

THE  
DECIDING HOUR

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# CHAPTER 1

It was summertime, and best friends Connor, Caleb, Malik, Thiago, Ethan, and Dustin, were on their way back from a trip to Acapulco. What better way for a group of young guys in their early twenties to spend their summer vacation than with a trip to Acapulco? Cancun was going to be their choice come next summer. They were about eighteen hours or so into the nearly twenty-three-hour ride back to Texas when it all started.

Malik, the funniest of the group made sure to let Dustin know just how bad of a driver he was. At age twenty, he still possessed teenage tendencies. Which, of course, was not a bad thing; why be in a hurry to grow up?

Malik ran a pick through his mini-flat top. “Hey Dustin, we have a better chance of getting back home by horse, seeing how slow you are driving. I mean, can you at least speed it up, just a little? I know it’s good to be cautious but man, this is a bit much.”

Connor tended not to laugh at the jokes they threw around, but that one was just too good to pass up. A small burst of air escaped through his nose as he attempted to restrain the laughter. Though the more he thought about the joke, the harder it became to suppress it. Biting his lip, he squeezed his eyes shut as his shoulders bounced and his stomach trembled. Surprisingly after a few seconds, he was able

to completely stifle it and bring himself back under composure completely.

“Better safe than sorry, and you’re not so good yourself. Like, I don’t understand you. Why make fun of my driving when you’re worse than I am?” asked Dustin, tapping his index finger against his temple. “Think about it Malik, think. I know thinking is not your strong suit, but give it a go, will ya?”

Thiago peered back from the front seat. “Someone throw me a bag of chips; I’m starving. And don’t tell me there is none left. I know y’all greedy punks ain’t eat them all.” Suddenly, he aimed his attention at Ethan. “Hey, I was just thinking, you can do other things than read the Bible. We are on a road trip, coming back from a vacation, you know? Fun things?” Thiago looked on as he waited for a response, but it never came. “Um, ok, never mind then...” he said amid the awkward moment before turning back around when suddenly, a bag of chips came crashing against the back of his head. “Cabron! Cobarde! Who threw it?” he asked as he began to dig his knuckles into the palm of his hand, gritting his teeth as he felt the rage building within. He continued to dig his knuckles into the palm of his hands as he attempted to channel the anger into something physical other than one of their faces. “I’m not playing; who threw it?” He continued as he fumed.

When Thiago got mad, he always showed his displeasure by speaking in Spanish first, then in English, which only prompted laughter from the others. Unwanted laughter that, unfortunately, would only escalate his anger. Who wouldn’t get upset after randomly having a mini airbag tossed to the back of their cranium?

“Sure wasn’t Connor, and Ethan wouldn’t hurt a fly; that only leaves two people,” said Dustin.

Caleb aimed his finger at the culprit. “It was Malik; don’t look my way.”

Malik proceeded to slap and pound his knees, laughing as tears streamed down his face. “You asked for a bag of chips, right?” If Malik wanted to get to you, he really didn’t have to say anything. He just had that laugh, that laugh which meant he was laughing *at* you and not *with* you.

Irate, Thiago reached his arm across, displaying the tattoos which covered it as he began to jab at Malik’s knees. In an attempt to dodge the hits, Malik moved his knees from side to side. “Haha!”

“Hey! Guys! Can we not do this now?” exclaimed Dustin. “I’m trying to concentrate here.”

“Man, if you don’t shut your slow, turtle-driving, ‘I got to be careful’ self up. They need to make a new book titled, ‘Tortoise, the hare, and Dustin’,” Thiago responded before opening the bag of chips. “Ha!” A chip was tossed into the air before landing in his mouth. A loud crunch ensued as he chomped down.

“I hope you choke,” said Dustin as he continued to look intently through the dash window.

Malik reached forward with tears of laughter in his eyes, giving Thiago a fist bump in recognition of the joke. He took a moment to see if the others were amused, his laughter coming to a still as he too focused on Ethan. He sighed before shaking his head. “Since we’ve been on this trip, man, you have done nothing other than read. Like

Thiago said, live a little. You will always have time to read, but moments like these only come but so often.”

