was it possible? Could this thing, this man, or whatever it was, be real? It had to be, there was no other explanation.

“This is unbelievable...Aiya, maybe we should go. We can call Dr. Jacobs and tell him, maybe figure out why this has happened.”

“No, just finish it,” I said firmly.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

She nodded and continued, *“My mother’s tears of sorrow have never left my memory. As I write these words, I live her pain all over again. But I put them on paper, not to help me remember what my mother went through, I could never forget, but so that my mother’s words will always be with me. My sadness, and my mother’s tears, I put with her pictures. And one day, my beautiful daughters, when you come of age to understand, I will read this to you so that you will know of your heritage, know of your ancestors and how they suffered, so that we can live, love, and go on.”*

I sat there, almost incoherently. I felt as if someone had picked me up, tossed me around, then threw me to the ground and stomped on me. Was that a part of history? If it was, I’d never heard about it. And what about those poor children? I doubt if anyone ever knew

about them. But why, why me? Why are they calling to me? I wondered how I was supposed to help them if they were dead. I turned to face Kaya and felt my heart drop into my stomach. God, the sound of her voice as she had read the letter...but I'd been so lost in my thoughts, I'd forgotten about her.

She had not even a glimpse of color left in her face. All she had were the tears that covered it. Gasping as though she'd lost her voice, with her mouth agape, it was like she cried silently in pain. I thought she'd gone into convulsions as I watched her petite body jerk in every direction. The letter she had clutched in her hand, and held tight against her chest. I grabbed her and hugged her as tight as I could, almost afraid I'd lose her.

"I hurt so much, Aiya. It's like our whole world is falling apart all over again," she whispered in my ear.

"I'm so sorry. The only reason we didn't tell you was to protect you. We love you so much, and all we tried to do was spare you from any more pain." Startled by our grandma's voice, we wrenched simultaneously.

"Spare us, protect us?!" I shouted as I let go of Kay and turned to face my grandma. "How dare you?"

"Aiya, please. You don't understand!" she answered.

"There is nothing to understand! You should have given this to us a long time ago. It's my mother's album, and her letter that she wanted to read to us, but she never got the chance. You had no right!"

"Please...please...just listen to me. We only did it for you and

Kay, can't you see that?" she pleadingly asked.

"No, I can't! We've been living a lie. One told to us by the very same person who claims to love us. You were never planning on telling us were you? If we hadn't come over today and pushed you for answers, we would've never known."

"Your father left us so he could marry her, and it broke our hearts. It was the hardest thing in the world watching him walk away from us. When he was taken from this Earth, a part of me died with him. And I knew if I hadn't been against their marriage, I wouldn't have known the worst feeling in the world. Instead, I would have known the joy of..."

"You were against them?!" shouted Kaya, cutting her off. "You said it was Mom's family!"

"Please girls, you have to understand! It was a mixed marriage. We just couldn't condone it," answered my grandpa.

"Condone it?!" I screamed. "They were in love and you wouldn't let them be together! Our lives were ripped apart because you wouldn't accept an Indian into your family! Well, what do you think we are? Do you condone us? Oh my god! That's why you didn't tell us! Grandma, how did you get my parents' stuff?" I quickly asked.

"We knew where you lived, we always had. I'm so sorry...I just couldn't bring myself to accept any of it," she answered.

"You knew the entire time?! What about the accident?" I asked.

"After the accident...while you girls were in the hospital...we took care of everything, the house, the fune..." my grandma started

to cry and didn't finish.

"What does she mean, Grandpa?" asked Kaya.

"We sold everything, bought their plots and had them buried. Then put the rest of the money in the bank for you girls," he answered.

"You haven't done anything for us! You only did it for yourselves. To cover your mistakes. Tell me...you knew everything, took care of everything...what about the fucking orphanage we were in for over a year? Did you know we were there?" I furiously asked.

"Yes...oh my god...yes! I'm so sorry!" screamed my grandma.

My jaw dropped and I felt a sharp pain, as though it had smacked on the floor. I was stunned, and by the look on poor Kaya's face, I knew she was completely devastated.

"We wanted to come see you in the hospital, but we were so unsure. Then after you recovered and they took you there...we...didn't know what to do. We talked about you girls everyday, even dreamed about you, but there was just a lot of uncertainty. Then we finally realized, you were our family. You were part of John, no matter what kind of blood ran through your veins," my grandpa shakily said.

"Oh my god! We went through hell because of the blood that runs through our veins!" I yelled.

"You...you...don't understand! We love you. It's like we have John back," said Grandma.

"No, I understand!" I replied, putting everything I had taken out back into the box. "You don't have to be uncertain anymore. We'll

leave and won't come back. Kay, let's get the hell out of here!" I leaped out of my chair, grabbed the box and my purse, then walked out.

"How could you have done this to us?!" cried Kaya as she forcefully pushed her chair back, then hurried after me.

"Please! Please...don't do this! Come back!!!" screamed Grandma.

"Give them time, Martha. They'll see we did it for them."

I heard what my grandpa said and my body wrenched. I thought no amount of time in this world would ever be enough for me to understand. We practically ran to my car trying to escape my grandma's cries, then jumped in and drove away. Not once did I look back. It felt like we had been driving for an eternity when Kaya finally pulled into the driveway. I was numb, and completely lost. My head was throbbing, pounding against my temples, worse than it ever had. From the look on Kaya's face, I knew she wasn't too far behind. We didn't get out of the car, we just sat there quietly. I didn't even know how long we'd been there. Dusk had fallen when a shout quickly brought us back to reality.

"Are you alright? What's the matter with you two? Answer me, please!!" I saw Daniel through the windshield. He opened the car door. "Kay, baby, talk to me. What the hell is going on?"

"Daniel..." she cried, reaching for him.

He held her tight and carried her out of the car. "Aiya, can you walk?" he asked.

"Yes..." I managed to say, holding on to the box, I got out of the

car.

We went into the house, and he laid her on the couch, then sat by her side. I sat in the rocker next to them with the box on my lap.

“Tell me, what happened?” he asked.

“It was horrible, Daniel. Everything's been a lie!” answered Kaya, waving the letter she still held in her hand.

“What are you talking about? What's that?” he asked, taking it from her.

“It's something our mother wrote, but never had the chance to read to us,” I answered.

“Do you mind if I read it?” he asked.

“No...you should know the truth as well. Maybe it will change your mind about us,” I said.

“The truth?!” screeched Kaya. “How can it be when I don't believe it?”

Daniel looked confused as he arched his brow and began to read the letter. Not even a minute passed when tears started to roll down his face. He put it down and held on tight to Kaya. “I'm sorry, baby...” he whispered tenderly.

“Are you going to leave me now that you know who I am?” she asked.

“Kay! What are you talking about? You're my wife! I would never leave you. I love you!”

“I love you so much, Daniel...I'm sorry,” she cried.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, honey. Aiya, neither do you, and don't you ever forget that!” he said firmly, then picked up the

letter and continued to read. It didn't take him long to finish, and he shakily put it back into the envelope. "This is so unbelievable! Those people went through hell. How could something like that happen? Kay, Aiya, I'm so sorry...your ancestors were tortured. Corralled like fucking cattle! My god...your great grandmother, grandmother, and great aunt!"

"Shit! Where are the boys?" Kaya frantically asked.

"They're fine, baby. I put them to bed already."

"Bed? What time is it?"

"According to my watch, it's nine thirty."

"What? I didn't even realize it was that late. How long have we been back?"

"You were at your grandparents' for quite a while, and I have no clue how long you were sitting in the car before I realized you were out there."

"Aiya...are you okay?" asked Kaya.

"I'm fine...I wanted answers, and we both know I got them. I guess you really should be careful what you wish for, huh?"

"Don't say that! Both of you got answers which you should have had long ago, but now you know who you are. You know your grandmother, what happened to her family, and you have a letter from your mother. From what I read, she loved both of you very much. How could you possibly see that as bad? Granted, the way you found out was wrong, but I think it's great that you know," said Daniel.

"You're right, honey. I think we're still in shock. The entire time

that they raised us, they knew. Hell, they even knew we were in that damned orphanage, and they just left us to rot until their guilt got the better of them!” answered Kaya.

“I’m so sorry, but it doesn’t change who you are. And Aiya, now that you know, maybe your nightmares will stop.”

“My nightmares! I actually hadn’t thought about them since we left...but I know they won’t stop. I think they’re connected to what happened to our ancestors.”

“How could they possibly be connected?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but that’s what I need to find out. Maybe we should call Dr. Jacobs so we can try and figure it out.”

“No, it’s already late. I think the two of you need a good nights sleep and we’ll give him a call in the morning.”

“Daniel’s right, Aiya. I’m exhausted, and I know you are too. Let’s just go to bed, hopefully we’ll be able to get some sleep.”

“I know that’s probably the best thing to do right now. I just don’t know if I can. My mind’s going crazy with a hundred different thoughts, and what if I have another fucking nightmare?” Just as I said my last word, the phone rang, and I jumped.

“I got it,” said Daniel, leaning over and reaching for the phone on the end table. “Hello?” he said. “Yes they are, and they’re fine,” he paused. “I have no clue what you did, Martha, they didn’t say a word. Alright, hold on just a second,” he covered the receiver. “Kay, do you want to talk to your Grandma?”

“I have nothing to say to her...and I don’t know if I ever will. So just hang up the phone, Daniel!” said Kaya, more than firmly.

“I’m sorry, Martha, she’s a little tired right now. Would you like me to give her a message for you?” he asked, pausing for a few seconds. “Alright, goodbye,” he hung up the phone. “She said to tell you girls that they love you very much and they’re very sorry.”

“They’re not sorry. They don’t even know the meaning of the word!” said Kaya.

“What they did was wrong, but I know how much they love you,” said Daniel.

“They’re liars and...”

I quickly cut Kaya off, “I don’t want to talk anymore. My head feels like it’s going to explode. You’re right, Daniel, I think we should just try and get some sleep now.”

“Maybe you should go up to the spare bedroom and try to get some sleep there,” said Daniel.

“No, I’m fine right here. I don’t think I have the strength to move,” I answered.

“Alright, if you’re sure. Come on, baby, lets go to bed.”

“No...you go ahead. I’m going to stay down here with Aiya.”

“Well then, I suggest we all get comfortable, because I’m not going anywhere either.”

I sat there and watched them fall asleep, my mind running around in circles at a hundred miles an hour as I tried to decipher everything. My old memories mixed with the new ones, I wondered if that little girl was the reason they’d come back to me. I took out the photo album and started looking through it, hoping for some kind of clue. I swiftly thought about the darkness. I'm sure it knew how

weak and vulnerable I was. It could easily come with that fucking monster and take me away, and I'd be lost in my nightmares forever. No, I wouldn't let that happen. I'd stay awake, make a pot of coffee...and wait for the light.

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The dawn broke through the window and I actually smiled as I took a deep breath, relieved that I had managed to stay awake. I put the album back in the box and quietly tiptoed past Kaya and Daniel, making my way to the stairs. I headed up, stopping at the boys' bedroom door first. I opened it and peeked in, they were both still sound asleep. I smiled, then as I began to close the door I heard rustling sounds. "Shit...I woke them," I whispered, then walked in. "Morning! Sorry, I know it's early, but since you're awake...I love you guys!" I excitedly yelled as I saw them moving around.

"Auntie...Auntie..." They were horrible whispers that were muffled by the blankets. "Come closer..."

Chills ran down my spine and I cringed. "Wha...what's wrong with you guys? That's not funny..." I shakily moved towards their beds, and the rustling sounds grew louder and louder as the blankets swirled violently around. I reached out for them, and what my fingers touched felt hot, then I heard raspy breathing.

"They are mine now. They give to me what you would not!" that bastard screeched at me, his putrid stench reeked as his face bore through the blankets.

"No! No! If you lay one finger on them, I'll fucking kill you!!" I shouted as I lunged at him. I felt myself fall face forward and smack

into something hard. I quickly pushed against it and leaped up, only to find myself standing in the middle of the living room. My head bobbed aimlessly as I looked around.

“Aiya! Are you alright?” asked Kaya as she came walking down the stairs.

“I...I...the boys!!” I gasped and hurried towards her.

“I just came from their room, they’re fine. It’s only six forty five, they’ll be asleep for a few more hours.”

“What? Damn...Kay,” I sighed as I reached for my head and squeezed.

“What’s wrong? Oh shit...you had another fucking nightmare, didn’t you?”

“Are you sure they’re alright?”

“Yes! Why? What the hell was your nightmare about?” she worriedly asked.

“Nothing...never mind, it’s fine. Where’s Daniel?” I didn’t want to tell her, there was no need to scare her any more than I knew she already was.

“In the shower. We woke up about an hour ago and didn’t want to wake you. Are you sure you’re okay? Maybe you should lay down for a while. I don’t know how you could have slept on that chair,” said Kaya.

“I thought I slept fine, until I woke up anyway.”

“Alright then...I’m going to make some coffee,” she said as she touched my cheek and walked into the living room, picked up the empty coffee pot and cup from the table, and headed to the kitchen.

“Yeah, sorry I left that there,” I answered, then went upstairs to the bathroom. When I came out, I peeked in on the boys, they were sound asleep and looked fine. Just like two little angels without a care in the world. I closed the door and went back down. When I walked into the living room Kaya and Daniel were sitting on the sofa, talking about the letter.

“Yeah, my thoughts have been going crazy too,” I said as I flopped down.

“Well, it’s still early, and I’m sure our thoughts aren’t going anywhere, so drink your coffee before it gets cold,” said Kaya.

“Thanks...” I answered, reaching for the cup on the table.

“I know just what you mean, Aiya. Believe it or not, I haven’t been able to get that letter out of my mind,” said Daniel.

“That’s not hard to believe. Did you even know something like that happened to the Navajo?” I asked.

“No. I had no idea. And, Aiya, it doesn’t have anything to do with me being white.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I just asked cause I didn’t know,” I quickly answered.

“Well, it has been over a hundred years, but shouldn’t it have been in history? I mean, I don’t remember reading about it either,” he said.

“I know, I don’t remember ever hearing about that,” added Kaya.

“Where’s the letter?” I asked.

“I put it under the couch. I’ll get it,” said Daniel, bending over

and reaching for it. “Here,” he handed it to me.

“Are you going to read it?” asked Kay, sounding surprised.

“I wanted to. Why?”

“Why don’t we wait until we call Dr. Jacobs? I mean, once was hard enough. Do you really want to read it again right now?”

“You’re probably right. Let’s finish going through the box, and at eight, we’ll give him a call,” I said, putting the letter down and reaching for the box.

“I’m gonna get another cup of coffee. Anyone else?” said Kay, standing up.

“Yeah, I can go for another cup,” I answered.

“Me too, but I’ll get it. You sit down with Aiya and start,” said Daniel, grabbing her cup, then mine and heading into the kitchen.

Kaya sat on the floor, I stood up and sat down next to her, placing the box between us. I took off the lid and carefully tipped the box over, emptying the contents on to the floor.

“Here, just be careful, it’s hot,” said Daniel, handing Kaya and I a cup of coffee.

“Thanks,” we both said simultaneously as we reached for the cups. We looked at each other and just shook our heads as we smiled. Daniel chuckled and walked back to the kitchen.

“Hey, Mom’s jewelry box! You open it.”

“Alright,” I answered, slowly lifting the lid. “Wow! Look at all this! I don’t remember Mom having this much stuff...wait...I recognize this bracelet! She always wore it on her right wrist, and look! Their wedding rings!”

“Oh my god!”

“What? Did you guys find treasure?” Daniel jokingly asked as he sat down on the floor next to us. “Eat! I’m sure you haven’t had anything in your stomachs for quite awhile,” he said, placing a plate of biscuits filled with sausage on the side of our mess.

“Thanks, honey. It looks delicious, and I’m starving.”

“Aiya, you better eat at least one,” said Daniel.

“I’m going to...thanks,” I answered, reaching for one. I was actually starving. I couldn’t remember the last time I had anything to eat.

“Now, show me what you found,” he said.

“Look, my parents' wedding rings,” said Kaya, handing them to Daniel.

“Wow...they're beautiful,” he gasped. “What’s that, Aiya?”

“My mom’s bracelet.”

“That’s incredible. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite so pretty...well, except for you, honey. Oh, and you too, Aiya.”

“Yeah, good save,” I said, nodding my head. “I can’t believe there’s so much.”

“I think you need to keep the bracelet. Why don’t you put it on?” said Kaya.

“What? Are you sure?”

“Of course I am. Cause...I have my eye on those,” she said, reaching for a pair of silver hoop earrings that were laced with beautiful blue and purple turquoise.

“My wife always has an ulterior motive,” chuckled Daniel.

“I’ll put the bracelet on and you put on the earrings, alright?” I excitedly said.

“Alright...go!” she shouted, and as she quickly put them on, I did the same.

“They’re gorgeous,” I gasped at how perfect the earrings hung on Kaya.

“So is the bracelet. It fits your wrist just right.”

“Yeah, it does,” I answered, looking at it.

“Well, I think they’re suited just for each of you. I know if your mother were here, that’s exactly what she would have given you,” said Daniel.

“So do I. They’re a perfect match for us,” answered Kaya.

“Alright...what about all the necklaces? There’s still a lot of earrings, a few more bracelets, and look at all of the turquoise rings,” I said.

“Why don’t you just split them evenly?” suggested Daniel.

“For once, babe, you’re right,” giggled Kaya. “Aiya, you pick out the ones you want, then I’ll take what’s left. I mean, everything’s beautiful, and it’s Mom’s, so it really doesn’t matter. But not the wedding rings, you should keep those.”

“What?!” I just about shouted. “No, Kay, I agree with everything else, but these are too sentimental, they’re Mom and Dad’s. I can’t.”

“Yeah, you can. I certainly don’t need another wedding ring, and I’ll have plenty of Mom’s other rings to wear. Plus, I think she would have wanted you to have them.”

“Are you sure? I mean, do you really think she would have?”

“Yeah...so no more yapping. Daniel, what time is it?” she quickly tried to change the subject.

“It’s eight thirty,” he answered, handing me back the rings.

“Shit, already? I’m going to call Dr. Jacobs,” I said as I began to put everything back in the jewelry box.