It was at this moment that Ethan decided to avert his attention. “No, Malik, I did do other things aside from reading. Acapulco is a beautiful place, just like the earth itself. It was fashioned and made by the Creator so it couldn’t be anything other than beautiful. It is mankind who makes it an ugly place. By the way, staring at and talking to every girl that passes in a bikini does not constitute as enjoying yourself. You have your way of enjoying a vacation, and I have mine. Fair?”

“Hey man, do you,” said Malik, raising his hands in defeat before leaning back in his seat. *No need to get all philosophical.*

“Guys, just forget about it. If he wants to read, let him,” added Caleb with a note of exasperation in his voice. “I mean guys, who are we to judge what someone else chooses to read? We all have different hobbies and interests, you know? It is what makes us all unique. Just because something doesn’t appeal to one of us, that doesn’t mean we have to put our two senses in it.”

Thiago averted his attention once more. “Ok Dr. Phillip, and we appreciate you for adding your two senses.”

“Sure thing, Bozo,” responded Caleb sharply.

Thiago and Malik knew each other two years prior to knowing Connor, Caleb, and Dustin. The five of them met in junior high, where they became best of friends. Whereas Thiago and Malik met during their last two years of elementary school. Giving them a little more time to become acquainted. Ethan and Connor knew each other the longest, the two becoming best of friends in Bible study as children.



## The Deciding Hour

A smirk crisscrossed Connor's face as he began to recollect on an eventful moment in his past—a moment that gave him a new outlook on life.

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The story goes a few years back, a time when Connor and his friends were emerging as teenagers. A time when most kids feel a sense of thrill—thrill knowing they are entering a new phase of life. A thrill when they finally see that one facial hair sprout on a random part of their face. A phase when they enter junior high and live like all the cool kids depicted in their favorite TV shows. While some children get to experience the “cool” aspect of junior high, others are on the unfortunate end of it.

*I am not afraid; I am not scared of them. Smile, look cool. Don't look scared, don't look scared, be cool.* Droplets of sweat formed along Connor's brow, his eyes peering about the school hallway anxiously. His locker swung open, which he then used to obstruct the view of any passerby as he put away his science textbooks. For the most part, the students seemed only concerned with themselves and saw no reason to target him.

*Hurry up and put this away. Hurry, hurry, hurry.* As Connor scurried to put away his textbooks, it was soon time to leave the comfort of his locker. As the door was swung shut, he felt a slight resistance. The door nudged as he pulled. “Oh boy, not again,” said Connor under his breath. Unfortunately for Connor, his first six months at M.H.S 257 weren't the best, as he was the target of school bullies.

“Hey, doofus, you forgot to put something in your locker,” said one of the three bullies. Grabbing Connor by his collar, he began to wrestle with him as they tried to stuff him inside the locker.

“Get off me!” shouted Connor as he struggled with the three bullies.

“Hahaha!” was all he could hear as the entire hall began to laugh. He began to feel himself shrinking as the crowd continued to grow, a hot flush rushing to his cheeks as the embarrassment continued. The cackling echoed through the hall, and he wished it could just end once and for all.

Connor’s body hit the wall with a loud thud. Not only did Connor begin to feel hopeless, but also powerless against the bigger and stronger bullies. He was at their mercy as he could only hope they would eventually end their assault.

“Go in yourself, or we will force you in; it’s your choice, doofus,” said one of the bullies as they nudged him with their fingers.

Connor’s chest lifted up and down as his nostrils flared. The muscles showed through his clenched jaw, but he chose not to fight back, expecting it would only bring on a worse outcome. Connor felt hopeless, the moment an eternity.

His eyes darted back and forth about the hall as he slouched against the locker. The laughing and heckling continued. Adrenaline and embarrassment took over as he saw everyone was against him. As the torturous moment went on, his eyes continued to dart about as he scanned the crowd surrounding him. While doing so, he noticed two students walking toward him with a bit more energy than he liked. For Connor, the cool, new, and hip clothing they were wearing meant only one thing, trouble.

Panicking once more, he braced himself for the next onslaught of mental anguish. As the two students neared, Connor remained locked onto them with eagle vision, continuing to sweat profusely. *Oh no*. Then suddenly, one of the three bullies went stumbling backward.

“Hey, what was that for!” he shouted.

“Yo Chad, back up off him,” said one of the two. Raising one eyebrow, he stared at the other. “What? You gone do something about it, Nathan?”

The three bullies could do nothing other than scowl at Connor as they backed away with shattered egos. Never before had they felt powerless and most of all, humiliated.

Lifting his chin with two quick nods of the head, he sought to make the message clear. “Yeah, keep it pushing.”

Connor looked to the two guys that had stuck up for him, brows furrowed. *Why did they help me? They can't be here to help me.*

“Hey man, you good?” asked one of his saviors as he placed a hand on Connor’s shoulder.

“Y-yeah, I guess so,” answered Connor with a stammer as he came to before fixing his clothing.

“Hey Thiago, he is eating lunch with us today.”

“For sure. Malik, I’ll catch you later; I gotta run, don’t wanna be later for P.E.,” he said before giving two friendly taps to Connor’s chest with his backhand. “See you at lunch.”

Welling with tears, Connor fixed his eyes on Thiago as he walked away, still wondering why he chose to display such kindness towards him. Never in a million years did he imagine students going

out of their way to become friends with him, especially since he viewed Thiago and Malik as the “cool” guys.

“I have to run too. See you later,” said Malik as he also went on his way.

Due to the kindness of Malik and Thiago, Connor was no longer bullied. It wasn’t long after that Dustin and Caleb joined their tight group. Junior high could be rough without a tight-knit group of friends; Malik and Thiago loved to align with the underdogs and protect them. But most importantly, he was able to build a lasting friendship, which lasted well beyond their middle school years.

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Back in the car, Dustin continued to be at the butt end of their jokes.

“Oh gees, you guys are so funny. NOT!” exclaimed Dustin.

“Okay, okay, cut it out,” Connor said in an attempt to stop the situation before it escalated into a long, drawn-out back and forth.

It was their first time driving to and from Acapulco. Even so, they still had a sense of where they were as they neared the destination. At some point, however, everything started to seem off. The sun was rising one moment, and they appeared to suddenly be driving into a thick, dark mist the next. This was peculiar since the forecast showed no rain and clear skies. The sudden change was truly alarming, which only led to many questions.

Scooting closer, Caleb looked about as he placed himself between the driver and passenger seat. “Dustin, I don’t think we’re heading in the right direction. Where did all this fog come from? I

know I'm tired, but I know for sure we just had clear visibility, like, three minutes ago. Now we can barely see anything ahead of us. How is that even possible? Are you sure we are heading in the right direction? Let us figure this out before we get too off course."

The car jerked as Dustin slammed the brakes. "Look man, you guys told me to go this way," he said as he pointed to his phone before squinting. "Wait, what the..." Dustin's phone only displayed a bright white. "Bro, don't tell me my phone is acting up. BROOO."

Out of curiosity, the others pulled out their phones, and to their surprise, their phones only showed a bright light as well. A wave of silence ran through the group as they felt the coincidence's implications.

Bewildered, Connor gently shook his head. *I have never seen anything like this happen before. All of our phones just happen to mess up at the same time? This is just too big of a coincidence. First the weather, now this? What next?*

"For real man, this is just weird," added Thiago as he twisted and turned his phone, tapping it against his leg as he attempted to get it to work. "I know damn well my phone ain't broke; I just bought it like, two weeks ago. They better give me my money back, receipt or not."

"Look, I'm definitely done driving at this point. Caleb, you take over," said Dustin as he released the steering wheel. *I think I need a cigarette;* he thought as he began to tap his pant pocket. *Damn, I'm out,* he thought as he began to look around at the others. *None of them use cigs, damn.* Defeated, Dustin rested his head temporarily on the steering wheel. *It's probably a sign I need to quit anyway.*

If anyone had to choose who was the most reliable of the group, it would have been Caleb. His organized mind is what got him on the radar of bullies at school; everything he owned was color-coded, from his pencil case to the sections in his binders. Such behavior attracted unwanted attention at school. Therefore, Malik and Thiago found another kid to protect and another friend to add to the group. Caleb took the wheel as the group attempted to relax from the previous ordeal, continuing in the direction they were given before their phones went haywire. Hoping they can once again, run into some sense of normalcy.