“I’m going up to check on the boys. They never sleep in this late on a Sunday morning,” said Daniel as he got up.

“Hey, what are we going to do?” Kaya quickly asked. “We can’t have the boys here with Dr. Jacobs when we talk about Aiya’s nightmare and Mom’s letter.”

“You’re right. I can take them out for breakfast, then over to my parents’ house,” answered Daniel.

“What if your parents have plans? It is Sunday.”

“Then they can change them. Don’t worry, they won’t mind. I’ll call them from our room after I get the boys ready,” he said, and headed upstairs.

“Alright, if you’re sure,” Kaya said. “His parents are weird sometimes.”

“Maybe it’s better if I just call him and meet at his office.”

“No, it’s not better. It’s not like his parents are mean or anything, they love having the boys over, they’re just different. They go to church every Sunday.”

I laughed. “There’s nothing wrong with that. Okay, I’ll give him a call, then I’m going to get cleaned up. Do you have something I can wear? I’ve been in these clothes too long. I look like shit.”

“Trying to impress someone, are we?” she joked.

“No! I’m just tried of wearing wrinkled clothes. You should probably change too, unless you’re into the unkempt look,” I said as I finished putting everything back in the box. I reached for the lid, closed it, then wobbly got up, my legs had fallen asleep.

“Nah, I’ve grown out of that stage,” she laughed “ I’m gonna jump in the shower. I’ll get out some clothes for you and put them in the spare room.” She stood and headed for the stairs. “Oh, I almost forgot. Daniel put Dr. Jacobs’ card on the desk in the kitchen.”

“Alright,” I answered, and walked into the kitchen.

Reaching the desk, his card was the first thing I saw. I picked it up, glancing at his number and found myself smiling, but I wondered why? I reached for the wall phone and dialed. It rang five times and I thought maybe he was still asleep, or more than likely he wasn’t home. It was Sunday. I’m sure he had plans. I was about to hang up when I heard a click, then he said, “Hello?”

“Good morning, Dr. Jacobs, it’s Aiyana. I hope it’s not too early for me to be calling.”

“No, of course not. I’ve been worried about you. I was expecting your call yesterday. I hope everything’s alright,” he answered.

“Yes, and no. I mean, I’m fine, but I’ve found out quite a bit about my childhood, and I know it’s related to my nightmares.”

“Are you still at your sister’s house?” he asked.

“Yes, it seems I haven’t been able to make it home.”

“Good. I am in the middle of something right now, but I can be

there in an hour. If that's alright?"

"That's fine."

"Okay then, I'll see you soon."

"Great, goodbye."

"Bye-bye," he said, and hung up.

I hung up the phone and ran towards the stairs, then headed up just as fast. Reaching the spare room, I saw the clothes Kaya laid on the bed, a pair of blue jeans that looked like they would fit snugly, and a dark purple, silk blouse. I picked them up, and as I went into the bathroom I mockingly said, "Hmm, very nice. I guess she wants to make sure Dr. Jacobs notices me. As if you could get anything over me, Kay. I know what you're up to." I closed the door, turned on the shower, then quickly got undressed. It felt good to get out of those clothes. I couldn't believe I'd been in them for days. I had to laugh, then I stopped abruptly when I saw myself in the mirror. Damn, I really did look like shit. I hurried and got in the shower. I think I'd forgotten just how good hot water felt, as soon as it hit me, I gasped. About thirty minutes, give or take, I was dressed and heading back downstairs.

"Well, don't you look nice," said Kaya as I came into the living room.

"Yeah...thanks for the jeans. I can barely breathe."

"That's the idea," she laughed.

"It's too quiet. Aren't the boys up?" I worriedly asked when I realized they weren't down here, and that damn nightmare popped into my head.

“Yeah, up and gone. Daniel already left.”

“What, already? I didn’t even get to say hello to them. I’m sure they’re probably disappointed. They expected me to have breakfast with them yesterday. They have to know I’m still here. I know they saw my car when they left,” I said, disappointed myself.

“Don’t worry, you can make it up to them when this is over. They love you and they understand. Daniel told them you weren’t feeling good, and you know what they said? ‘Make sure Auntie eats chicken soup, that will make her feel better.’”

“If only,” I sighed.

“Alright, lets not worry about that. Did you call Dr. Jacobs?”

“Yeah, he should be here soon,” I said, walking to the rocker I’d been sitting on. I reached down for my purse and set it on the coffee table, then opened it and brought out my compact, shadow and lipstick.

“Makeup too? Well, I guess you better, cause from what I remember, Dr. Jacobs is damn good looking, and his body wasn’t bad either,” she laughed.

“No! I just know I look like shit. I saw my face in the mirror,” I answered as I applied my powder.

“Whatever you say. I’m getting another cup of coffee, want some?”

“Yeah, I could really use another cup.”

“Hey, so when he gets here, what’s going to happen? I mean, is he going to hypnotize you again?” she asked.

“No, everything's clear in my head. I actually wish it wasn’t, but

I want him to read Mom's letter so he'll know, and hopefully see the connection. I mean, he has to right? I see it, and so do you."

"I hope he does. Maybe he can figure this out," she said, coming back with the coffee, then handing me a cup.

"So do I."

Just then the door bell rang, and I jumped. "Get the letter, and I'll get the door," Kaya said, setting her cup down and running to the door.

"Dr. Jacobs, please come in. Aiya's in the living room."

I heard the door close, then Dr. Jacobs said, "Thank you."

I stood nervously, holding the letter in my hand. "Thank you so much for coming again, Dr. Jacobs," I said as he walked in, reaching out my hand for his. He held my hand tight for a few seconds and I felt my stomach turn, but it was the nice, butterfly sensation.

"Aiya, you look well rested, considering what happened the other night. I'm glad. Why don't we all have a seat and you can tell me what you found out."

"Thank you. Please, sit here on the sofa," I said as he let go of my hand. He sat down, and I eagerly handed him the letter. "Please read this before we start."

"What is it?" he asked, arching his brow.

"I couldn't even begin to explain. Just read it, please."

"Very well," he said, then opened the envelope and took out the letter.

I sat down on the other end of the sofa, and tried not to watch him as he read it. I crossed my legs, fidgeting with my fingers. When

Kaya came back into the living room we looked at each other, arching our brows. She set a cup down in front of him and picked up the one she'd left.

"Dr. Jacobs, I brought some coffee for you," she said, then sat on the rocking chair and took a drink of hers.

He was so enthralled, I doubt he even heard her. I reached for my cup and almost slurped as I took a drink. I was nervous and worried. I couldn't help but wonder how he'd try to explain the similarity. I turned to Kaya, trying to keep my mind occupied, but she looked way more nervous than I was. She was rocking back and forth with the cup in her mouth, spilling more than she was drinking, and just staring at Dr. Jacobs.

"Aiyana...this is unbelievable! Is this letter from your mother? Where did you get it?" he asked, and I could hear the sorrow in his voice, mixed with excitement.

"Yes, Dr. Jacobs, my mother wrote that. It was told to her by her mother, and I just came in to possession of it...from my grandma who has had it for twenty years!" I raised my voice as I finished my last words.

"Incredible...simply incredible," he gasped.

"That's putting it mildly," said Kaya.

"Your ancestors have been through such pain, tortured unlike anything that we could even begin to imagine..." he sighed.

"Yes...we know..." Kaya shakily answered.

"I know of The Long Walk, and with all that I know, it cannot compare to the truth of this letter."

“You’ve heard of this before?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes. As I’ve told you, the mind intrigues me. Any culture that can survive the repugnant tortures thrown upon them by man, has the strongest mind yet. The Navajo are one of many people that have impressed me. Just their perseverance to rise above the adversities they faced...is astounding. Their healing rituals are outstanding, the Horno Oven and herbs that I used are just one of them.”

“Wow...” I sighed. “Then I guess my next question should be...do you believe that my nightmares are connected to what happened to them?”

“You have to admit, it’s a hell of a coincidence how we just got this,” said Kaya.

“I believe you do, and after reading this I can understand why. But, Aiyana, I must see everything logically. Just because those children disappeared and you’ve had dreams of children, does not mean they’re the same. I can’t see that. I’m sorry.”

“Dr. Jacobs! I have never believed in anything supernatural. I mean, ghosts and things of that sort, but not only do I believe Aiya, I know just as certain as you’re sitting there, that it is all connected,” said Kaya.

“Thank you, Kay...” I said warmly. Her words of support made me feel good.

“Very well, since I am out numbered, let us connect the similarities. Aiyana, begin with the children in your nightmares, then with the children that disappeared during The Long Walk,” he answered.

“The children that I’ve seen were kept in cages, like animals waiting to be slaughtered...and that’s what happened. The children in that Long Walk disappeared...and most likely were slaughtered. That bastard I saw in my nightmare doing the slaughtering has to be the man my mother described in her letter! Is that enough of a similarity for you?”

“The same man?” he questioned, arching his brow.

“Yes, Dr. Jacobs! Remember that morning you came over after my nightmare? I said I’d seen everything clearly. Well, that thing I saw had on some sort of name badge, 'Dr. Heilbronner', and that was before I read the letter! Now, you tell me how that’s possible.”

“I...I...don’t know...” he stuttered. “But there has to be a logical explanation.”

“There is! I think that little girl was my grandmother’s twin sister, that’s why I smelled my grandmother. That’s why you burned the same scent, so I could remember.”

“Wh...what?!” gasped Kaya, her eyes wide with astonishment.

“That is impossible, Aiyana!” Dr. Jacobs said, stunned, as his other brow quickly arched. “I burnt those scents because that is what I’ve always used in my therapy.”

“No! Why is that impossible?”

“Because someone who has been gone for a century does not just come back.”

“It could happen. Think about it. Remember when I said I thought the children needed my help? Maybe this is how they’re trying to communicate.”

“My god, Aiya! They’re talking to you through your nightmares! But why? I mean, they’re dead, what could they possibly want?” Kaya worriedly asked.

“I don’t know. I felt as though they needed me to save them from that monster. Or maybe it’s just that they want someone to know what happened to them.”

“Alright, lets say I believe all of this. Now, Kay is right, they’re dead, so you can’t save them. And if they just wanted someone to know what happened to them, then why not just in dreams? If it is your great aunt trying to communicate with you, why would she want you to have horrible nightmares that only traumatize you?”

“I don’t think she's traumatized me. It’s that thing. I didn’t feel the same when I saw the little girl. I felt helpless...not frightened out of my mind!” I shouted.

“Aiyana, please, just calm down. All I want to do is help, and if that means I have to believe in supernatural forces, I will try,” he tenderly said, reaching for my hand.

“That’s all I want...for you to believe me and know I’m not crazy. No matter how far-fetched this sounds.”

“You’re a lot of things, Aiyana, but crazy is not one of them,” he smiled, warmly. “Alright, let’s go through your mother’s letter again, and see what else we can connect.”

“Thank you...” I said, returning his smile.

“You’re welcome. Now, what about this army base she talked about before reaching...wait!” he gasped. “Hwèèldi...I know that word. The Navajo referred to that...yes, it’s Bosque Redondo! That’s

where they took the Navajo on The Long Walk. If they passed a base before reaching it, that would more than likely be...lets say...about one hundred ninety miles or so before New Mexico. What is up there now? Hmm...Kaya, is Daniel here?"

"No, he took the boys out for breakfast, then he's taking them over to his parents'."

"Does he have a map of Arizona around anywhere?"

"Yes, he has quite a few of them. They're in his desk, I'll get them," she answered, quickly heading into the kitchen.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I just want to take a look at something."

"Here, I brought all of them," Kaya said as she handed the maps to Dr. Jacobs.

"Thank you. Ah yes, Arizona. Perfect," he said, laying out the map on the coffee table. "The Long Walk began in Canyon de Chelley, and it was well over three hundred miles through Arizona, then into New Mexico. So we need to figure out what lays betwe..."

"My god!" I gasped, interrupting Dr. Jacobs and quickly placing my finger on the map.

"What is it, Aiyana?"

"I live here, East Paradise Flats. Coyote Hills is about fifty miles from my house going north. That would be around this area here. It has to be the army base they passed!"

"Are you sure?" asked Dr. Jacobs.

"Yes, I'm sure! And I know the owners of the building bought it fifty years ago and turned it into a hospital. It has to be that old army

base! The first time I saw that building, I felt an eeriness about it, and I swear it could be a fortress, you'd never believe the iron doors it has! Plus, there's a ton of really strange rooms."

"Oh my god, Aiya...it is that place! That's why the children are haunting it! Because that's where they died!" said Kaya frantically.

"Alright, we think it's the same place, but we have not established that for a fact, and to even suggest that they're haunting it brings us to a whole different level. It would mean we believe in ghosts, we believe that the dead can come back. What will we believe in next, aliens?" he asked.

"I think Kay is right. In my nightmares I saw the children in cages at Coyote Hills. I know that for a fact because I saw that thing drag the little girl down the corridor, then the stairs. The same stairs I fell down, or should I say, the ones that bastard pushed me down! They're the same ones that lead to the break room...the room where I watched him rip her apart!"

"Aiyana, we must remain rational! All your memories from your childhood have just returned to you. You could just be combining the two."

"I'm trying to be as rational as I can, and if I combined them, that's because they're the same."

"You've come in to possession of your mother's letter, which speaks of children missing. The similarities are uncanny, but it does not mean they're the same. You are trying to replace the children in your nightmares, with them."

"No, I'm not. All of this started at Coyote Hills! The patients

seeing children, talking about them all the time, I even saw and heard weird things, but didn't think anything of it. After I saw that damn monster kill Mr. Blidsen, all hell broke loose, and my nightmares began! Now my mother's letter...it just confirms everything, it doesn't replace it."

"Aiyana, Coyote Hills being a psychiatric hospital dictates that the patients there are diagnosed either with schizophrenia, psychosis, or dementia, all of which are often accompanied by hallucinations. They could see a variety of things, from dogs, cats, rabbits, children and ghosts, that is not uncommon."

"I know it's not, but they all had the same hallucinations, children! Not to mention the same damn medications. Haldol, Thorazine, Prolixin, and on the days of their extreme agitation, when they screamed at the top of their lungs, 'Help them, don't let them die!' and wouldn't stop, a healthy injection of Ativan, the drug of choice to calm them down!"

"That is not uncommon either. The anti-psychotic medications you mentioned are used in the treatment of schizophrenia. Ativan is often used in conjunction when extreme agitation is exhibited. Especially if they're at risk of harming themselves or others."

"Dr. Jacobs," I whispered. "I doubt they were ever at risk of harming anyone. They were just diagnosed incorrectly. I believe they were over medicated to keep them quiet, so that the staff would think they were crazy and not pay any attention to what they said."

"Diagnosed and medicated inappropriately?! Aiyana, do you realize the implications of that?"

“Yes, I do...and my part in it. I know now that they really did see the children, and that thing, because I’ve seen them too. If I had listened to them sooner, Mr. Blidsen would still be alive.”

“His death is not your fault! Whether you believed them or not, wouldn't have changed the outcome of that. We do not control death!”

“No, we don’t, but we should be able to stop it if it's not their time to die!”

“Aiya, please! I agree with Dr. Jacobs, you know damn well that was not your fault!” exclaimed Kaya.

“I just feel like I should’ve done more for them. I medicated them instead of helping them...and I hurt them...” I said, remorsefully.

“Aiyana, you did nothing wrong. You did what nurses do, take care of the well being of their patients. Remember that,” Dr. Jacobs said softly.

“But...I never once stopped to believe that maybe they really did see something. Here I am begging you to believe me, to believe something that sounds crazy...yet I didn’t until it was too late,” I sighed.

“If you would have told me this from the beginning, I would have very easily explained it away. But now...I don’t believe that I can,” he shakily whispered.

“I don’t think you were supposed to explain them away. I think you were meant to help me,” I answered softly.

“How's everything going?” asked Daniel, walking into the

living room.

“God, you scared the shit out of me!” gasped Kaya as she jumped, and just about hit the ceiling. “I didn’t hear you come in, honey. How did things go with the boys?” she asked, quickly standing up and kissing his cheek.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, baby,” he said, hugging her. “They’re just fine. They were outside playing ball with Dad when I left. Dr. Jacobs, nice to see you again.”

“The pleasure is mine,” he answered, standing up and shaking Daniel's hand. “And please, call me Ryan.”

“Alright, Ryan. Please, sit back down and continue. I hope you’ve found the answers to Aiya’s nightmares,” Daniel said as he and Kaya sat down.

“We’ve had some very interesting revelations come into play. I can most certainly say that much,” he answered.

“I take it you’ve read the letter then.”

“Yes, it was unbelievable. I’ve read much about the Navajo and The Long Walk, but nothing comes close to that letter.”

“Yeah, it was pretty emotional.”

“Emotional is an understatement,” I sighed.

“Dr. Jacobs, you seem to know a lot about them,” said Kaya.

“I’d like to think I do, but it’s just about as much as anyone else would. And please, Kaya, you don’t have to call me Dr. Jacobs. It makes me feel like an old man, and I’m not my father. Aiyana, if you don’t mind, I’d prefer you to use my first name as well.”

“No...I don’t mind that at all,” I answered.

“Well, it’s certainly more than I know about them, Ryan. Are they still around? I mean, I know the Navajo are still alive, but what happened to them? Where they’d go?” asked Kaya.

“Of course!” Ryan gasped. “Aiyana, remember when I said the Navajo still frequent the High Plains? That is the original site of their homeland. In your mother’s letter she referred to it as the four sacred mountains.”

“My grandmother’s house!” I said as realization struck me.

“What about your grandmother’s house?” he asked.

“Kay, get the picture albums out of the box, they’re by your chair.”

“Okay,” she quickly answered, reaching for the box. “Here, but what does Grandmother’s house have to do with any of this?”

“I’ll show you,” I answered, grabbing the album and flipping through the pages. “Where is it...yes, right here!” I pointed. “Dr. Jacobs...I mean, Ryan...wow that sounds weird, it’ll take awhile to get used to calling you that. Anyway, look! The house, and the background.”

“I don’t believe it! That is a hooghan. See the round shape and odd color? That’s because they’re made out of wooden poles, tree bark and mud. Notice the doorway, it opens to the east, that is to welcome the sun. The background I’m really not too sure about, but it does look like it could be the High Plains.”

“Aiya, what are you thinking?” asked Kaya.

“I’m thinking that Grandmother’s house is in the High Plains.”

“What?” she gasped. “No way.”

“No, Kaya, it is possible. Your grandmother was Navajo, so it’s more than likely she lived on a reservation,” answered Ryan.

“My god...do you think we have family there?” she asked.

“There’s only one way to find out, honey. Anyone up for a drive?” asked Daniel.

“Are you kidding me?” Kaya asked, surprised by Daniel’s suggestion. “What are we supposed to do, just casually go up there and say, ‘Hey, do you know my grandmother?’”

“That’s pretty much what I’m thinking. I mean, if Aiya thinks this is tied to her nightmares, then I think that’s where we should start,” he answered.

“Daniel’s right! We need to take a drive up there and find out,” I said.

“I agree,” said Ryan. “That is where we’ll find the rest of the answers we’re looking for.”

Daniel quickly stood, picking Kaya up with him. “Let’s go,” he said.

“Are you serious?” she gasped.

“As a heart attack,” he answered.

“Kay, we have to do this! I know it’s the only way to find out why I’m having these nightmares,” I said.

“Okay...I did say I’d do whatever it takes to help you, and if this is the only way, then I’ll go.”

“Thanks.”

“Alright, great, but do we even know how to get there?” asked Daniel.

“I do. We’ll take my car,” answered Ryan, standing up.

I stood up a little shakily, my knees felt as if they were too weak to hold my weight, and my stomach had that same feeling from when I was in the elevator. My mind went into overdrive automatically, I doubted it had any gears left. I wondered what we’d see, what we’d find out. Were the answers there? Was that little girl really my grandmother’s twin sister?

“Are you alright?” asked Ryan, reaching out and grabbing my arm.

I twitched as I answered, “I...I’m...fine. Just nervous I guess.”

“You’re nervous...and I’m freaking out!” said Kaya.

“It’s going to be fine. The both of you just need to relax,” replied Daniel.

“Easy for you to say! You know your family, and know they’re weird, but we have no clue what we’re walking into. For all we know, they could massacre us...” said Kaya, more than a little frightened.

“Honey, you’re being ridiculous now! Come on, no one’s going to touch you. Now, let’s just go, we’re wasting time,” sighed Daniel.

“Alright...I’ll grab my sweater and purse,” she said, and hurried upstairs.

“Sorry about that, Ryan, but Kaya can be a worry wart sometimes,” said Daniel.

“Please don’t apologize. I think we’re all a little on edge.”

“I’m taking the album and letter with us,” I said.

“That’s a good idea. Here,” said Ryan, handing me the letter.

“Thanks,” I reached for it and placed it in the album.

“Okay, I’m ready, let’s do it,” said Kaya, walking back into the living room. “Here, Aiya, I brought a sweater for you.”

We quietly headed for the door. Daniel opened it and we walked out. “That’s my car right over there,” said Ryan, pointing to a dark blue convertible parked across the street.

“Wow...that’s gorgeous!” Daniel practically drooled. “It’s a nineteen sixty four Chevy, right?”

“Thank you, and yes it is. A Chevy Chevelle Malibu Super Sport, to be precise,” he answered as we walked towards it. Reaching the car, he opened the door and pulled back the seat. “Daniel, Kaya, please hop in,” they climbed in and he brought the seat back up. “Aiyana.”

“Thank you,” I replied as I got in, and he closed the door.

He walked around the front of the car, and I saw him smiling at me through the windshield. I shivered, but it was different, not like I was scared or anything...it felt good. I thought my stomach had swallowed a hundred butterflies, and I felt my heart skip a beat. I nodded my head and grinned, wondering if he knew how his glance had made me feel. God...I hoped not.

As he got into the car, he actually fumbled getting the keys out of his pocket. “Ahem...” He cleared his throat and smiled. I wondered if he’d felt the same thing I did. I could’ve sworn he actually blushed, and I thought he was just a bit too nervous. He started the car and the stereo blasted, “California Dreaming.” He quickly reached for the knob, lowering it almost to nothing.

“The Mama’s and Papa’s,” I chuckled.

“Yes, I love their music. I find it helps to relax me,” he answered, sounding almost embarrassed.

“I like them too,” I quickly said, and thought it weird that we had the same taste in music. I wondered what else we had in common.

“Well, if this is going to be a long drive, which I’m pretty sure it will be, maybe you should turn it back up,” said Daniel.

“It is a very long drive, so I agree. Mama’s and Papa’s, here we go,” he laughed, turning the stereo up and taking off.

We drove up the block, then turned right, heading east. It was fifteen minutes from Kaya and Daniel’s house as we came to the turnoff and he headed northwest.

“Wow!” gasped Kaya. “You know, if you would’ve went straight for another five miles it would’ve taken us to Aiya’s house.”

“Really? I know you mentioned you lived in East Paradise Flats, but isn’t that on the outskirts?” he asked.

“Yeah, I live in the country. Nothing around for a mile on either side of me. I love it,” I answered with a slight chuckle. “Of course, I haven’t been home for a few days...just hope my plants are still alive.”

We continued driving for about forty minutes. I think we had heard, “Monday, Monday” and, “California Dreaming” at least five times each already. I had thought I couldn’t tire of that music...boy was I wrong. Finally, we came to a sign, “Dry Creek Rd.” I looked

around, but nothing was familiar to me.

“That’s our turn,” Ryan said.

“I had no clue this road came out so far. I don’t think I’ve ever been this way before,” I said as he turned.

“Unless you were driving up to the High Plains, you’d have no reason to come out this way,” he answered.

“Is that the only place this road leads to?” asked Kaya.

“Pretty much.”

“Funny, I’ve lived here all my life and have never been this way either. I don’t think I even know this road,” said Daniel.

“Knoll Hills, that’s our next turn off,” he replied, turning left.

I couldn’t believe it. We’d been driving for over two hours now, and I had no clue where we were. Nothing looked familiar, but as my head moved around aimlessly, the scenery took my breath away. I saw wildflowers dancing in the wind, pine trees and red woods, more than I could possibly count, everywhere. Then the road began to curve, and I caught a glimpse of dark blue with white splashing fast atop it.

“Oh my god!!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

“Aiya! Are you alright?” Ryan worriedly asked as he began to slow down.

“Aiya, what’s wrong?” gasped Kaya.

“The accident! Kay, look around! It’s the same damn road!” I said, turning around to face her.

She drew in such a deep breath, that we all heard it. Her eyes looked as though they pulsed, then quickly moved from side to

side. “I remember...” she gulped. “The big trees, the river...you’re right! This is it.”

Ryan pulled off to the side of the road. “Are you sure?” he asked as he turned off the car.

“Yes...yes!!” shouted Kaya.

I heard his door open, turning back I saw him get out of the car and walk to the edge. I quickly opened mine and followed.

“Wait for us!” said Kaya as they quickly got out.

“What are you doing?” I asked, reaching Ryan's side.

“I’m just looking. Looking at your lost childhood, your pain, suffering, and heartache,” he whispered, more tenderly than anyone I’d ever heard before.

I felt warm, almost giddy, like a child with a new toy. I had goose bumps going crazy up and down my arms, my legs...even my stomach. I wondered about this new sensation that was teasing me. I hadn’t felt anything like it before.

“What are we doing off the road like this? That’s a very dangerous edge,” said Daniel.

My thoughts quickly jumped right out of my head, along with my body, as I turned around to see Kaya and Daniel behind us, looking down. “Aiya...this is the spot...” Kaya shakily whispered, her face losing what color she had.

“Baby, are you okay?” asked Daniel, putting his arms around her.

She didn’t answer, all she did was cry. I turned back and looked down into the ravine, it was so deep. I shuddered and took a deep

breath. The nice feeling goose bumps swiftly turned to pin pricks along my arms. My stomach felt as if it had exploded, along with my heart. I shut my eyes tight. I couldn't look anymore, but I couldn't walk away either. I felt the wetness of my tears pour down my face, then a bright flash shook my body. I saw our station wagon rolling over and over down that ravine, and heard the terrifying screams of my mom and dad, "Kay! Aiya! Hold on babies, it's going to be alright. We love you..."

"No! Please...no!!!" I screamed as my eyes twitched painfully open. I felt myself heave, and reached my hand to my mouth, quickly turning my head and leaning over.

"Aiya, what's wrong?" asked Kaya as she hurried towards me.

I wiped off my mouth, and as I lifted my head, I felt gentle hands on the back of my neck. I turned, only to come nose to nose with Ryan, his strong, soft hands were holding back my hair. Kaya and Daniel were standing next to him, worriedly staring at me.

"What the hell just happened, Aiya? You scared the shit out of us!" cried Kaya.

"Let's get back in the car so you can sit down, Aiyana. I think I have some juice in the glove box. You can tell us what happened after you calm down," Ryan said, holding on tightly to my waist as we walked.

"I'll get the door!" exclaimed Daniel, rushing to the car and opening the door.

"Yes, I do! Here, drink this," said Ryan, handing a bottle of apple juice to me. I just about finished it in one drink, it felt like I

was dying of thirst. “Whoa...Aiyana, slow down or you’ll make yourself sick again!” he grabbed on to the bottle.

“Kay, come on, I want you to get back in the car,” said Daniel, grabbing her hand. They walked around the car without taking their eyes off of me.

“Alright, let’s get your feet in,” said Ryan as he reached for my legs, then scooted them inside and closed the door. He walked around and got in. “Are you up to telling us what happened?” he asked.

I nodded my head. “Yeah...I saw the accident, and heard my parents screaming.”

“Aiya...what the hell?!” gasped Kaya.

“The car rolled over, right there...” I shakily pointed to where we had stood. “Kay, they were so scared...and they loved us so very, very much...” I sobbed.

“Aiya! Why...why is this happening?!” she yelled, it was a heart wrenching cry.

“It’s alright, honey. I’m here, nothing’s going to hurt you,” whispered Daniel, holding her tight.

“It’s not that much further. We should get going,” said Ryan, starting the car, then I was startled by a squeaking noise. “It’s just the top. I’m putting it up.” He reached for my hand, and squeezed it reassuringly.

We got back on the road and Ryan still held on to my hand as he drove. We were quiet, but I knew everyone’s minds were going crazy with their own different thoughts. I just had one, that fucking vision.

It felt like we had driven for hours when we came to an old dirt road, but as I glanced at my watch, only thirty minutes had passed.

“Look! Look! Over there, it’s that house! That’s Grandmother’s house!” shouted Kaya as she pointed.

“My god...I don’t believe it...” I sighed.

“Alright, I think we’re here,” said Ryan as he turned onto the road.

“Finally...my stomach feels like a punching bag being used for practice,” said Kaya.

We were driving slower than a tortoise moving across the road, but the dust blew around us like a tornado going a hundred miles an hour, almost blinding our view. As it settled, we found ourselves in front of the house. The car came to a stop, and I knew exactly how Kaya felt. I had been so frightened these past months, and now that I was close to finding answers, I was even more frightened.

“Okay everyone, let’s get off,” said Ryan as he opened his door and stepped out of the car.

Daniel and Kaya got out on his side of the car, and I slowly opened my door. Getting out, I reached over for the album, then just about slammed the door shut.

“I don’t see anyone,” said Kaya.

“Let’s go knock on the door,” said Daniel, heading for the funny house.

“This is incredible!” gasped Ryan. “That’s a pretty big hooghan. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought I’d get to see something like this, unless it was in a picture. Look, there’s three

more over there,” he pointed.

“Aiya, look! It’s the chair from the picture!” said Kaya, more than excitedly, as she pointed.

“I see it...” I breathed, walking closer to the house.

“Yanaba....! Yanaba....! Yanaba....!” echoed in the air.

“What the hell? Did you guy’s hear that? Someone’s calling out our mom’s name,” gasped Kaya.

“I heard it,” whispered Daniel.

“Me too,” I shakily answered.

“It’s alright, you’re not hearing things. I think it’s that man coming this way,” said Ryan, pointing to a very old man with long, gray hair.

“Wh...who’s that?” Kaya worriedly asked.

“I don’t know, but we’ll soon find out,” answered Daniel. “Look, he’s starting to run, and for an old man he’s moving pretty fast.”

“Everyone, just stay calm,” said Ryan.

“Oh my god, Aiya! I think it’s that man from the picture,” gasped Kaya as he drew near.

“It can’t be. He’d have to be over a hundred years old!” I answered, surprised by what Kaya said. I wondered, as I stared at him, if it actually was the same man, it did look like him.

“Yanaba...!” he again shouted.

“Why does he keep calling Mom’s name?” asked Kaya.

I shook my head and opened my mouth, but before I even had a chance to get one word out, he stood in front of me.

Tears poured from his sad, black eyes and rolled down his worn, wrinkled face, as a smile that felt so familiar, lit up his features. “Yanaba...” he whispered gently.

I didn’t even have enough time to blink as Ryan quickly stood between us. He almost looked like a man protecting what was his. “Sikis, langundo,” he said, placing his hand across his chest. “We do not mean to intrude, nor do we attempt to trespass on your land. We have only come here seeking answers. My name is Ryan, and these are my friends. Aiyana,” he turned to me. “Her sister Kaya, and Daniel, Kaya's husband,” he gestured.

“What did you say to him? Was that Navajo you spoke?” I asked.

“Yeah, I know a little bit. I just told him we’re peaceful friends,” he whispered.

The old man nodded his head, still smiling as he looked at me, then at Kay. “Yazhi wyanet...” he said.

“I don’t understand him,” I whispered in Ryan’s ear. Then looked the old man in the eyes. “I’m sorry...I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I think he said, 'beautiful little ones.' Do you speak any English?” asked Ryan.

“Shizheè...” he answered.

“What is he trying to tell us? And why was he calling our mother’s name?” asked Kaya.

“The album, Aiyana, open it and show him the pictures,” said Ryan.

“Of course!” I gasped, opening it. “My mother,” I said, showing him the picture.

“Yanaba...bilagaana...” he cried.

“Yes, Yanaba! That’s our mother’s name,” I answered.

“Can I help you with something?” a voice behind us asked.

Startled, we quickly turned around. I felt my eyes bulge as they fell upon the three scary looking, rather large, men standing behind us. I wondered if they were related to the old man. God, I hoped so. They all had long, black hair and eyes, and wore funny clothes. They probably thought we were trespassers and were going to make us leave. Then I remembered what Kaya had said about us being massacred. I cringed, and tried to quickly dispel the thought as I rolled my shoulders.

“Yes, please...we do not mean to cause any trouble. We're looking for the family of Yanaba,” said Ryan.

“Why does the white man travel many roads? How does he know to speak the name Yanaba?” asked the older of the three men. He wasn’t quite as old as the first old man, but his features were the same.

“This is Aiyana,” Ryan said, placing his hand on my shoulder, probably to steady me, I was shaking like a leaf with my crazy thoughts. “This is her sister Kaya,” he gestured with his other hand. “They are daughters of Yanaba.”

“That cannot be so! Yanaba has been gone for many moons,” he answered.

“Sani!” shouted the old man.

“Azhé‘é,” he answered, lowering his head. “I have lost my manners. Please, come inside before the night falls.” He gestured for us to follow the old man, then nodded at the other two, and they walked away.

“Do you think we should go in there with them?” whispered Kaya.

“There is no need for fear. We have not took the scalp of the white man for many moons,” answered the one the old man had called Sani.

I was shocked. I didn’t think he had heard her, and from the look on poor Kaya’s face, she was just as surprised as she was scared. “It’s fine, come on,” I said as I followed the old man.

I walked through the door and my body shivered, but it was a nice sensation as I was taken aback by the smell of my childhood. My eyes moved eagerly, looking at the eight sided room as I slowly made my way behind the old man. Then, in the corner, I could've sworn I saw my grandmother and mother standing and smiling at us. I felt warm and secure, and I couldn't help but smile. I wasn't frightened anymore, but instead felt a calmness, as though my worries had been taken from me, it was such an incredible feeling.

“This is unbelievable...” I heard Ryan whisper from behind me.

“Yes, it is...” I happily sighed.

The old man stopped when he came to a weird looking fireplace. It was made out of red bricks from the floor all the way to the ceiling, and in the middle was the opening. I thought it looked like a big circle of fire. On the bottom, the bricks came up like a

counter top. There were different types of pots, dishes and utensils set on it. A big, odd looking, black kettle hung over the fire and I could see the steam rising out of it. It reminded me of a witch's brewing pot. In the corner was a big wooden table and chairs.

“Yazhi,” the old man said as he gestured for us to sit. I smiled at him, this seemed so natural, as though I had done this before.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” said Ryan as we sat down.

I quickly inhaled an aroma that was familiar, and noticed some kind of bread and dried meat on the table, but I wasn't sure what it was. The old man smiled as he nodded and began to fill bowls with what was inside of the kettle. He placed them on the table in front of each chair. I watched him and smiled, his every move seemed timed so perfectly. He reached for cups and placed them next to the bowls, then grabbed a pot and poured dark, hot liquid into the cups. From the smell, I knew that it was coffee.

“Oh my god!” gasped Kaya, her head frantically looking about as she reached us. “I remember this place, every single inch of it!”

Daniel stood behind her, his head moving about just as frantically as Kaya's. “Wow...this is incredible, honey. I've never seen anything like it before,” he barely whispered.

“My grandmother's house...I even remember that bed,” she pointed. “That's where she used to tell us stories to put us to sleep. Aiya, do you remember?” she asked, her eyes welling with tears.

“Yeah...I do...” I answered, my voice scratchy. The old man smiled tenderly at Kaya as he gestured to the chairs. They sat down, and I saw the other old man walk in. “Sani, that's your name?” I

asked.

“Yes, that is what I am called,” he answered. “Please eat. You have come from far away, your stomachs must hurt.”

“Thank you. I am very hungry,” said Ryan as he began to eat.

Kaya and Daniel stared apprehensively at their food, then at me. From the looks on their faces I knew they were worried, so I quickly began to eat. “This is delicious,” I said with a nod, rolling my eyes at them, trying to hint as best I could, ‘Please don’t offend them.’