After a few minutes, a powerful storm suddenly broke out as thunder and rumbling ensued. With the fog they were already experiencing, the storm did nothing to ease their anxiety. Ethan on the other hand, remained the most composed. Gently, his lips moved as he mumbled to himself. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

Slamming his hands against the wheel, Caleb did his best to peer through the fog. “Just great! Now rain?” The rain got stronger and stronger, soon accompanied by powerful thunder and wind. The rain fell with great force in front of the car’s headlights, and it appeared as if blinding sparks emitted from the ground.

Unlike Ethan, Connor wasn’t very religious, but at that moment, he grabbed the small cross that he wore around his neck. His parents, on the other hand, were very religious, so he wore it for them. Along with the cross, he had a pendant with a picture of him and his sister Sofia as children. He wore it to remind himself that one day, they would find her.

“Someone turn the radio on; maybe there is something being said about this,” Connor suggested.

The knob clicked as Caleb turned on the radio, everyone listening intently. They waited and waited to hear something, but all they could hear was static. Turning the knob, Caleb tried to find anything being broadcasted. After trying for a few minutes, something finally came through.

“Shhh! guys! listen.”

“Weather advisory, all roads and lanes are at risk of flooding. If not for an emergency, it is advised to stay off the roads until further notice. Heavy accumulation of rain accompanied by dense fog is forecasted to continue through the night, and even perpetuity.”

Flinching as he furrowed his eyebrows, Connor looked about in great bewilderment. *No way. Did, did it just say unto perpetuity? No, I had to have just been hearing things. T-that can't be right.* With a quick shake of his head, he was back to trying to find a solution to the situation.

“Oh boy, we have to do something,” said Thiago, looking about as he turned his head. He looked around as he searched for a way out of the unexpected occurrence, but there was no sign of a safe haven.

“Duh, we have to do something, but what?” responded Dustin.

Grasping the two passenger seats, Malik leaned forward. “Caleb, just drive and hopefully, we’ll run into a residence somewhere. There has to be one somewhere close by. If we do find one, hopefully, the people living there will help us.”

“Things are really getting weird, like, really weird. I don’t feel right about this at all,” said Caleb.

The sound of crackling could be heard, then BOOM! A thundering lightning bolt landed about four feet ahead of the car. The sound was frightening enough to make everyone's hair stand on end. Yet, Ethan seemed unbothered.

Dustin's eyes widened as he let out a bloodcurdling scream, a scream that seemed like it would never end. Connor wanted to tell him to tone it down a bit, but Thiago beat him to it.

“Bro, will you shut up already? You screaming like that is not helping this situation.”

Connor would have personally been more polite in his request; nonetheless, it was well understood. Suddenly, Connor felt the urge to look at his watch; it was precisely 6:00 am. The air within the car became frigid. Frigid to the point where everyone hugged themselves, utilizing the heat from their own bodies to help ease away the biting cold.

“WHAT THE! Yo! How did it get so cold all of a sudden? Caleb, did you crank the A.C.?” Malik whined.

Caleb rubbed his body with one hand as he adjusted the temperature with the other. “No, I didn't touch anything. I have no idea where this cold came from. Crap man, it's freezing. First, it goes from clear skies to thick dense fog. Then it goes from warm weather to frigid air. Something is not right here. I was never no whiz kid. But I am quite sure it can't be scientifically possible for it to get this cold, this instantly. At least not naturally.”

“It's like we're in some movie, and you know what happens to us minorities, right?” Thiago's body jolted as Malik's hand landed on his shoulder.



“Yeah, Caleb, Connor, Dustin and...” he stopped before grinning. “Well, Ethan is mixed. So he may get a pass,” he said before bouncing with laughter as the tears streamed. “So, Caleb, Connor, Dustin, and Ethan, by the skin of his teeth, will go riding off into the sunset, while some one-eyed, ‘the hills have eyes’ creep done got us two,” said Thiago, joking back.