“It is mutton stew, and that is fry bread. Dip it into the stew and eat,” said Sani as he reached the table. “Azhé‘é, sit.” he said, and as the old man sat down, he did as well.

Kaya and Daniel nervously did as Sani instructed. “This is very good, thank you,” said Daniel.

The old man smiled as he picked up his cup and took a drink, not once did he take his eyes off of Kaya and I.

Feeling a little edgy, I hurriedly turned to Sani. “This belonged to my mother,” I said, handing the album to him.

He opened it and slowly turned the pages, then looked to the old man. “They are daughters of Yanaba?” he asked. “I do not understand, Azhé‘é. How can this be?”

“You knew our mother?” I asked, surprised.

“I am brother of Yanaba,” he answered.

“What?!” shouted Kaya.

“She left many, many moons ago. My father’s heart has still not mended,” he said.

“I’m really confused. My mother was your sister, and you said

your father is still heartbroken. Where is your father?" asked Kaya.

"Here with us," he answered, nodding towards the old man.

"Oh my god! That's why he was calling out Mom's name...it's cause he thought I was her!" I said, bolting to my feet. I walked to the old man, and reaching out, I caressed his worn face as I smiled warmly, looking into his sad, black eyes.

"Shizheè," he tenderly said.

"Why does he keep saying that, what does it mean?" I asked.

"Grandfather," answered Sani.

"Grandfather!" I cried, wrapping my arms around him. I'd wondered why this had felt so natural, now I knew as my memories of him came flooding back.

"Yazhi, you are your shima," he said.

"I...don't understand..." I sniffled, letting go of him.

"He says, 'little one, you are your mother.'" answered Sani.

"Grandfather...I remember!!" yelled Kaya, jumping up and practically leaping for him, then hugged him as if there was no tomorrow.

"My gaagii..." he sobbed.

"Yes, Shizheè...your raven has come back!" she balled. I hadn't seen her cry that hard since our parents died.

"You know the meaning of gaagii?" asked Sani.

"Yes...I remember, that's what he always called me. I...was his raven..." she panted as she finally let go of him.

"Ayor anosh' ni."

"What does that mean?" asked Kaya.

“He said he loves the both of you very much. I will now ask what has been hurting my heart. Yanaba has not returned for many moons. Father said it is because she has gone to join her ancestors. Is that so?”

“Yes, Sani. Shizheè...I’m so sorry. She passed away many years ago,” answered Kaya.

The look upon their faces took my breath away. I thought I’d actually felt their pain surge right through me. “I’m so, so sorry, but that’s why we’ve come. We found a letter that she wrote. In it, she tells of what happened to her mother on The Long Walk of the Navajo, and of children that disappeared. One of them being my grandmother’s twin sister, Nashota.”

“Yes, many of our people saw the windspirit on The Walk of Tears. My father was just past five years, but he remembers all that happened. He has spoken of the dark night when the white devil in blue flew through the camp and carried away many, many children.”

“I have been having night...I mean...dreams of children, and a horrible man has them. I think it’s the same children that went missing,” I shakily said.

“You see the spirits just as your mother and her mother. They had the vision, and it has passed to you,” said my grandfather.

“Wha...what?” gasped Kaya, and from the look on her face, she was just as surprised as I was that he spoke English.

“What...vision?” I asked, dumbfounded and actually at a loss for words.

“So you can speak English?” asked Ryan. “Please, then can you

tell us what you mean?”

“All of this has me utterly amazed. I...don’t even know what to think anymore,” said Daniel, fretfully.

“You are husband of my gaagii?” asked my grandfather.

“Yes sir, I am.”

“The white man has always been an enemy to us. He has wanted what we have. Our lands, our pride, but he is greedy and never satisfied until he has taken all we have.”

“NO!” answered Daniel in a tone I had never heard from him before as he firmly shook his head. “I am nothing like that! I love Kaya with all my heart. She means more to me than life itself!”

“Please, Grandfather! Daniel is a good man, and I love him very much. We have two beautiful sons. Your great grandchildren, Shizheè,” said Kaya.

“Yanaba taken from me, my yazhi, my gaagii, now two more shiye taken from me. Inside my heart there is pain, it does not have room for more,” he answered. There was so much sadness in his words that I felt my stomach tie in a hundred knots as his tears rolled down his cheeks.

“No! We have come back, and I promise, you will see your great grandchildren. Your heart will know joy,” answered Kaya.

“Grandfather, I’m so sorry, but we were just kids when all of this happened. We would never want to hurt you, and if it wasn’t for our mother’s letter...I...I...don’t...” I couldn’t finish my words, it was as though my throat felt the pain as I spoke. My mind went haywire, passing every gear and skipping overdrive. I knew just how

he felt. To lose someone you loved and have everything taken from you...he was exactly like Kay and I.

“This is as hard on us as it is on you, Grandfather. Our world was taken from us too,” sobbed Kaya.

“Now our hearts can be filled with happiness. Our worlds have once again come together. I have seen my Yanaba, my gaagii, and my yazhi. Sani will go bring the Hatalii here. You will tell him of your dreams, and he will give you the answers you seek,” said my grandfather.

“What is a Hatalii?” asked Ryan.

“He is the medicine man,” answered Sani as he walked out.

“I don’t know, Aiya...come on, a medicine man?” said Daniel in an uncertain tone. “It’s already late, I think we should just leave.”

“We can’t, Daniel. This is my only hope to put an end to the nightmares. Please understand, I have to do this,” I answered.

“The white man fears what he does not know,” said my grandfather.

“My only fear is what harm this will have on Aiya.”

“Everything’s going to be fine, Daniel. I truly believe the answers are here,” I said.

“We need to put our trust in him. I know he would not do anything that would harm Aiyana,” said Ryan.

“Daniel, he’s my grandfather. He’d never hurt us,” said Kaya warmly as she tried to convince him.

“The Hatalii will perform the hóchq’iji. No harm will fall upon Yazhi, only hózhó,” said my grandfather.

“Okay...I have no clue what he’s talking about. So how is this going to help if we don’t even know what’s going on?” asked Daniel.

“I think he is talking about the chantways. I believe there are twenty-four different rituals that the Navajo practice,” answered Ryan.

“The white man knows of our chantways?” asked my grandfather.

“Only what I have read,” he answered.

“Then you do not know our ways. Only the white mans words,” replied my grandfather.

“You are right. I hope I did not offend you.”

“Yatahey,” said a voice from behind, startling us. Our heads seemed to move in sequence as we quickly turned around. Our eyes probably grew twice their size as they fell upon the strange old man standing next to Sani. We gasped, and I heard utter amazement escape our lips.

My god, I had thought my grandfather was old, but this man surely had him beat. From all the wrinkles across his face, he had to be over a hundred fifty years old. He had these odd, white, curved markings, I thought they looked like waves of an ocean splashing against his wrinkles. His thinning gray hair made his dull, black eyes stand out, it hung loosely and just passed his shoulders. Across his sagging forehead was some type of brown headband.

He had on, from what I counted, nine white necklaces. They were beautiful, but I thought they looked like pieces of bones

hanging down his unclothed chest. I wondered if he had to struggle to keep his head up from the weight. He wore what looked to be a skirt, it was dark brown and had big, round silver buttons across the top. Underneath were brown pants, with some sort of sash tied around them, and hanging from that was a large satchel. He had them tucked into knee length moccasins that I thought were gorgeous. They had oblong shaped, turquoise beads along the sides, with white feathers hanging down them.

Across his broad shoulders hung a heavy, woven cloak. It was bright red and had big, silvery dragonflies all over. It reminded me of the dragonfly sensation, and I couldn't help but wonder if that's what they looked like. In his right hand he held a long shaft, at least a foot and a half in length. It was wrapped in colorful yarn with beautiful black feathers on both ends. In his left hand he held another type of shaft, but it wasn't as long, not even half the size. It was wrapped with what I thought was an animal's skin, and appeared to have a tail at one end, and a small head at the other.

"Yatahey," answered my grandfather, standing up and walking towards the old man that was fast approaching us. He bowed his head, gesturing his arms out, "Daughters of my daughter have come back to us after many moons. They have not come alone. Nukpana has found it's way into the dreams of Yazhi."

"What are you talking about, Grandfather? I don't understand. Who's doing this to Aiya? Who is Nukpana?" Kaya shakily asked as she stood.

Daniel quickly moved to her side and put his arm tightly around

her, by the way her body trembled, I knew it was to steady her. I thought it strange that I wasn't trembling as Ryan and I got up and stood by them. We waited for my grandfather to answer. I hoped he'd say something, anything, but he didn't. He stood quiet in front of the old man.

"We do not have much time. I will begin purification of the hooghan," said the old man. He then began to speak in Navajo as he raised his arms up and faced the door. It sounded to me like he was singing. It reminded me of an old western Cowboy and Indian movie, where the medicine man would dance and pray for rain.

I noticed Sani coming towards us, in his arms he held various objects. They were the oddest looking things...I didn't recognize any of them. He walked to the middle of the room and set everything down. I was amazed he'd actually managed to hold on to it all.

"Grandfather," I whispered. "What are they doing?"

"The Hatalii must consecrate the hooghan before he begins. It will dispel evil and attract good," he answered.

"Evil...good...chantways...this is just too much to believe," muttered Daniel.

The old man had turned in four different directions, as though he'd sung to the east, west, north and south. When he finished, he looked at Sani and said, "Prepare the sèi," then as he turned towards me, his eyes passed over Daniel, as though he wasn't there, yet he nodded at him. When his dull, black eyes met mine they appeared to glow. I saw my reflection in them, and it felt as if he had searched my soul. I shivered as his words echoed in my head, "You are your

shima. It makes my heart smile to see her face again.”

“My mother...” I whispered.

“I don’t understand! What about our mother?” asked Kaya.

“She was Kamali, the spirit guide. Yazhi has her spirit.”

“What does that even mean?” asked Kaya.

“I’d like to know that as well,” said Daniel.

“Yazhi has the power to help those who have crossed to the spirit world. Nukpana knows this and has come to her in dreams,” he answered.

“Are you saying she can see and speak to ghosts?” asked Daniel, arching his brows.

I glanced at him. I couldn’t believe what he’d asked, and poor Kaya. Her face lost all color and she was trembling again. I had never seen her like this before, she always tried to be brave for my sake, now I felt it was my turn to be brave for her.

“I don’t think that’s what he meant, Daniel. Is it, Grandfather?” I asked in as strong of a tone as I could manage, trying to ease Kay’s mind. But when he didn’t answer, I thought it had to be true. How in the world was I going to be brave for Kay, if I couldn’t even be brave for myself?

“Hatalii, I’m called Ryan. I too, am a medicine man for my people. I have been trying to heal Aiyana, to help her see within her dreams.”

“You cannot help her with the white mans ways. Darkness is a gateway for beings from the spirit world. Nukpana travels this dark path into her dreams.”

“Then how do we stop them?” he asked.

“We cannot until we draw out Nukpana.”

“How...will we do that?” I shakily asked. My heart was still pounding, and now my head had joined in.

“I must prepare a soul catcher made from the strength of our ancestors, it will enable you the power that you seek,” he answered as he set down the shafts he held. He then pulled strands of leather out of his satchel.

“Power? I don’t understand. I’m not seeking that. I’m looking for answers to my dreams,” I said, regretting that I’d even asked anything. I knew the answers were here, but I thought it was just like pulling teeth, hard to get one.

“I agree with Aiyana. All of this is confusing for us,” said Daniel.

“It is only confusing because the white man has a closed mind,” the Hatalii answered.

“I know of dream catchers, they supposedly help with bad dreams. But you have said her dreams will not end until we draw out this 'Nukpana.' So forgive me if I sound like an idiot, but I have never heard of a soul catcher. What exactly will this do?” asked Ryan.

“It will give her the power of great warriors long past. It will trap his dark soul and send it back to where it belongs. Once the children are free of his hold, it will allow her to release them to the resting place of their ancestors,” he answered, raising his arms up towards the ceiling, as though he was waiting for something.

I thought everyone heard my heart beating as it began to pound even harder. I was frightened, taken aback by what he'd said. I hadn't told him anything about the children. And if that thing really was a ghost, how in the hell was I supposed to send it back to where it belonged? For that matter, how the hell was I to trap it? Quickly, I glanced at Ryan, then Kay and Daniel, and felt my heart sink into my gut as my eyes saw the fear in theirs. I wanted answers, but this was not what I had expected.

"Hatalii...what do you mean it will give Aiyana the power she needs? Are you suggesting that she is to capture his soul?" asked Ryan.

"She is the only one who can."

"Wait!" I gasped. "Are you saying this Nukpana thing is a ghost? That's what I've seen in my dreams...and I'm the one who has to stop it?"

"You have seen the white devil they called Dr. Heilbrunner. The white devils in blue spoke often of him. Their eyes always happy as they saw the fear in the children. It is he, Nukpana. He has come for you," he answered.

"How? How is any of this possible?" Kaya shakily asked.

"It's not possible! Are you kidding me? Ghosts from over a hundred years ago, and now they've come back?!" exclaimed Daniel.

"Everything is possible. All things in this world and the next. Just because you do not believe, does not mean it is not so."

"Why me? I don't understand what that basta...I mean, what

Nukpana...wants from me!”

“He knows that you can take the children away from him. This is something he cannot allow, for without them, he is nothing.”

“Is that why I’m having these dreams? Is it the children?”

“Yes, Yazhi. The children that were taken long ago have suffered enough. It is time for you to return them to their homeland,” said the Hatalii.

“Exactly how is Aiyana to do that?” asked Ryan.

“It will take the strength of us all for her to accomplish this task. We will have to draw him out and weaken him enough to allow Yazhi to trap him within the soul catcher. Sani readies the sèi, and when he is done, I shall begin the iikááh,” he said, then gestured towards Sani.

I felt lost. Most of what I'd heard, I didn't even understand. I looked to Ryan for support, his gaze was elsewhere, then to Kay and Daniel, but they too seemed enthralled by something. I wondered what the hell could be so damn interesting that they looked like they were in a trance and had forgotten all about me. I shook my head, following their stare, and saw Sani in the middle of the hooghan.

He had just finished pouring sand, or maybe it was corn meal, the texture was similar, I wasn't exactly sure, but it was all over the floor in every direction. He now had my attention as well. He began to sweep across it, using something I thought could have been a miniature broom. He was smoothing it out very meticulously, and after what the Hatalii had said, I could only imagine what it was going to be used for.

“Do not fill your body with fear, Yazhi, for Nukpana will prey on your weakness. You must believe and have strength in yourself, and all will become clear,” said the Hatalii.

I heard his words, and thought it a dull ache in my head, then glanced at him, but didn’t answer. I wanted to scream, “Nothing is clear! Just tell me what the hell you mean!” when I noticed the leather straps he’d taken from his satchel, he had bound them into a circle. He had some kind of string in his hands and was weaving it through the middle. I thought it looked like a giant spider web. “That...in your hands...is that the soul catcher?” I asked.

He stared at me with his black eyes, and I felt that same sensation, as if he had searched my soul. “We will sit down,” he said as he walked to the table, sitting at the head of it. “We will speak of all things past, all things present and all things to come.”

We headed towards the table, glancing at one another, and I knew from the looks we’d given each other, the same thoughts were on our minds. But we dared not ask the Hatalii what he meant by that. We’d only get more riddles, not answers. As we sat down, the Hatalii nodded at my grandfather.

“The past will now be spoken,” he said.

My grandfather looked to Kaya and I, his black eyes reddened and welling with tears. “Your grandmother’s heart broke when she awoke and was still there, but Nashota was not. Her tears of sorrow opened her mother’s eyes, only to close her heart with pain,” he said his words so heartrendingly, I felt my body cringe with each one.

“Grandfather! I’m so sorry...when I read our mother’s letter and

the pain she spoke of, I felt it in every part of me. I know I could never, not in a million years, come to understand what happened to them, but I can understand their heartbreak...because I felt mine break too..." said Kaya sorrowfully.

"I too read the letter...my heart has had pain, but never the pain that has touched yours..." said Ryan.

"The white man is without a heart. He is empty and only filled with a dark soul. Their want is for everything, their greed is undying. They stop at nothing until they have taken all. They do not care how they come by it," answered my grandfather.

"Not all white men are like that. I can promise you, neither Daniel or I have dark souls. Our intentions are pure, they're simple, and they're done out of love," said Ryan.

I felt my cheeks blush as he said that, and I wondered if he was talking about me, or just Kaya and Daniel. I quickly tried to displace that thought without looking at him, if I did, he'd know it made my stomach do cartwheels. Even in the midst of all this uncertainty, pain, and my fear, I felt a quick touch of giddiness, like a school girl with a crush.

"They heard screams of pain echo through Father Sky. Screams that made their legs run, their eyes search," whispered my grandfather.

"I...I...am so sorry for your pain. I don't know what I would do if I lost the ones I loved..." muttered Daniel, as he gazed longingly at Kaya.

"We do not need the white man's pity!" exclaimed Sani as he

walked towards us.

“I am not giving you pity! I can feel the suffering, and my remorse is sincere,” Daniel shot back.

“How can you feel something you know nothing of?”

Daniel turned beet red. I thought smoke would come out of his nostrils as they flared, and his mouth opened.

“Honey, please,” Kaya whispered, squeezing his hand before he could say anything. By the loss of color to his finger tips, I knew it wasn’t a gentle squeeze, and from the look on her face she had thought exactly what I did. If they continued to exchange harsh words, at any minute we’d have a fight on our hands. Daniel was mellow and pretty easy going, but when he was pushed into a corner, he’d push back.

“Forgive me, please...I didn’t mean to offend anyone,” muttered Daniel.

“There is no need to give your forgiveness. It is I who should give mine. I know you are not like the others. I see the love Gaagii has for you in her eyes. Azhé’é, I am sorry. I did not mean to stop your words.”

My grandfather looked at both of them, his eyes stern, but with a smile that I thought showed understanding of these two very different men. He nodded respectfully and continued, “Their eyes only saw the white devils mounting their horses. Nashota and the other children were not seen. The screams came to a stillness that stopped the beating of many hearts as the loud fire of guns shook Mother Earth. When the sun touched down upon the sadness of the

land, tears of blood fell from the heavens. Our legs walked just as the days pass. Nascha spoke of Nukpana until the day her breath left. She believed he sent the one they called General Bishop to gather children and bring them to him.”