“Hey, hey, you don’t think we’re going to at least make it halfway through the movie? Man, we have to make it at least halfway through,” responded Malik as he continued to make humor of the situation.

Thiago leaned forward, holding his stomach as the muscles contracted with each laugh. “Nah, I say we don’t make it past the first twenty minutes, and I am being generous.”

It was at this point that Connor started to feel that jokes were inappropriate; the situation they were in was dire. Connor couldn’t help but feel like a flashflood could creep up on them at any moment, and he knew just how quickly one of those could turn a person’s life upside down. As much fun as they had on their trip to Acapulco, he began to regret ever going on it. His goal now was to get everyone to safety.

“Come on, now is not the time for joking. We’re in a serious situation. There is a time and place for everything, and now is certainly not the time or place for that,” said Dustin as he clenched his fists, peering nervously out the window.

Connor was relieved to hear that Dustin shared his sentiments. He took the time to turn to Ethan, the quietest of the group, as he did not hear much from him. “Hey man, everything good over there?”

With eyes closed, Ethan gently nodded as he continued to speak gently to himself. Connor was unsure as to what he was saying but felt it was unnecessary and inappropriate to ask. All he knew was that, whatever he was saying, it was bringing Ethan comfort, and that was enough for him; plus, he knew there were more important things to focus on at the moment. Most importantly, finding shelter. He let out a sigh of uncertainty as he returned his attention to the dash window, where things only seemed to be intensifying.

Caleb's gunmetal blue eyes suddenly lit up. "There! Over there! I think I see something."

"What? Over where? I don't see anything," Dustin said as he looked about to find the source of Caleb's excitement.

"Over there, I see a building," he continued as he aimed his finger.

"Ohhh, right. Thank goodness, let's check it out."

Through the dense fog was a large structure, appearing to be a hotel of some sort. It was the only building in sight, so they had no choice but to be grateful for the opportunity. Now was not the time to be picky; they had to make do with what was presented.

Carefully, Caleb began to drive to the entrance as everyone wasted no time grabbing their belongings in preparation to head inside. In the process, a couple of bags of chips and other items were tipped out and into the car, which was paid no mind. They left the vehicle parked out front, expecting to hop back in as soon as the rain and fog cleared up. The morning could not come soon enough.

## CHAPTER 2

In the ten seconds it took them to run from the car to the building, everyone managed to get completely drenched by the torrential downpour. Once inside, everyone extended their arms into the scarecrow position as the water dripped off their soaked clothing. Small splatters of water ensued as the droplets came crashing to the floor. Combined with the sudden and unexpected chill of the air within the car, they could only hope no one got sick.

Thiago bent down in a rush before wiping his shoes. “Aw damn, not the new kicks! And I just got these too! Man, someone’s going to have to pay for them. These the limited editions too, so even if I do get money for the damage, there ain’t no way I can buy them again.”

Scrunching his face, Malik lifted his shoulders in a state of confusion. “What? Who’s going to pay for it? Mother nature? Thiago, you’re crazy man. Which one are you gone sue, the rain? Or the sun for not being out?”

Meanwhile, Ethan took the time to retrieve his Bible, where he began to relish over it. “Thank goodness you did not get wet,” he said before kissing it. Ethan truly admired this particular Bible; he had it since he was a little child. It was his first Bible, and from the first day he got it, he always cherished it.

“Let’s worry about finding a room for now and one that is reasonably priced. Some people may be jerks and try to price gouge knowing the situation. Money, money, money, that is all it’s about these days. No care for the consumers,” said Dustin in frustration.

BOOM!

“What was that!” shouted Dustin once more as he landed on the floor, trying to flee from the loud sound of thunder from outside the hotel’s entrance. It was almost as if the lightning and thunder were trailing them wherever they went.

“I-I don’t feel good about any of this. Where’s the receptionist? Oh, I think I’m going to be sick,” said Caleb, gripping his stomach.

Slowly, Ethan’s head began to nod as he looked around. “Hmmm, not bad, not bad. Very nice place, and oh man, the chandeliers, wow. I can honestly see myself living here.”