There was so much heartbreak in my grandfather’s voice as he spoke, that it chilled me to my core. The look of emptiness that I saw on Ryan and Daniel’s faces made me weak at the knees, but the looks of Kaya and my grandfather weakened my heart. I shook so hard I felt my entire body spasm, as though it were curling into a ball. I thought at any second I’d break apart and collapse. I wondered how such contempt and suffering could be inflicted on so many people that it could last forever. What could make someone do such horrid things to another human being? Just the thought of that monster sickened me. I drew in such a deep breath trying to calm down, that it made me dizzy. I reached for my head, and felt the gentle touch of Ryan’s hand on my shoulder.

“Are you alright?” he asked softly.

I nodded my head, reassuring him I’d be fine, and I caught a glimpse of Kaya. Her face looked contorted, as though she was trying to fight back the pain, then she sobbed. And I was two seconds behind as I began to cry uncontrollably. I couldn’t help it, the pain was overwhelming. I reached for Grandfather’s hand and tenderly squeezed it, but didn’t say anything. There was nothing I could say, no words could take away the pain.

“Hatalii, the sèi is prepared and I have begun the iikááh,” said Sani.

His words cut through our sobs, and suddenly there was silence as we were brought back to reality, back to what was going on around us. It was as though we'd forgotten and lost ourselves in a world of sorrow. One that was well known to us and our grandfather.

"Ane'hee, I will begin," the Hatalii answered, then stood up, facing me. He reached out his arm, and in his hand dangled the thing he'd been working on. I'd never seen anything as astounding. "Yazhi, this I have weaved with all the pride, love, heart, soul, strength and tears of our ancestors. In your hands, those of the Kamali, it becomes even more powerful as they become one with you."

"Forgive me, Hatalii, I do not mean to offend, but just how is Aiyana to catch Nukpana in that? It's a little small, isn't it?" asked Ryan.

I heard what he said clearly, and had I not been so enthralled with this thing the Hatalii called a soul catcher, I probably would have had the sense to realize what he implied. But it was like I was hypnotized as the white webbing seemed to sparkle in my eyes. It looked like it had tiny diamonds hanging in each weave, and I could swear it had pieces of bone tied around it, human bones I thought.

"I would really like to know that as well," said Daniel.

"This black feather represents the darkness of Nukpana," the Hatalii pointed to the feather hanging on the bottom. "Yazhi must chant the Anaa'jí, this will bring him out of the spirit world. Once his soul leaves, and enters our world, all his strength will fade. He will no longer have the power of the dead to call on, and will have to face

the courage of the living. He will yield to the combined power of the soul catcher and Yazhi. The webbing of tears will draw him in, and the feather will keep him trapped for all eternity.”

“I...I...don’t like the way that sounds...” Kaya shakily said. “She could get hurt, or she could...” her voice shook so much she couldn’t finish the last word.

“Please forgive me again if I sound like an idiot, but it sounds to me like Aiyana has to get pretty damn close to that thing in order to catch it,” said Ryan, and not very politely.

My senses came back damn quick when I heard what they said. I shuddered at the thought of having to get close to that monster again. I didn’t know if I could. That thing, Nukpana, had tried to rip me apart in my nightmares. I’d felt his grasp. But if he were in this world, he’d do more than try, he’d succeed. God, I couldn’t bare the thought. “Whatever it is you think I have to do...I don’t think I can. I’ve seen that thing, and he’s not going to yield to me,” I said hesitantly.

“Nukpana has come for you, Yazhi. It is you who has the strength of the Kamali. It is you who must send his black soul back to where it belongs,” he answered.

“How?! How am I supposed to do that? I have no frickin’ clue what a Kamali, or a spirit guide is!!” I exclaimed.

“Within you lays the power of Kamali, it has always been there. You have only forgotten the ways of your ancestors. Look, and you will see.”

I was taken aback by his words, they reminded me of poor Mr.

Blidsen, when he had told me to open my eyes. He'd not only seen the children, he had spoken to them. If I was supposed to be a spirit guide, then I was a damn lousy one. "Hatalii..." I said, then paused, making sure what was on my mind came out right. "This...Kamali you think I have the power of, that's impossible. I haven't been able to see or speak to ghosts. I've only seen them in my dreams."

"Yazhi, you have seen, you just have not looked. Nashota has come to you, calling for your help, but you have not listened."

"Oh my god...the little girl!" I gasped.

"Yes. Nashota needs you to guide her and the children. Nukpana took their windspirit from them long before their time was to end in this world. They have been lost in the spirit world. Tortured beyond our understanding."

I glanced at Ryan, and from his expression, he was not only stunned, he was floored. I turned to Kay and Daniel and I wasn't sure whose jaw had hit the floor first, not only were they shocked, they seemed scared stiff.

"Why me? If they've been trapped all this time and you knew, why haven't you set them free?"

"They have not come to me to seek my help, for their souls lay beyond my reach."

"They've been tortured, day after day for all these years, yet only now they seek my help? I don't understand."

"They have waited over a hundred years for the spirit guide to release them. There has not been one to enter their world, until you."

"But I haven't entered their world. I'm in the world of the

living. I thought they were in the spirit world, in the world of the dead.”

“Their world is where their souls are. The place where life was taken from them and death was given. The place where Nukpana is strong.”

“Coyote Hills...” I sighed.

“What is this Coyote Hills you speak of?” he asked.

“It’s the hospital I worked at. It was there that everything began.”

“Oh my god!” exclaimed Kaya. “You were right. This is all real, isn’t it?”

“Is this place where you first saw Nukpana?”

“Yes. In my mother’s letter, she spoke of an army base that Grandmother had told her they’d passed. We looked at a map, right where she said the base would’ve been, was where I worked.”

“I was but a boy as I walked in the middle of Mother and Father. I remember well...my eyes saw such a place that it made my heart cry, and the white devils in blue laugh. ‘Don’t go to sleep, filthy Indian, if you do, Dr. Heilbronner will get you.’ Yes, my Nascha was right,” Grandfather said sadly.

“That is his world, his hold on the children that he believed none could enter, until you did, Yazhi. He fears you for this. He knows your power weakened his hold on them and allowed them to call to you and show you the way. Remember that. Let it guide you and be your strength. Let him see that he should fear you!” The Hatalii placed the soul catcher on my lap and headed towards the huge circle

in the middle of the room. “We must begin.”

How in the hell was I supposed to make Nukpana fear me, when I feared him? He was the one with all the power, he'd had it for over a hundred years, and I was new at this. Whatever this was, this spirit guide, it was hard to believe. I knew I hadn't weakened that bastards hold. How could I have if the children wouldn't even answer me, and he just tossed me around? If it hadn't been for Ryan hypnotizing me, I would've never known what was happening. I'd probably be in the loony bin by now. I glanced at him and managed to smile, but he didn't respond. He looked like he was in another world, one of disbelief, as were Daniel and Kay. They all stared blankly at the Hatalii, they looked like stone statues that were ready to break at any second.

I watched Sani follow the Hatalii, and as he passed Daniel, he nodded his head respectfully, but I doubt if Daniel even noticed. Then my eyes fell upon the Hatalii as he stood in the middle of the circle, he held out his right hand and Sani placed some type of sand in it. It began trickling through his thumb and forefinger and fell onto the ground, forming shapes. I thought they looked just like people with square heads, but made out of sticks.

“Grandfather,” I barely whispered, but Kay and Daniel jumped as if an explosion went off in their ears. Ryan quickly looked at me with uncertainty in his eyes and shook his head. “After our parents died my heart had so much pain, that I wished I had died too. As I got older I realized, that's not what I wanted at all, it was just that I couldn't understand why they'd left us. Then I wished for a beautiful

place in the sky where they could sit on the clouds and look down at Kay and I smiling, laughing. Is there such a place Grandfather? If ghosts exist and have a world to roam in, then there has to be, right?"

"Yes, Yazhi. There are such places for all souls to roam," he answered.

"I'm so sorry that I didn't believe you, Aiyana," said Ryan, and I felt the sadness in his voice. "But all of this is new to me. It is something that I have never believed in. I've always thought myself a reasonable and logical man. Yet I find myself sitting here in the middle of things that I thought could not exist. All my logic and reasoning escapes me."

"I just don't know what to believe anymore..." sighed Daniel.

"I believe in all of it. Aiya saw it in her nightmares, and the Hatalii knew. It was my mother's letter that led us here," said Kaya.

"The white man has never believed or understood anything that they could not see before their eyes. They think if it is not there, that it must not exist, because they cannot see beyond their eyes. They are blind, they lack the ability to open their minds. But know this, Ryan, Daniel, just because you cannot see it, does not mean it is not there," said my grandfather.

I felt a spark surge through me, like a bolt of lightning had hit me. I didn't know if it was because Ryan finally believed me, or because of what my Grandfather had told him. It was exactly what I'd said to Ryan in our second session. I smiled at both of them and felt a warmth in my heart. I turned my attention to Ryan and softly said, "It doesn't matter if you didn't believe me...as long as you do

now.” He smiled without saying a word, and the look I saw in his eyes made my heart skip a beat. The warmth I’d felt in my heart had expanded. I felt it rush through my veins.

“Grandfather, those drawings, what are they? And what do they mean?” asked Kaya, and my head quickly jerked in her direction. I was glad someone pulled me away, if I had continued to look into Ryan's eyes, I would've been lost in them forever.

“They prepare the iikááh. The place where the gods come and go,” he answered.

“Come and go?” she gasped. “Grandfather, are things going to come through there?” she worriedly asked.

“No, my gaagii, nothing will harm you. The Hatalii will request the help of the gods to dispel Nukpana.”

“We have heard iikááh said many times, but what does it mean?” asked Daniel.

“It is a sandpainting of The Holy People, portraying our heritage.”

“Azhé’é, everyone, please come and gather around the circle,” said Sani.

My grandfather nodded as he stood and said, “It is time to take back what the white man has stolen from us.” He then walked towards Sani.

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“It’s midnight, and we have the boys to think about, Aiya. I know how much you want your nightmares to stop, but I think we should leave now. We can always come back later,” whispered Daniel.

“No, we can’t! It ends here and now, I know that. Please, Daniel...” I answered, standing up.

“The boys are just fine with your parents, and considering the time, I don’t think it makes a difference if we leave now, or when it’s done. We said we’d do anything to help, and we’re going to,” said Kaya firmly as she stood up.

“They’re right, Daniel. We started this, we came up here looking for answers, and we got them. Now we need to see it through,” said Ryan as he stood next to me.

Daniel nodded his head, “Alright...” he answered, and stood up as well.

We walked to where Sani and Grandfather were. The Hatalii was still in the middle of the circle. It looked like he was drawing with water colors, like a mural was being painted before our eyes. There was white, yellow, red, black and blue. The sand trickled through his fingers as he moved them with such control and skill, a real artist, I thought, as the stick people now seemed to be detailed

figures that were three dimensional.

“The iikááh is ready. Sani will show everyone their place around the circle. Yazhi, you will come here with me and we will begin the Hóchō’íjí,” said the Hatalii.

I swallowed hard, as though that would wash away the fear I felt. Nodding at the Hatalii, I headed towards him. Sani positioned Ryan, Daniel then Kaya, in that order, along the back of the circle, facing the door. He then walked and stood on the other side of Ryan, as my grandfather stood next to Kaya.

“What do I have to do?” I worriedly asked.

“Sit here in the middle, as everyone faces the door, so shall you,” he answered as he pointed, and I did exactly as he instructed.

“This is not going to hurt Aiyana, correct?” asked Ryan.

“No more words will be spoken. Time is not on our side. The Hóchō’íjí can not be completed in its entirety and we mu...”

“Just what do you mean by that?!” Ryan interrupted the Hatalii.

“The chantway requires five nights that we do not have. All we waste is more time with your empty words. I will say a sodizin and begin. Keep your places around the circle. Free your minds of all fear, and do not break your stance,” he answered, lifting his arms high in the air as though gesturing to the sky. He turned, facing the east, south, west then north. “Sa’ah Naaghéi, Bik’eh hózhqó. Haiya naiya yana.” He repeated those words, then gestured down towards the Earth, dipping his fingers in some type of liquid and onto the sandpainting, it adhered to them, and he placed it across my forehead. The shaft that looked like it had a tail on one end and a

head on the other, he now held in his right hand, and he vigorously began shaking it. It sounded like a rattle snake.

He began moving around me, like he was doing the rain dance again, and continued to speak in Navajo. I had no frickin' clue what he was saying, but I thought it sounded like a choir singing hymns. It was almost hypnotizing. He then paused for a few moments, as though he was waiting for an answer, then started again.

“He speaks of the creation of the Navajo. The Holy Supreme Wind, the creator of mists of lights that rose through the darkness bringing purpose. Of the first Hooghan built by Coyote with the help of beavers. The Holy People, First Man and First Woman. First Boy and First Girl. Talking God and Walking God. Of the four sacred mountains. He tells of how The Holy People gave ceremonial to The Earth Surface People,” said Sani, as the Hatalii continued to chant and dance around me.

I felt like I was going to pass out, I was dizzy. My head seemed to be spinning with his twirling around. I quickly glanced back at Ryan, Kaya and Daniel, their eyes as wide open as their mouths were. I thought they were in a trance. I closed my eyes, hoping the dizziness would subside if I didn't watch. Then I heard heavy, raspy breathing, and thought the Hatalii was getting tired. But it quickly turned to wheezing, and a rancid scent entered my nostrils. I knew *he* was here.

“Oh my god!! What's that horrid smell? And those horrible sounds! Did you hear that?!” gasped Kaya, and my eyes flung open.

“We have to remain calm! Don't move, remember what the

Hatalii told us, stand strong!” said Ryan.

“Calm?! There’s no way that’s going to happen, not after that stench! What the hell is it?!” shouted Daniel.

I saw the Hatalii moving around even faster, and his words no longer sounded like a hymn, their intensity was fierce, like he was having a bad argument with someone. Ryan, Kaya and Daniel were still in the same place, but they looked pale, and I saw the look of fear cross their faces. I thought they were ready to heave at any second. Sani and my grandfather rushed into the circle. My eyes went crazy looking for that thing. I didn’t see him, but god I felt him.

“Nukpana is stronger than I anticipated! Sani, Shilah, join me in the Hóchō’íjí!” exclaimed the Hatalii.

“Yazhi, stand. Remember, you are Kamali, as your mother and those before her. Let their strength guide you to the path that has always been yours. Your courage will bring the harmony you seek into your heart. Hold tight to the soul catcher, believe, be one with your ancestors, and you will be ready for Nukpana,” said Grandfather, then he joined in the chanting with the Hatalii and Sani.

“Hatalii, what has happened?!” asked Ryan. “What do you need us to do?”

“Be brave, and no matter what happens, do not break the circle!” answered Sani.

“Oh my god!!” screamed Kaya. “It’s that thing isn’t it?! It’s that thing Aiya saw. The thing they call Nukpana! Daniel, I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t think I can be still. I’m so scared! Look at me...I can’t stop shaking...”

“Baby, it’s alright, I’m right here next to you, and I promise, nothing will hurt you!” he answered firmly.

I jumped to my feet and swiftly stood by my grandfather, holding on to the soul catcher as tightly as I could. Panic and fear was so heavy throughout my body I could taste it, but I wouldn’t show it. I wouldn’t bow down to Nukpana, I wouldn’t let him know that he frightened me. I stood brave and tall, ready to show him I wasn’t one of his helpless little victims. I’d give him a fight like he’d never seen.

“Help...us...help...us...Aiyana...” screeched all around us, but it wasn’t the children. I’d know that voice anywhere, it was him. But where was he?

Shadows began to swirl above us, teasing, taunting. It was just like the black hole in my nightmare. They moved faster and faster, with such force we were blown back a few steps. It was like we were in the mouth of a tornado. The Hatalii, my grandfather and Sani were still speaking in Navajo, but their intensity had increased, and I knew it was aimed at that thing.

Yellow eyes glowing like a full moon broke through the shadows, and I saw his rotten flesh and decayed teeth. “They’re mine...I will not let you take them from me!!!” The words spewed from his black mouth, covering us with his rancid stench.

“My god!! Do you see it?!!” Kaya frantically screamed.

“Do not show him fear!! Be brave! Do not break the circle!!” shouted the Hatalii.

“Grab my hand, Kay, and don’t let go,” said Daniel.

“Nukpana! The children will be free. They will return to their homeland and find peace, but your black soul will be trapped with your enemies for all eternity. Kamali waits for...” The Hatalii's words stopped cold.

I cringed as I heard the same sound of flesh ripping open as I did when that bastard had killed the little girl. Loud, screeching heckles mixed with the heartrending cries of excruciating pain. Bright flickers of metal flashed chaotically up and down as I felt something wet slap me in the face.

“Join us, you filthy Indian...” Nukpana hissed.

I felt the grip of arms wrap tight around my waist, and heard wrenching screams as I was suddenly swooped back. My neck felt like it snapped in two as it rebounded on the ground. Then I saw Nukpana, his jagged fingers wrenching the Hatalii's hair as he held him up off the ground. The Hatalii's legs dangled, and his poor old body jerked violently. Blood was spewing everywhere as that monster plunged his scalpel over and over into the Hatalii's chest. Sani was ramming that hideous thing continuously with the shaft, trying to force him back as my grandfather's arms reached for the Hatalii, desperately trying to break him free.

“You are in our world! The world of the living! How dare you attempt to take a soul. Release him now! I command you!! The only power you have is in the world of the dead!!” shouted Grandfather.

“But I do have power in your world. I have tasted it. It is given to me freely by the weak, impure souls of the living. The sweet taste of fear...” Nukpana answered raucously.

“Nothing is given to your black soul!! You take what you do not have. But I will not let you take his!!” Sani yelled as he lifted the shaft and rammed it through that things black mouth.

“Where is your power, Nukpana?” Grandfather asked mockingly. “You are only half way in the world of the living. You do not even have enough power to enter our world completely. If you are so powerful, I invite you to enter and take me!!”

“I do not need to enter completely, Indian. I have more than enough power to take his weak soul...”