“I mean, it’s ok, but the chandeliers look antique, so that means only one thing. Creepy. Not that it really matters; we’re only spending the night here,” added Caleb before squinting. “Speaking of night, have any of you noticed how it went from sunny weather to nighttime in almost a matter of minutes? I know thunderstorms can darken a sunny day, but it literally is nighttime. So weird.”

The place looked decent. The only off-putting thing about it was the profound silence; there was not a person in sight. Then out of nowhere, the strangest-looking man appeared from around the corner.

“Whoa! Where did he pop up from?” asked Dustin, startled.

As the man walked to the desk, he did not once look in their direction, seeming to lack any expression. His gait was almost robotic

as his legs remained straight, and his walk lacked any sense of urgency. But for some odd reason, he appeared this way to everyone but Ethan.

“Good evening to you too, sir!” shouted Ethan as he raised his hand in recognition.

“Man, why does he look like that?” Malik asked before turning to Ethan. “And what do you mean, ‘Good evening to you too, sir’? He did not say anything. He’s just standing there being weird. Yo, I think someone may have slipped you something on the trip.”

Malik’s body jerked forward as Caleb forcefully nudged him. “Shh! Not so loud; he can hear you!” He whispered. *I have to admit; he could use a tan; he looks like the walking dead*, Caleb thought to himself.

Perplexed, Connor fixed his gaze towards the floor. *Why do I feel like this? I can’t even describe this feeling...this guy is just so creepy.*

Though Malik went about it the wrong way, everyone but Ethan understood his question. The feeling experienced when looking into the receptionist’s face was hard to describe. In his eyes was hate, the type of hate you wouldn’t wish anyone to experience. Though they did not do anything to him, they still felt that the immense hate coming from him wasn’t the result of a hard day’s work but that it was aimed at them just for being in his presence, for existing. His facial expression was blank. His eyes emanated detest. To top it all off, his gaze never once made contact with them. Rather, he just stared at the computer before him, not blinking once. Yet to Ethan, oddly, he appeared to be the most pleasant man he’d ever met.

Connor fought through the awkwardness as he wiped away a few trails of water streaming down his face. “Hi, sir. Would you happen to have any rooms available that can fit us all?”

He awaited some form of reaction or response as he blinked awkwardly, but there was none. The receptionist’s gaze remained fixed on the computer, motionless, with the same dark look in his eyes. After a few seconds, he reached for a key before uttering:

“Ninth floor.” His voice was low, yet powerful, but not the “command a room” kind of powerful to where people may admire it. Rather, it was almost as if several voices spoke together at once.

Ethan’s drenched sneakers squeaked as he took a few steps forward. “Thank you sir! Free? Wow, sorry to hear that the computer systems are down. I guess the storm outside is causing an error,” said Ethan as his shoulders bounced, laughing enthusiastically. “But who can turn down anything free?”

Ethan stopped and stared at the receptionist with his mouth slightly opened as he smiled as if listening to a response. Yet to the others, it appeared as if he was smiling and talking to himself in a manic episode. As he continued to stare with his mouth ajar, a bone-chilling thunderclap radiated throughout the room once more.

Dustin grabbed his chest. *I honestly don’t think I can take any more of those.*

After staring for some time, Ethan resumed speaking.

“Woah Man, tell me about it! Rough weather, isn’t it?” asked Ethan as he spoke to the receptionist. Though as before, in the eyes of the others, it appeared as if he was speaking to none other than himself.

Ethan stopped speaking and stared once more, exposing a toothy white smile before removing his glasses. Wiping the perspiration from his glasses with his shirt, he then placed them back on where he then nodded towards the receptionist. “Oh really?”

Silence ensued once more as Ethan smiled toward the receptionist with cheerful eyes. As much as the group normally enjoyed Ethan’s smiling and laughter, at this moment, it became the scene of a horror movie’s worst nightmare.

Malik, Thiago, Dustin, and Caleb looked at one another as if they had seen a phantom. Their gaze shifted back and forth between the receptionist, who kept a murderous zombie-like gaze, and Ethan, who gave the jolliest, yet creepiest smile in total silence.

*Let me see if my phone is working now; I have to take a picture of this so that when whatever drugs Ethan is on wear off, I can show him just how insane he was acting,* Thiago thought as he retrieved his phone. He began to tap it against his hand. “Damn it, it’s still messed up.”

Disturbed, Caleb looked on. “Ok, that’s it, I’m walking home,” he said as he grabbed his things and headed to the door. He felt a squeeze around his bicep as Malik grabbed hold of him.

“And where are you going in this weather?”

“Far away from here. Do you not see how creepy this is? Ethan is acting all weird, and we have a rehabilitated serial killer that rose from the dead for a receptionist. Do I need a better reason to leave?”

Swiftly, Connor whipped his head to the left. “Ethan...are you okay? You are behaving very oddly right now. You are talking to yourself, and it is making everyone uncomfortable. This guy has said

nothing to us the whole time, yet you are having a full-blown conversation with him.”

“Me?” asked Ethan as he pointed at himself dramatically. “You guys have been nothing but disrespectful this entire time. The guy has been talking and communicating, very friendly, yet you all just stare at him, mumbling disrespectful comments as if he is not standing right in front of you. He has been very courteous. I can expect such antics from the others, but you Connor? I am surprised.”

It was at this moment that Malik gripped his belongings. *He is really going insane.* “Caleb, you still interested in walking home?”

Baffled, Connor’s fingers treaded down his face. *It is almost as if we are not standing in front of him. And Ethan, I do not know what is going on with him. It’s like, he is losing it, and I have no idea why.*

Connor was expecting the receptionist to name a price at the very least. He looked back at his friends, only to see Ethan with the same jolly smile as before while the rest looked on petrified. It was evident that they all were very put off by the clerk’s mannerisms, all but Ethan. The group was short on cash, so Connor saw him not asking to pay as a blessing. Yet, he could not help but find this peculiar. He even began to imagine the clerk approaching their room in the middle of the night, knocking slowly and creepily upon the door to correct the error. With that in mind, he grabbed the key from him and headed to the room, the number of which was on the key, 908.

“Damn Connor, are you done yet? Man, let’s go, let’s go, it’s freezing. And this guy,” he said, turning his head from side to side. “N-never mind, man; let’s just hurry up,” whispered Dustin, nudging Connor while keeping an eye on the receptionist.



As crept out as Connor was that the receptionist never took his eyes off the screen, he was also happy he did not actually lock eyes with him. Connor could only imagine how off-putting it would have been, awkward and possibly outright frightening, had he done so.

“Last one to the elevator has to stay down here with him,” said Caleb as he started running full speed.

Squinting, Dustin raised his hands in confusion. “Really Caleb? You’re twenty-two, not twelve.”

“Guys, like come on, seriously!” exclaimed Ethan as he flashed an embarrassed smile toward the receptionist. “Excuse my friends; this is so unlike them. They have their ways, but I have never seen anything like this from them before. You have been nothing but accommodating; thank you for your kind service.” He lowered his head as he looked down toward his chest. “Oh, this?” he said before holding the Bible in his hands. “Yeah, it’s my Bible. I try to read it as often as I can. I mean, I have read it front to back many times over already, and each time, I learn something new.”

All of them continued to look on, confused and petrified between Ethan and the creepy receptionist. All was silent as Ethan appeared to ramble on towards a soulless body, void of life itself as it continued to stare down at the computer, motionless.

Slowly, Thiago inched closer to Malik as he kept an eye on Ethan. “Ethan is my boy, but he can’t stay in the room with us. I’m sorry, he just can’t.”

As his jaw continued to tremble from the cold, Malik extended his arms as he commenced to shake off more of the rain. “Yo, he’s

really bugging out right now; I don't even know what to do about it. I won't feel too comfortable having him in the same room as me either, but what else can we do? Even if he could get his own room, you know how we do. We never abandon each other, no matter the situation; clearly, he is under the influence of something. Hell, this guy is probably doing voodoo or witchcraft on him. How he's doing it? I have no idea." Malik decided to take one last look back at the receptionist before looking towards Ethan as he continued smiling in the receptionist's direction. That was all the push he needed to start running. "Thiago, I'll see you at the elevator."