“Let me go!” I shouted as I tried to get up. “I have to help them before it’s too late. Before that fucking monster kills them!!”

“Baby, don’t you move, stay exactly where you are. Ryan, don’t let Aiya go! I’ll help them kill that fucking thing!!” shouted Daniel as he rushed passed us, lunging for Nukpana.

“No....! Please don’t! Don’t, Daniel!” screamed Kaya.

“What the hell?” gasped Daniel as he toppled right through that monster, smacking onto the ground and tumbling into the wall. Kaya screamed frantically as she darted straight for him. I had never seen her run as fast as she did.

“Yazhi! The soul catcher!!” yelled Sani. “You must hurry! His hold is strong, and I cannot push him back!”

“No! Don’t go near that thing!!” screeched Kaya.

“Ryan! You have to let me go! Please! I have to do this. Can’t you see what the hell is happening? They’re going to die!”

“No! I couldn’t bare it if something happened to you,” he

answered. I felt him release his grip as he pulled the soul catcher from my arms and ran towards them. “I have it, Sani! Tell me what to do.”

“Hold it in front of Nukpana, and as I command him to yield and enter, you do the same! You want into our world, then come. Our ancestors await you with open arms! Come into the web and join them!”

Ryan stood right in front of that hideous monster and held the soul catcher high, “I will send your black soul back to where it belongs. You have no power over me! The souls of great warriors long past call to you! It is they who have the power! It is they who call you to join them! Come into the circle of webs and be trapped forever!!” he shouted.

Nukpana heckled, “Fear is strong...another fresh soul for me to take...” his focus was now on Ryan as he leered at him, and released his hold on the Hatalii.

“Do not show Nukpana fear! It feeds on it!!!” shouted my grandfather.

As the Hatalii’s body slowly crumpled to the ground, that thing brought his scalpel up. Ryan quickly threw himself back as the scalpel plunged down. My heart stopped, and I felt my breath being sucked out as I heard the sound of ripping, and gasped.

“You want a soul? Take mine you son of a bitch! I’m right behind you!!!” yelled Daniel.

I saw Daniel jump to his feet as Kaya held on to him, crying and pleading, “No, please! Daniel, no...”

I leaped up as fast as I could, and as I ran towards Ryan I began shouting, “Get away from him you fucking coward!!! You wanted me, well here I am! Come and get me! You, the taker of souls, for you have not one of your own! Dr. Heilbronner! I know who you are, and you have no power over me. Not in the world of the dead or in the world of the living!! I am Kamali, and I command you into the web of tears!!!”

“NO....! It can not be....!” his words screeched as the dark shadows swirled violently, and he suddenly disappeared.

“Ryan, are you alright?!” I frantically asked as I dropped to my knees beside him. I almost fainted when I saw the huge rip in the middle of his shirt, but there was no wound. I let out such a huge sigh of relief that it felt like a hundred pounds of despair had been shed much too quickly.

“I...I’m...fine. What about...”

“Oh my god! The Hatalii!!” I screamed, cutting Ryan off. The Hatalii was sprawled in the middle of the circle, his chest was ripped to shreds and his blood had covered the drawings. It looked like they had been shredded as well. My grandfather and Sani were by his side. I felt helpless, it was just like Mr. Blidsen all over again.

I felt the strength of Ryan’s arms as he held me tight. “I am so sorry...for everything,” he tenderly whispered in my ear.

“Kay...where’s Kay?!”

“I...I’m here, Aiya,” she shakily answered, and I saw her and Daniel barely inching their way towards us.

“Are you hurt?”

“No...just dazed...and scared. That...that thing was horrid! I just can’t believe it!”

“Is he dead?” Daniel fretfully asked as they reached us.

Kaya gasped. “What? Oh...no...my god...no...” then tucked her head into Daniel’s shoulder and cried.

“Yes, Nukpana has taken his soul,” answered Grandfather.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry,” I said.

“I tried. I’m sorry! I just went through that damn thing like it was nothing,” said Daniel.

“Do not be. It is not of your doing, for without belief, there is nothing. The Hatalii waited long for this chance to face Nukpana, and for you, Yazhi. He did not realize it had such strength, none of us did. He let his fear be known and Nukpana tasted it.” Grandfather placed his hand upon the Hatalii’s face and closed his eyes. He prayed in Navajo, as did Sani.

Kaya and Daniel knelt beside us, and we lowered our heads. I heard whispers and knew they were praying as well. I began to say a prayer, but my thoughts were going crazy, I didn’t finish. My entire body shook and I couldn’t get the picture of that thing out of my head. If he was stronger than they realized and had the power to kill the Hatalii, how in the hell was I going to stop him?

Not only had I seen that monster rip apart children, but now two people that I knew, and with such ease. He had almost killed Ryan. What if that would’ve been me in front of him? Thank god it wasn’t, or I’d be laying there ripped to pieces. I shuddered at my selfish thoughts, but I was relieved it wasn’t me. And I was remorseful for

being glad that it wasn't. I jerked as I felt warmth touch upon my shoulders and looked up to see the light come through the opening in the ceiling. I knew it was morning, the darkness was gone, but the light changed nothing. If anything, it added to the remorse I felt. I saw the sadness on everyone's faces as their tears slowly trickled down their cheeks. A strong sense of despair lingered around me and I was taken aback. I could no longer bear to look upon the Hatalii's dead body. I stood up, almost falling back, my legs felt like rubber, they were numb. I had no feeling left in them, just like in me I thought.

"Are you alright?" Ryan worriedly asked as he grabbed on to me.

"I'm fine. I just have to move, I'm sorry..." I ran out. The brightness of the sun shone in my eyes. I stopped in my tracks, covered my face, and balled.

"Aiyana, we will get through this. I will not leave your side until we capture that damn thing and this comes to an end," said Ryan as he came up behind me.

I turned around, and before I could say anything, I saw the color leave him as his eyes welled with tears. "That's blood! You have blood all over you! Are you sure you're not hurt?" he asked as he frantically reached for me.

I just shook my head. I knew now that the wetness I'd felt on my face was the blood from the Hatalii as he was ripped apart. Ryan took his handkerchief out of his pocket and painstakingly began wiping my face. "How are we going to end this if the Hatalii is

dead?" I shakily asked.

"There has to be a way, Aiyana. I heard panic in Nukpana's voice when you stood up to him. Then he was gone. You must have weakened him."

"He is right, Yazhi. Nukpana fears you and knows you have the power to trap his soul," said Sani as he walked out of the hooghan.

I looked at him and answered, "If I had power, the Hatalii would not be in there dead!"

"Do you fear Nukpana?" asked my grandfather as he came out with Kaya and Daniel.

"Of course I do!"

"Nukpana did not taste your fear. He ran from you, Yazhi. You stood brave before him and did not falter. What was in your mind?"

"I...don't know, Grandfather...I just had to stop him! I thought he was going to kill..." I didn't finish. I realized at that moment, as I was about to say Ryan's name, that I hadn't been scared of Nukpana. My thoughts were on Ryan.

"I know I was scared, and if I hadn't seen that damn monster with my own eyes, I would have never believed it. Aiya, I thought this was all in your mind, I'm so sorry. Kay, I love you so very much. If anything happened to you, I don't know what..." Daniel cried, then held Kaya tight.

"Yazhi, clear your mind, we will speak of Nukpana. It now falls upon you alone to capture him. You must go to where he has the children, that is the only way."

"Coyote Hills..." I gasped. "Grandfather, I don't think I can."

“You can, and you will! There is nothing more that you can do here.”

“How? How will we do this without the Hatalii?” asked Ryan.

“The Hatalii was only meant to show Yazhi the way. She knows deep in her heart the path of the Kamali. Her power came out when she feared for your life.”

I heard my grandfather's words, and I knew what he meant. I was so worried about Ryan that I didn't think about how much I feared that monster. I said my words strong, brave, without hesitation, and I had known exactly what to say. I didn't give in to the fear, and I don't think my grandfather or Sani did either. I had sensed their strength as they tried to fight, and Nukpana hadn't attacked them. I quickly glanced at Ryan, and the look on his face took my breath away.

“For my life...” he whispered, as he gazed longingly into my eyes.

“The Hatalii has lived for many, many moons and was ready to join our ancestors. His wait has now come to an end. But, Yazhi...his soul was not meant to be taken by Nukpana,” said Sani, and my attention turned to him.

“I don't understand...are you saying that thing has his soul?”

“He is now trapped in the spirit world with the children, and that is where he shall remain until you set them free,” answered my grandfather.

“Aiya can't do this! I don't understand how you can keep saying that after what happened! My god, that fucking monster killed the

Hatalii, he almost killed Ryan, and he could have killed all of us!!” screamed Kaya.

“My gaagii...I know this is unlike anything you have ever known. Your pain is in my heart. I only wish that my heart could take all the pain from yours, but it cannot. Nukpana will always come to Yazhi with the darkness, and as his power grows, one day he will take her soul. It must end now, and by her hand.”

“Kay, it’s alright...I love you and I would never do anything to hurt you. But Grandfather is right, I have to do this. I understand that now.”

“If you do this, you will hurt me. Aiya, I can’t lose you!”

“You’re not going to.”

“No, you’re certainly not. I won’t let that happen!” exclaimed Ryan.

“What the hell are you even talking about? You saw that thing. Do you honestly think you can stop it?!”

“My gaagii, please...I know you fear for Yazhi, but she has the strength, she has the power of Kamali. It has always been within her and she is the only one who can stop Nukpana. I know this, and I also know he cannot harm her if she does not fear him. Fear is his only strength, and we must not give him more to feed on.”

“Azhé’é speaks the truth. The Hatalii was strong, but he allowed a glimpse of fear to escape him. We must all be strong for Yazhi, without fear, for that is only a weakness. One that we can not allow ourselves to let escape us,” said Sani.

“What do I have to do?”

“You will wait for the darkness, for that is how Nukpana travels. You will go to this Coyote Hills you have spoken of, that is Nukpana’s hold on the children. You will enter without fear and follow your heart, it will lead you to him. You will...”

“She will not go alone!” exclaimed Ryan, cutting him off. “I’m going with her! Aiyana, I will not let you do this by yourself.”

“It has been many moons since I have heard such brave words come from the mouth of the white man. I remember well the last time a white man stood before me with that same look in his eyes. He led my Yanaba down the wrong path and asked for her hand in matrimony,” Grandfather said.

“Oh my god...Dad...” gasped Kaya as she turned two shades of pale. If that was possible, she already was white as a sheet.

“I meant no disrespect sir, and I know this is certainly not the time to bring up the past. At present, I believe we have more pressing issues to discuss,” said Ryan.

“His words are wise, Azhé’é. We cannot allow Nukpana more time. His strength will grow with the soul of the Hatalii,” said Sani.

“Gather the elders, and I will finish here.”

Sani nodded his head, then walked to Kaya and hugged her. “You must be strong, Gaagii. Yazhi needs you,” he then placed his hand on Daniel’s shoulder, and gestured a nod of respect. Turning to me he said, “Yanaba stands proud, Kamali, and you will not disappoint her,” he kissed my forehead, smiled at Ryan, then walked away.

“Yazhi, you and Ryan alone will do this. Find Nukpana, and

only address him as Dr. Heilbronner. I saw in his eyes fright when you called him that. It seems the white devil has long forgotten its white mans name. For many years he has been called the doctor of death, the taker of souls, the keeper of children, Nukpana, the being of fear, and I believe that is all he knows.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think they should do this alone,” said Daniel.

“I agree, Grandfather, we can go with them and help, maybe Sani...”

“No, my gaagii! They do not need any distractions. Their focus must be upon each other, no other thoughts can be in their minds. One slip, one glimpse of fear will weaken their concentration and Nukpana will taste it. Yazhi, Ryan, do you understand?”

“Yes, I do, sir. If we keep our minds clear of fear and only think of Dr. Heilbronner, then he won’t have any power,” answered Ryan.

“You were willing to give your life for Yazhi without any hesitation, but you had a glimpse of fear. That is why Nukpana turned on you. That is something you cannot show again, for next time, you will not be so lucky.”

“I understand.”

“Grandfather, I now know what I have to do, and I’m not scared,” I said my words crisply, bravely.

“You are your shima! Her heart smiles as yours has opened and accepted the path she did not. My heart knows this. The children know that as well. They know they will be reunited with their ancestors, their torment has come to an end. The Kamali has

returned to her homeland.”

I felt the sense of pride Sani spoke of as my grandfather’s words touched my heart. It was as though my mother stood here and I felt her strength and love. I knew this was meant to be, and I knew Ryan was the one meant to help me.

“The soul catcher,” Ryan gasped. “I had it, and I don’t remember what I...”

“Do not worry, you laid it safely by the Hatalii.”

“My god, I forgot! Grandfather, we can’t just leave him in there like that. We have to move him, cover him up...”

“No, Gaagii, we will not touch him. Sani will bring the elders here and we will prepare his body. Until his soul is returned, his windspirit will not join our ancestors.”

“How do I...”

“Yazhi...” he spoke softly as he placed his fingers to my lips. “No more words. It is time for you to take your path. You now know the way, and when it is over, I will know. I will get the soul catcher,” he walked into the hooghan.

“Aiya...I don’t know anymore! We talked about your nightmares, that thing...and the children, but...but...I saw It! Its fucking real! It’s really real!! I saw the Hatalii, he didn’t even have a god damned chest left! Please...I’m begging you! Don’t do this...” cried Kaya.

“I have to, Kay! You heard Grandfather, its never going to end until I stop that thing. He’ll keep tormenting me in my nightmares, and I’ll never have any peace. I know if he doesn’t take my sanity,

eventually he will take my soul.”

“All my daughters have found their way back to me. Guided by Changing Woman herself. She would not have done this just to take them away again,” said my grandfather as he came out. “After you have trapped Nukpana and set all souls free, dawn will come to you. Stand tall, breathe in the air and Nitch’i will give you new life as He did Her.”

“No one will ever take us away from you again,” said Kaya firmly.

He put the soul catcher in my hands, “Ayor anosh’ni,” he said, hugging me tight.

“I love you too, Grandfather.”

“My gaagii,” he cried, and Kaya ran to us. He grabbed her and we all held on to each other. “Our tears are not of sadness or hurt. Our bond is strong, filled with love, it was not broken, just forgotten. After this, our tears will be of happiness. I will see my shiye.”

Our drive home was long and tense. Not one word was said, but there was nothing to be said. This day had changed us all. It made believers out of nonbelievers. Kaya, so innocent, so naive, yet so strong. Ryan, so level headed, so logical, so sure evil didn’t exist. Poor Daniel, clouded by his uncertainty, his fear to believe. I now knew that all the things I’d felt growing up, were real. The darkness that taunted me, hiding monsters under my bed. The cold wind from the north. The prickly sensations. Just because I couldn’t see them, didn’t mean they weren’t there. I just didn’t look. I didn’t listen. I

didn't believe. I am Kamali, the spirit guide. I return souls to their rightful places on this earth. I didn't doubt that anymore.

Ryan pulled along the curb in front of the house, "I don't live that far away from here, Aiyana. I'm going to go home and change out of these ripped clothes. I'll be right back."

I looked at him and nodded, "Okay..." then opened the door and got out of the car. Kaya and Daniel climbed out, and I closed the door. Then he drove off.

"What the hell was that about? I can't believe he's just going to run off like that," said Kaya.

"He's not running off, he'll be back, I know it. But I got the feeling he had to do something first," I answered.

"Alright, lets get inside. As bad as we look, I'm sure we're scaring the neighbors," said Daniel as he headed towards the front door. Kay and I shook our heads and followed.

"God, Daniel, the boys! I'm sure they're worried. We've never left them over there like this. Your parents must be frantic," gasped Kaya.

"I know, baby, we need to hurry and get cleaned up and go get them."

He unlocked the door, Kay and I went inside and headed straight for the stairs. "Kay, I'm going to need more clothes please," I said as I went into the bathroom.

"Just jump in the shower and I'll bring you some."

I looked at myself in the mirror, there were smudges of dry blood on my jaw and neck. The pretty silk blouse Kay had let me

borrow was covered in blood. I knew it was ruined. I set the soul catcher down on the hamper and took off the clothes without even flinching. I had nothing to be scared of anymore, not after everything that had happened. I turned on the shower and got in. I watched the bloodied water go down the drain as the hot water poured over my body. I wondered how much more blood I'd see before this day was over. I drew in a deep breath and thought about Ryan. Why had he been in such a hurry to leave? He seemed really strange, and I knew he had something on his mind.

“Aiya, can I come in?” asked Kaya, as she tapped on the door.

I turned off the shower and grabbed a towel, “Yeah.”

“Here’s a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt,” she laid them on top of the counter. “I know no matter what I say you’re going to go through with this. I don’t know how I’m going to be able to keep my composure around the boys when I know what you’re doing. Aiya, if anything happens to you...”

“Nothing is going to happen! I...”

“You don’t know that!” she yelled, cutting me off. “What if Ryan doesn’t come back? For all we know he could be hiding in a fucking closet! I know he has to be scared, hell, we all saw that thing. He doesn’t know you well enough to risk his life for...”

“Enough, Kay!” I shouted, rudely interrupting her. “You saw how he put himself in harms way trying to help. How could you even say those things? I know he’s coming back. Now just stop. I have to get dressed, and I don’t need anything else on my mind right now, so just go pick up the boys, please...”

“I’m sorry...I know you do, but it feels like my head is going to explode. I can’t lose you. Why don’t I just stay? Daniel can go by himself, and I’ll go with you.”

“No, Kaya! How many times do I have to say it? Ryan is coming back. You need to promise me you’ll be strong, just like you always have been! Please...I need you to be my Rock of Gibraltar!”

“Okay...okay...I promise. I’ll keep you in my thoughts every second, and I will pray to God to give you the strength to stop this monster. I love you so much...”

“I know. I love you just as much. Now get out of here, and don’t worry, we will come back in one piece. I promise you that! And you know I’ve never broken any of my promises.”

She nodded her head as she lunged for me and hugged me tight, then ran out the door. I stepped out of the shower, dried off, and dressed. Looking in the mirror, I cracked a smile. I knew in my heart Ryan would be back, and we would stop that thing. I pulled my hair back tight in a ponytail, grabbed the soul catcher, and walked out.

I entered the living room, it was empty, cold. I felt my heart stop. I thought Ryan would have been back by now. I walked to the front door and opened it. Daniel’s car was gone and I didn’t see Ryan’s anywhere. I began to panic. What if Kaya had been right? I closed the door, more like slammed it shut, and as I turned around, I saw the little girl.

“Aiyana, have no fear, everything will be as it should. I feel it in my heart. I know we will now go home,” she spoke softly. Her sweet little voice soothing as she smiled at me, and I thought her big, sad

black eyes gleamed with happiness.

“My god...Nashota...” I gasped.

“All you ever had to do was believe...”

“I’m so sorry...” a knock on the door startled me, and she was gone. “No, wait! Come back. Nashota!” I shouted.

“Aiyana! Are you alright?! It’s Ryan, open the door, please!”

I opened the door, and cried as I looked into his eyes, he grabbed me and held me tight. “What happened? Are you alright?” he worriedly asked. “I heard you yelling.”

“I’m fine, Ryan. I just saw Nashota, she spoke to me.”

“Lets go inside,” he said as he let go of me.

I nodded and wiped my tears, then we went into the living room and sat down on the sofa. “I’m sorry I took so long. I know I shouldn’t have left the way I did,” his words were abrupt, almost distant.

“What’s wrong, Ryan? What aren’t you telling me? If you can’t do this, you do...”

“Of course I’m doing this with you!!” he exclaimed, cutting me off. “Please don’t question that. I think we should talk about how we’re going to do this. We can’t just walk in there and say we’re there to catch a ghost.”

“Yeah...” I answered with hesitation. I knew he was hiding something. But what? I nodded my head. “The night shift starts at ten. I know the first thing everyone does when they get there is go to the break room to put their stuff away. The pm nurses will count with Jill, give report, then they’ll do rounds. After that the staff from

the pm shift will go into the break room, get their stuff, and leave. Jill and two nursing assistants will be the only ones left in the building. That place is huge, I don't think we'll have any problems sneaking in."

"Perfect. It's eight thirty now, and you said it takes about an hour to get there. Lets get going. We can stop for coffee first, because I need caffeine right now."

"Why don't I just make a pot? We can fill a thermos and take it with us."

"Alright, I'll help." We got up at the same time and walked into the kitchen. "Did Kaya and Daniel go pick up their children?"

"Yeah, they'll probably be back soon," I answered as I reached for the coffee.

"Are they alright? I know everything that happened today was pretty intense. It's a hell of a lot to take in, especially when you've never believed in such things. I have never seen anyone killed before, Aiyana. I can tell you, I'm still dazed. But I will focus on what we have to do, and do everything in my power to make sure that nothing happens to you."

I finished pouring the water into the coffee pot without even answering or looking at him, then started it. I opened the cabinet, took out a thermos, rinsed it, then smacked it down on the counter.

"Is something wrong?"

"Just the fact that you're acting differently, that's all! Ryan, I know how hard today was for you. My god, I'm certainly not used to seeing someone ripped to shreds either, and I know I've put a lot on

you. You're only supposed to be my shrink, trying to fix my head, not out fighting evil spirits. You've seen things that you never believed existed. I'm sure your life has been completely thrown off its axis. About now, I bet you're probably wishing I never stepped foot in your office."

"Yes," he sighed. "I mean no! That's not what I'm thinking, although it is partly true. If I'm acting differently, I'm sorry. I don't mean to. The thoughts in my head are ones I've never had before. I just don't know how to deal with them. Some shrink I am, huh? Aiyana, please believe me when I say it has nothing to do with me not wanting to be here, or not wanting to help you do this! Because that could not be farther from the truth."

"The coffee's done. I'll pour it into the thermos and grab us two little ones and fill them so we can drink it on the way," I said. After I was done I handed him his, grabbed mine and the thermos. "Alright, we should get going."

"Do you have the soul catcher?"

"Oh shit! I left it on the sofa."

"I'll get it, your hands are full." He ran into the living room and grabbed it. Then we walked out. I felt the tension between us as he opened the car door.

I drew in a breath. "Thank you..." he closed it, and this time he walked around to the back of the car. I wondered if it was because he didn't want me to see the look on his face.

"Which way do I go?" he asked as he got in and started the car.

"The turnoff we took to the High Plains, when we reach it you'll

go straight. Then the second stop we reach, go right. We'll come to another stop after about five miles, you'll go left. The road curves all around the hills, but it takes us straight to Coyote Hills."

"Sounds easy, but if I take any wrong turns, let me know," he answered as we backed out of the driveway.

"I will."

He didn't make any wrong turns or ask any questions, and I didn't ask any either. I figured when he was ready to tell me what was on his mind he would, so the rest of the drive was in silence. It wasn't until we reached the driveway to Coyote Hills, and he came to the end, where the parking lot began, was the silence broken.

"Wow, you weren't kidding. This place is unbelievable," he gasped as he turned into the parking lot.

"You should probably park back here where no one will see us. We should be able to watch everyone come and go from here."

"Alright, there's a car coming up behind us now," he answered as he parked.

I looked at the car, but didn't recognize it, and it was too dark to see who was in it. "What time is it?"

"Nine fifty five."

"Good. I think that's one of the nursing assistants, so there should be only one more car coming. I'm sure Jill is already here, there's seven cars parked in the front."

The car parked and someone got off, but I couldn't make out who it was. A spark of fire, and I saw it was Jackie as she lit a

cigarette and leaned against her car.

“She must be waiting for someone,” I said.

“I hope she didn’t see us. Oh wait...I think you’re right, here comes another car.”

We watched it drive slowly through, then park next to Jackie. The door opened and someone stepped out and walked over to her, but I couldn’t see who it was. Jackie tossed her cigarette, and they headed towards the sidewalk.

“Okay, we just have to wait until we see six of those cars leave, then we’ll head in,” I answered, then filled my cup with more coffee. “Do you want some?”

“Yes...please.”

We’d finished the entire thermos by the time the last car drove out. “What time is it?” I asked.

“It’s ten forty five.”

“Okay...” I answered as I drew in a deep breath. “Are you ready?” I set down my cup, picked up the soul catcher from my lap, and got out of the car. As I closed the door I saw Ryan reach into the glove box, grab something, and put it into his jacket.

He got out, walked towards me, and reaching for my hand he said, “Let’s go.”

“Ryan, you need to tell me what’s on your mind before we go in. We have to be on the same page, no distractions remember?” I said as I grabbed his hand.

“You’re right...I didn’t mean to keep anything from you,” he let go of my hand and reached into his pocket. “I brought a gun.”

“What?!” I gasped.

He held it tight in his hand, shaking his head. “I didn’t know what else to do. I have to protect you.”

“Ryan, that gun is not going to help us. In case you’ve forgotten, Heilbronner’s already dead! We need to do this together, without any doubts. The only weapon against that thing is this soul catcher. If we let ourselves believe a gun can hurt him, we weaken our strength.”

He opened the car door and put the gun back in the glove box. As he closed the door, he grabbed my hand and we headed across the parking lot. “I don’t have any doubts,” he said firmly.

We reached the front door, and as I grabbed the handle I felt my hairs prick me. “He knows we’re here,” I whispered, pulling it open. I peeked in and didn’t see anyone. “Okay, come on.” We walked into the entry, and I motioned for Ryan to stop. “Wait here, I’ll check the corridors.” I looked first towards the women’s side, then the men’s, the lights were dim and there was no one around. “It’s clear.”

“This place is huge. Where do we go?” he asked as he stood next to me.

I closed my eyes, “Grandfather said enter, and follow my heart...the break room.”

We headed down the corridor, reaching the door, I grabbed the key, unlocking it. As I put the key back in place, I looked around again, making sure no one had seen us. Pulling the door open, I whispered, “Be careful, the stairwell is narrow and decrepit.”

The lights were on and it was bright. I wondered if they would flicker, bringing us the darkness. They didn’t. We reached the bottom

of the stairs and I couldn't help but think that Dr. Heilbrunner wanted us to. "Let me make sure there's no one in here first." I took three steps, and felt a cold breeze rush me from behind, then that rancid stench quickly entered my nostrils. "He's here," I said as I slowly turned around. "Ryan!!" I screamed.

He was being dragged back up on the stairs, his arms frantically reaching out for the railing as he kicked. That thing's vile, black mouth grinned as he glared at me with those yellow eyes, "Help...help...us...do you hear the useless pleas?" he scratchily asked.

"Dr. Heilbrunner, what do you want with the soul of a white man? I thought your preference was for that of the Navajo?" I answered sharply.

Heilbrunner released his grip, and Ryan tumbled back down. I leaped towards him, grabbing his hand as he wobbly stood up. "Dr. Heilbrunner! You will have to do better than that!!" shouted Ryan. A horrible screech permeated the room, and he vanished.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"I'm fine...where did he go?"

"I don't know, but not far, I can feel it."

"We have to stay as close as we can to each other. That thing can come and go as he pleases. We can't give him the chance to get between us like that again. Hold on tight to the soul catcher, and don't let go of my hand."

I nodded, "You're right, together we're stronger than that bastard. I felt it." We glanced around, then headed towards the

entrance to the break room.

“Come back, Dr. Heilbronner. We’ve just begun,” mocked Ryan as we walked through. “This is no way to treat your company.”

“Yes, come back! Don’t be so rude. I thought you wanted us to visit you?” I heckled.

Loud, tumbling sounds on the stairs quickly drew our attention, and without letting go of our hands we ran back out. I felt panic in my heart, Dr. Heilbronner was walking down the stairs, dragging Nashota by her hair behind him. “Is this what you’ve come for? Here, I freely give her to you!!!” he screeched as he threw her over his shoulder at us.

Her broken, bloodied little body laid at our feet. I glanced down, her chest was ripped wide open and I saw her beating heart. Horror filled my senses as I began to fall to my knees. I felt the strength of Ryan’s arm hold me up as he squeezed my hand tight. I quickly stood tall, bracing my knees, and remembered what my grandfather had said. Let not even a glimpse of fear show, or Nukpana will taste it.

“I have not come here for her, Dr. Heilbronner. I have come for you!!” shouted Ryan as he moved forward.

I thought he was going to step right on top of her body, but he didn’t, she faded away with his steps. I moved with him as I added, “You’re nothing but a coward in the guise of a doctor! You can only harm helpless children because you don’t have the courage to face anyone other than them!”

“You do not know courage...you will know fear...” Dr.

Heilbronner hissed as he lunged down the stairs towards us.

I felt as though I had smacked into a brick wall as we were pushed back. I couldn't breathe. My breath had been completely knocked right out of me. We slid across the floor, and I felt my hand being pulled right out of Ryan's grip. Then my head rebounded as we slammed into the wall behind us, coming to an abrupt stop. I was dazed, disoriented for a few seconds.

"No!! Get away from him!!" I shouted as my wits returned, and I saw Dr. Heilbronner plunge his scalpel into Ryan. I leaped up and realized I didn't have the soul catcher. I frantically looked around and saw it by the stairs. I knew I'd never reach it in time. I threw myself on top of Ryan. "Dr. Heilbronner! You can't honestly think I'd let you take another soul!!" I shouted, reaching for his lab coat. Clutching it tight, I pulled him close, his rotting flesh and putrid smell touched my face. I stabbed my fingers into his ugly, yellow eyes, gouging into them. He writhed in agony and was gone.

"Ryan..." I gasped, scooting off. I saw blood on his jacket and it felt like my soul had left me.

"Ahh...ahh..." he moaned. "Wha...what the hell happened? I feel like a freight train ran over me. Shit, where is that thing?!"

"Oh god!" I sighed. "You scared the shit out of me. I thought he stabbed you. There's blood on you."

"I'm alright, he just grazed my arm. How long has he been gone?"

"Just a few minutes. I think I hurt him. I gouged out his eyes. Can you stand?"

“Yeah,” he slowly stood. “Where’s the soul catcher?!” he worriedly asked.

“I must have dropped it when that bastard pushed us, it’s over there by the stairs.”

“Come on, give me your hand, we’ll get it together. He seems to have more power when we’re separated. We have to make sure we don’t let go.”

We reached the stairs, and just as I bent over and picked up the soul catcher, the door opened. “Shit...” I gasped when I saw Jill.

“I thought I heard something! What the hell are you doing here?!” she yelled as she bolted down the stairs.

“Jill, I can explain! But you have to listen, please. Its going to sound crazy but...”

“There’s nothing to explain, Aiyana, you either leave now or I’m calling Mr. Simmons! Better yet, the police!!” she exclaimed as she stood in front of us. “I’m sorry, but whoever you are, you’re going to be in just as much trouble for being here!”

“I’m Dr. Jacobs. You can call whom ever you like, but all you’ll be doing is putting peoples lives in jeopardy. Or you can listen to Aiyana, and help us to save those lives.”

“Don’t tell me she has you believing that some invisible force is here and has killed one of our patients?”

“That’s exactly what I believe! Let me tell you the reason. It’s because I saw that damn thing kill someone as well!” he exclaimed.

“Jill, please, that thing I saw kill Mr. Blidsen is real, and It’s here.”

“Apparently you are as crazy as Mr. Simmons said. And you have someone else acting just as crazy as you. Fucking unbelievable! Now, are you going to leave, or do I call him?!”

“I guess you call him, because we’re not going anywhere.”

“Fine! Be stupid as well as crazy. I guess you want to spend the rest of your life in prison for murder!!” she screeched, then ran back up the stairs.

“We don’t have much time. She’s going to call him, and if she doesn’t, she’ll be calling the police. I’m sure of it.”

“We’ll have to hurry then. Have the soul catcher ready, and whatever happens, remember, hold tight to my hand.”

“Okay, let’s send Dr. Heilbronner’s black soul back to where it belongs!”

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We hurriedly went back to the break room, and as we walked in Ryan whispered in my ear, “It’s one thirty, we have to end this now, okay? Just follow my lead.” I nodded as he tenderly squeezed my hand. “Dr. Heilbronner! Where are you? Come out, come out wherever you are,” he heckled. “By the way, did I tell you I’m a doctor as well? I heard your eyes were gouged out, if you come out, perhaps I can help you.”

“Yes, Dr. Heilbronner...did that hurt? How was it feeling pain? Did you taste any fear in me? Of course you didn’t! But I tasted yours! Now why don’t you bring your vile carcass out here and show us what you fucking got!!”

Dark shadows moved furiously about, as though they couldn’t see. I knew he was hurt. There was no purpose to them and they seemed to ricochet off the walls. The putrid stench was heavier then before. “The only thing you will taste, despicable Indian, will be the coldness of my scalpel as I cut you open and rip out your lungs,” he hissed violently, showing his disgusting face. Then his entire body materialized. Wheezing filled the room as he hobbled towards us. He held his right arm up high in the air, with the scalpel in his hand.

I felt my body jerk forcefully as Ryan pulled me and we started to walk backwards. “Hold the soul catcher up,” he whispered, and I held it in front of us. “Come into the web, it calls for you!”

“Dr. Heilbronner, my ancestors await you. Their souls clean, untouched. You can have your pick of Indians, just enter the web. Come into it, I command you!”

“We are not the poor, little children you butchered!! Nor are we the old and frail! We stand before you strong and without fear!”

“I, Kamali, with the souls of untold power, call you into the webbing of tears! You cannot resist me!”

“You are powerless against the Kamali! You will yield to her words. She has courage and strength unlike any you have known!”

Dr. Heilbronner's rotting flesh seemed to peel off with each word we spoke, his face contorted as he began to cough uncontrollably, blood spewing everywhere from out of his black mouth. He stopped cold in his tracks, and his sunken, yellow eyes almost looked as though they bled, his black boots squeaking as he slowly stepped back.

“Going so soon?” smirked Ryan, and we took a step forward.

“Oh my god!! What the hell is that?!!” I heard Jill scream from behind us.

“Get out of here now, before it's too late!” I shouted as I turned around.

She stood there shaking uncontrollably, her face looked like it turned to stone as her mouth hung open. I felt the fear in her eyes as they welled with tears, and I knew if I did, that thing did as well. Suddenly, a rush of cold passed over us.

“Run, Jill!!” I screamed. But it was too late, he swooped down, pushing her onto the floor.

“Leave her alone! It’s not her that you want!” yelled Ryan.

Flickers of bright metal shone in my eyes as Dr. Heilbronner plunged his scalpel into her. “Get your filthy hands off of her!” I shouted, almost pulling Ryan’s arm out of its socket as I dragged him with me and jumped on that damn monster.

The soul catcher touched him and I felt his body cringe, then he was gone and Ryan and I were laying on the floor next to Jill. There was blood on the floor and all over her uniform. “Are you alright?” I frantically asked. She didn’t answer, and I thought she was dead. I reached for her wrist and felt a pulse. I sighed, “She’s still alive...”

We got onto our knees and Ryan looked to see where she’d been slashed. “She has a deep cut on her shoulder, but she’ll be fine,” he said as he took his handkerchief out of his pocket and placed it over the gash. “Hold this down and put pressure on it,” he took off his shoe, then his sock. Stretching it, he placed it in her arm pit and brought it around. “Okay, move your hand,” he tied it tight around the handkerchief. “That should stop the bleeding.”

Her eyes were open, and I knew she hadn’t passed out. Her pupils were dilated, her breathing was erratic, and she was still as a stone. She was frightened out of her mind. Just like I was after my nightmare, when I’d seen that monster rip apart the children.

“I’m pretty sure the only reason she came down here was to warn us that she called Mr. Simmons. I don’t think we have much time left,” I said.

“Damn...I know. Now, where did that bastard go?” Ryan asked, glancing around. “I don’t see him. Alright, I need to get her out of

the way,” he said as he put his shoe back on.

He leaped up, reached for my hand and pulled me up. Then bent down, swooping Jill up in his arms. “There,” I pointed. “Let’s put her back there by the restrooms.” As soon as he put her down, I heard the door open and the stairs creak. “Shit! Someone’s coming,” I gasped.

“Jill, are you down there? It’s Jackie. Mr. Simmons is on the phone.”

“Jackie, its Aiyana. Jill’s in the restroom,” I answered as I rushed to the stairs.

“So you are here. What’s going on? Mr. Simmons asked me if I’d seen you and I told him no.”

“I left my car keys in my locker and I came by to get them. I was just talking to Jill, but she had to use the restroom. Can you please let him know she’ll be right up?”

“Are you sure nothing's going on? Mr. Simmons sounded upset.”

“Positive. Please, Jackie, just go back up!”

“Alright, Aiyana. You know how much I respect you and trust you. I’ll go back up, and I’ll make sure no one comes down. Whatever it is you’re doing, just hurry, please,” she answered, then headed back up.

“Thank you, I will.”

“That was close! It’ll be morning soon. If we don’t finish this now, we won’t get another chance to. Come on, lets get back in there and capture his black soul,” Ryan said sharply as he reached for my

hand, and we hurriedly went back.

“It seems as if your visit to our world was cut short, Dr. Heilbronner. Why don’t you come back and try again!” teased Ryan.

“Help...us...help...us...” screeched around us, but I knew it wasn’t the children. “Listen to their cries of pain, for they will haunt you for all eternity. You will never set them free. They belong to me! And I have a new soul to torture. Your brave Hatalii!” he heckled.

“Then why not add another soul? One you have wanted. Here I am, standing in the open with my arms stretched wide just for you. Come and get me. What are you waiting for?”

“There are two fresh souls here waiting for you to take them. I won’t resist, come for me. You tasted my fear once, come taste it again!”

I glanced at Ryan, surprised by what he’d said, we were supposed to be drawing Heilbronner out to capture him, not tempt him with our fear. I squeezed Ryan's hand, and when he looked at me, I shook my head. He shrugged his shoulders. “It’s alright,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Yes...it’s alright. I will save a taste for you...” Dr. Heilbronner jeered, and suddenly his bony, bloodied hand grabbed Ryan by the throat and lifted him up. My hand was throbbing in pain as I desperately tried to hold on to his.

“You will not taste anything, you son of a bitch! Let him go, or I promise you an eternity of hell!” I screamed, holding the soul catcher high. “Look, they want you!”

He tossed Ryan across the room like he was a rag doll. I ran

faster than I ever had, falling to my knees as I reached him. "Ryan, please be alright...please..." He was motionless. I quickly placed my head on his chest. I felt it rise, and felt his heart beating. "Thank you God, thank you!" I said over and over in my head. Then I felt Heilbronner's hot, rancid breath, and I knew he was behind me. I swiftly turned around, smashing the soul catcher into his rotting face. He screamed horribly, writhing in pain, and disappeared again. "I won't let you put one of your filthy fingers on him!!" I yelled.

"Miss Crenshaw!! I know you are here!" I heard Mr. Simmons shout, and from the dullness, I knew he was at the top of the stairs. "What is going on down there? Where is Jill? I suggest you answer me!!"

"Oh shit...what am I going to do?" I mumbled. "Ryan, wake up, please," I placed my hand on his chest and applied pressure as I rubbed it.

"Did you hear me, Miss Crenshaw?! If I have to come down there, it will not be a pretty picture. I warned you about your interference. This time you really have gone too far. The repercussions of your actions will be severe. You are looking at jail time!!"

"Ryan...I can't do this alone...my god, wake up!"

"I'll help you..." Dr. Heilbronner hissed in my ear as he grabbed hold of my hair, dragging me back across the floor. I felt the sharp pain of his grasp, and the soul catcher slipped out of my hand.

"Let me go!!" I screamed as I desperately kicked my legs, trying to claw his face. He dragged me to the other side of the room and I

saw that metal table. My heart stopped.

“Aiyana, you have to be strong! Clear your mind, there is no fear, only courage...”

“Nashota!” I cried.

“What in the hell is going on in there?!” I heard Mr. Simmons shout, his voice was no longer dull. It was crisp, sharp, and I knew he was close.

“Don’t come in here! Please, Mr. Simmons, you have to get out!!”

“Do not think you can tell me what to do in my building! You have more gall than Dr. Franks thought. I am coming in there and you will be leaving the hard way,” he answered, then I saw him step through the entrance.

His eyes seemed to explode as they grew five times their size with the fear that now filled them. His fair complexion turned a hue of gray. Heilbronner slammed me onto the table as I continued to fight him with all my might.

“What the hell?!!” Mr. Simmons exclaimed. “This can’t be happening! My grandfather told me all about you. He said if we let you be, let you take what you wanted, you would not come into our world! I don’t understand, why are you here now after all these years? Do you know how much I stand to lose?!! This is your fault, Miss Crenshaw! Everything that’s happened began after you came here!!”

“You bastard!!!” I shouted. I felt my rage growing, and I managed to break free of Dr. Heilbronner's grip, or so I thought. He

had released me and was now scurrying towards Mr. Simmons.

“No! What are you doing? Don’t come any closer! I beg you, please! Kill her instead!!”

“Your grandfather feared me. I tasted it, but his soul slipped through my fingers! Now I taste that fear again, and I will have a soul!!” Dr. Heilbronner shrilled.

I leaped off the table, ran towards the soul catcher, and swooped it up. I stood there for a moment and glanced at Ryan, he was still knocked out. I knew I’d have to find a way to stop this damn monster myself. I quickly turned my attention back towards him. He was still moving towards Mr. Simmons. I opened my mouth with every intention to call it, but I hesitated.

“No! Please...please don’t do this! You can have any soul here in Coyote Hills that you want. I beg you! Spare me, please!” Mr. Simmons screamed as he frantically began to back away.

Dr. Heilbronner looked content, his decayed teeth protruded as he heckled and lifted his arm high, the flicker of metal flashed as he plunged the scalpel down into Mr. Simmons' chest. I heard the ripping of flesh as the wet sounds of blood splattered on the floor and echoed in the room, the heart piercing cries of Mr. Simmons as he desperately swung his arms aimlessly at Dr. Heilbronner, and screamed in agony, “No! No! Spare me! I beg of you!! I can give you all the souls you....” His cry trailed off as he tumbled back onto the floor, taking that bastard down with him. His arms clutched around Dr. Heilbronner like a vice as his body jerked violently.

I knew this was my only chance. I rushed forward, placing the

soul catcher on top of them. I held it down with every ounce of strength I had. “The power and courage of all Navajo who have given their windspirit so that we could live, call to you! They call Dr. Heilbronner to enter the web of tears, where your black soul belongs!”

“No...!! I belong here...with you!!” he wailed as his riddled body thrashed around.

I was being pushed back by the strength of his flailing body, my feet began to slide on the floor and I knew I was going down. Then suddenly I felt the strength of Ryan’s arms as they reached around me. “Dr. Heilbronner...you are done in this world, and in yours! It is time for your soul to bow down to great warriors long past. Feel the pain and torture you have inflicted! You will enter the web of tears!!”

“No...this cannot be...!!!” Dr. Heilbronner screeched.

“It can, and it is! You have no power where there is no fear. You have nothing but the empty darkness to hold on to, and now you will join it! Give your soul to those you have taken! Join it and be trapped with it for all eternity!!!” shouted Ryan.

It felt as though the ground shook, then exploded as Ryan and I were thrown back onto the floor. Dark silhouettes violently spun above us as the soul catcher seemed to come alive, I felt warmth tingling in my hands as it pulsated like a heart beating strong, and I could swear I heard it breathing. A rollercoaster ride moving at speeds of a hundred miles an hour, with the velocity of the wind pushing against you, was exactly how it felt as we laid there.

“What’s happening, Ryan?” I frantically asked. “I can’t move!”

“I don’t know...neither can I!”

Heartrending screams permeated the room, sending shivers down my spine as the dark silhouettes became crystal clear. I saw flickers of metal plunging into Mr. Simmons, over and over, his body twitching as he clutched his arms around that damn monster.

They twirled brutally around. I felt lightheaded as my eyes seemed to spin with them. Their bodies contorted into agonizing shapes as they were being sucked into the web of tears, like smoke through a straw. “Aiyana! Join us...!!” Dr. Heilbronner screeched, and I saw his scalpel plunging down towards my chest.

“She will not join you, but you will join us!” I heard a sweet voice fiercely shout, and I knew it was Nashota. Then I saw her standing by my side, her bloodied little hands held back his scalpel. It was as though that thing was suspended in time as the screaming, contorted body of Mr. Simmons infused right through him.

“Ryan...can you see her?” I asked, as my eyes welled with tears.

“Yes, your great aunt,” he said softly.

“We have to help her! Shit, I still can’t move! How in the hell are...” my words stopped cold as I saw children walking towards us. “Oh my god!” I gasped. “Look!”

“Aiyana, you have done what you were meant to do. You have set us free. Now his black soul belongs to us,” Nashota said as the children gathered around.

“NO!! You are my salvation, my only hope! This cannot be!!” Dr. Heilbronner howled as the children’s hands began to rip through

him, tearing his rotting flesh off his riddled body piece by piece as he writhed in agony. The scalpel was now in the hands of Nashota as she plunged it over and over into his chest. His black heart gouged out with her final thrust, and adhered to the scalpel as she brought it up. The soul catcher no longer pulsated, and the force holding us back was gone, as was Nashota and the children.

We laid there, even though we were able to move, it felt like we couldn't. I turned my head and glanced into Ryan's eyes, as he glanced into mine. My heart felt like a lifetime of despair had been taken out, yet it still felt as though pain hid within it.

"It's over, Aiyana...the children are free...and so are you," Ryan whispered tenderly.

I smiled, and my eyes welled with tears. He stood up and stretched out his hands. I clenched on to the soul catcher and reached out. He gently lifted me to my feet and I fell into his arms. I felt my body tremble as he held me tight.

"Aiyana..." I heard Nashota call my name. I let go of Ryan and turned around. She stood behind me, so close that I could smell that soothing scent of my childhood. Her big, black eyes no longer looked sad, they sparkled with joy, and her little round face was filled with the giddiness due from a child. "I feel the love in your heart. Open it, let it wash away the pain. Yanaba's heart smiles wide with pride. It flourishes with the love of her beautiful daughters as she holds you in her eyes."

"My mother..." I cried.

"Have no tears of sadness, we have now come home. My sister

no longer cries. My mother's eyes no longer search. The Hatalii no longer waits in suffering. Their hearts are no longer filled with pain, as our hearts are now filled with the love and strength of our ancestors." I fell to my knees, grabbed her and held her tight. I felt the warmth of her little body as her arms wrapped around me. That soothing, wonderful scent entered my heart. I felt the pain float away, and she was gone.

"My god, Aiyana...she's as beautiful as you are," Ryan said softly as he placed his hands on my shoulders.

"She's home now, where she belongs," I said contently.

"Come on, it's time for us to go too," he said as he bent down, reaching his arm around my waist and lifting me to my feet.

We held on to each other as we walked out. When we reached the stairs, Jill was sitting there. Her arms wrapped tightly around her trembling body as she swayed back and forth. Tears were pouring down her cheeks with her panting. Her reddened eyes glazed as she stared blankly at us.

"My god, Jill!" I gasped. I'd forgotten all about her. I sat down next to her.

"I...I...saw it..." she shakily said. "I...I...saw everything. God, I'm sorry...I'm sorry...sorry...sorry...!"

"Jill, stop! Please! There's nothing to be sorry about. Now come on, we need to get you out of here and take care of your shoulder," I answered as I stood up.

"I got her," said Ryan as he reached his arms around her. "I'm going to pick you up, okay?" She nodded her head as Ryan slowly

brought her to her feet. “Aiyana, you go up first.”

“Okay,” I answered as I made my way up the stairs.

“Are you ready?” Ryan asked. Jill nodded her head as he held her tightly, lifting her up.

I stood at the top of the stairs and watched as Ryan’s strong arms gently carried her up. My heart opened as wide as it possibly could, I felt it fill with love, and I knew at that moment, not only was Ryan meant to help me, he was meant for me. I smiled warmly at him as they reached me, then opened the door.

“Do you think you can walk?” he asked, and Jill nodded. He stood her on her feet, and we walked into the corridor.

“What happened? Are you guys alright? You’ve been down there all night. What in the world was going on?” Jackie worriedly asked as she ran towards us.

“We’re fine, there’s nothing to worry about anymore. Everything is as it should be. But if you could please help Jill to the nurses’ station, I’d appreciate it,” I answered.

“Of course I will. And, Aiyana, I don’t think I want to know,” she replied as she reached for Jill’s arm. I smiled and nodded at her.

“Thank you,” said Jill as they headed down the corridor.

Ryan reached for my hand, gently squeezing it, and the warmth I felt made my heart skip a beat. I looked at him, and as our eyes met, my heart was no longer content with just a skip, it began to race. “I will never doubt you, Aiyana,” Ryan gently whispered as he leaned towards me.

I felt the sweetness of his breath touch my cheek, then I shivered

with the soft touch of his lips against my forehead. “And I won't ever doubt you again,” I answered.

We walked towards the door, and I saw the dawn break through the huge, hazy glass windows. I was taken aback, the glow was amazing. I had never seen it come through like that, I didn't think anything could come through those old windows.

We reached the door and Ryan pushed it open. We walked out onto the red brick sidewalk, and halfway down I turned back to take one last look at the place that had changed my life. The hills were blushing a deep, wine red as the sun rose behind them, and I remembered the first day that I came here. God, it felt like a life time ago. I then realized, it wasn't the worse mistake I'd ever made after all, it was the best thing that could have ever happened to me.

“Ryan!” I gasped. “Look! How beautiful! Remember what Grandfather said, 'Inhale the first breath of dawn, the breath of life!’”

JULY 29

The sin (song) sung at the end of Hóchō'íjí (evilway) to justify the chant, begins with a sodizin (Prayer). It was given to The Earth Surface People by the Diyin Dinè (Holy People). It is the origin of the Navajo. Our Chantway wasn't completed, it was not sung, and the Hatalii's rattle never touched the holy ground. The iikááh was destroyed, and not scattered to the six directions from which they came. I can only pray that the soul catcher has the power to keep the black soul of Dr. Heilbronner, Nukpana, the evil that he is known as, trapped for all eternity.

I sing this now in the hopes that it is heard. "Sa'ah naaghéi, Bik'en hózhqó," I have spoken those words after each verse in my sin.

Haiya naiya yana

I have come upon it, yo, I have come upon blessing, wo,
People, my relatives, yowa lana, I have come upon blessing,
People, my relatives, ya, blessed, na 'eye lana heya 'eye,
I have come upon it, yo, I have come upon blessing, wo,
People, my relatives, yowa lana, I have come upon blessing,
People, my relatives, ya, blessed, na 'eye lana heya 'eye,
holghei.

Neya, now comes darkness, iya,

He comes upon me with blessing, wo,
Behind him, from there, ye, sa 'ah naaghei.

He comes upon me with blessing, wo,
Before him, from there, ye, Bik 'en hòzhqq, he comes upon me
with blessing, wo,

Before him, it is blessed, behind him, it is blessed, neya'eye,
lana heya 'eye, holaghei.

Neya, behind her, from there, ye Dawn, iye, she comes upon me
with blessing, wo,

Before her, from there, ye, Bik'en hòzhqq, she comes upon me
with blessing, wo,

Behind her, from there, ye, sa'ah naaghéi, she comes upon me
with blessing, wo,

Behind her, it is blessed, before her, it is blessed, neya'eye, lana
neya'eye,

I have come upon it, yo, I have come upon blessing, wo,

People, my relatives, yowa lana, I have come upon blessing,

People, my relatives, ya, blessed, na'eye lana neya'eye, holaghei

Neya, behind him, from there, ye, Afterglow, woye,

She comes upon me with blessing, wo, before her, from there,
ye, sa'ah naaghéi,

She comes upon me with blessing, wo, before her, from there,
ye, Bik'en hòzhqq,

She comes upon me with blessing, wo, before her, it is blessed,
behind her, it is blessed, Neya'eye, lana neya'eye, holghei.

Neya, behind him, from there, ye, sun, iye, he comes upon me

with blessing, wo,

Behind him, it is blessed, before him, it is blessed, neye'eye,
lana heya'eye,

I have come upon it, yo, I have come upon blessing, wo,

People, my relatives, yowa lana, I have come upon blessing,

People, my relatives, ya, blessed, neye'eye, lana heya'eye,

I have come upon it, yo, I have come upon blessing, wo,

People, my relatives, ya, blessed, na'eye lana heya'eye,

holaghei.

Neya, behind him, from there, ye, now Talking God, iye,

He comes upon me with blessing, wo,

Behind him, from there, ye, sa'ah naaghéi,

He comes upon me with blessing, wo,

Before him, from there, ye, Bik'eh hòzhqq,

He comes upon me with blessing, wo,

Before him, it is blessed, behind him, it is blessed, neya'eye,

lana heya'eye, holaghei.

Neya, behind him, from there, ye, now Calling God, iye,

He comes upon me with blessing, wo,

Before him, from there, ye, Bik'eh hòzhqq,

He comes upon me with blessing, wo,

Behind him, from there, ye, sa'ah naaghéi,

He comes upon me with blessing, wo,

Behind him, it is blessed, before him, it is blessed, neya'eye,

lana heya'eye, holaghei.

I have come upon it, yo, I have come upon blessing, wo,

People, my relatives, yowa lana, I have come upon blessing,
People, my relatives, ya, blessed, na'eye lana heya'eye,
holaghei.

All things past, present and future, always find a way to come together. I realize that now. I am Kamali, the spirit guide, and I return all souls to their rightful places on this earth. Ayor anosh'ni, I love you, Grandfather. I am my shima.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I've always loved making things up, it started when I was around ten. I'd get into all sorts of trouble fighting with my sisters, it seemed my mom would always take their side, and if I didn't want to get beat, I'd better think quick. The stuff that came out of my mouth was incredible, and hard to believe, but somehow worked, I'd only get hit half the time.

Then as I got older, instead of blossoming like my older sister had, I turned into the ugly duckling. The one who didn't fit in with the cool kids, the one who the dorks didn't even want to hang out with, but the one who always got picked on, and I realized that the more stuff I made up, the easier it was to make friends.

Eventually, all those crazy stories running around in my head found their way down on paper, and my love for making up stories turned to writing them. Unfortunately, after high school I stopped. I found myself married with children, and without any time to write. For the past twenty years nursing has been my love, then I lost my job, and all those crazy thoughts came back, returning me to my first love, writing.