Thiago cupped his hand around his mouth as he shouted. "Malik! we can't just leave Ethan!" Back and forth, he began to look between Ethan and the elevator. *Damn Ethan, sorry, but I'm not staying down here any longer.* "Hey, Connor," he said before pausing, shaking his head as one who took a sip of a strong drink. "And Ethan...hurry up before the elevator comes. I'm tired and just want to get away from this... guy," he said as he stared at the receptionist.

Connor stopped to look back. Watching as he saw the others mashing the elevator button as if their life depended on it. All the while, Ethan continued to engage the strange man in a one-sided conversation. Uneasy, Connor walked a few inches closer to Ethan. "I think we better get going now," he said as he desperately attempted to avoid eye contact with the receptionist.

Joyful, Ethan turned around and placed a hand on Connor's shoulder. "Sure, sure, coming now. Just give me a moment," he said before returning his attention to the receptionist. "Yes, and likewise, it was very nice speaking with you. Very clear weather coming for me soon? HAHA!" he said before turning to Connor. "Hey, according

to this guy, the weather will soon become clear and sunny, at least for me, that is. He's a comedian too!" he said before patting Connor on the shoulders. "Let's get going bud. And thanks again!" he shouted to the receptionist as he walked away.

Clear weather? Was this some form of cryptic message?

Meanwhile, the others remained by the elevator as their jaws continued to hit the floor in utter fright. Between the awkwardness of the receptionist and Ethan's smiling at him for seconds on end, the moment proved beyond uncanny.

"If I ever come across a day in my life that is stranger than this, I...I,"

\*DING!\* sounded the elevator interrupting Caleb mid-speech.

"Never mind, let's just get in. Hey Ethan! Connor! Hurry!"

Dustin's lips and jaw trembled as he tried to process what he had witnessed. "No way, no way. Did you guys see how creepy he was? No wonder no one but us is here. He probably scared everyone off. Where did they find him at? Death row?"

As they neared the elevator, Connor decided to look back only to see the receptionist continuing to stare at the computer motionlessly. His eyes continue to express detest and hate.

"Hey, guys! Don't be rude; wave back!" said Ethan sternly as he began to smile, waving excitedly toward the receptionist.

But all the others could see from the receptionist was the same blank stare as he continued to look down at the computer. The light emanating from the computer illuminated his pale, deathly complexion, intensifying the eeriness.

*I must get a picture of this.* Dustin retrieved his phone, and to his disappointment, it had ceased to work altogether. “Just great.”

Caleb shook his head. “E-Ethan, you are behaving really weirdly.”

The elevator finally came as everyone, but Ethan fought to get in. Once in, Connor decided to summon the courage to look back once more, only to find that the receptionist was completely gone. Connor extended and shook his arms as he looked upon them. *I really got goosebumps right now.*

“Yo, what was he on? I don’t even think meth can make someone look and act like that.” He paused before staring into Ethan’s face. “And Ethan, what was all of that about? I mean, really,” asked Malik as his chest heaved in and out.

“What? Being kind? Something you all were totally not being. The whole time, you all were looking at him as if he was some weirdo.”

“I mean, he was,” Caleb interjected.

“And of all people, Connor, I am surprised you came off in such a way,” Ethan continued. In Bible study, you know one of the main ethics preached to us as children was ‘treat people as you would want to be treated.’ A look of displeasure encompassed his face as he looked around at all of them. “I am really ashamed of you all right now, like really. Let’s just get some rest so we can head out.”

Dustin blinked rapidly and shook his head in confusion. “Ethan, what are you going on about? Look around you. Everyone here saw what happened; that receptionist did not utter one word. Yet you were talking to him as if you were having a full-blown conversation. It’s

not like it's only one of us saying this; we all saw and are saying the same thing."

"Well, I was having a conversation with him, and I must say, he was a very interesting person to talk with. Such a stand-up guy he was," answered Ethan.

As crept out as Connor was about the situation and the need for answers, he saw that discussing the event would only lead to more confusion. "Guys, guys, let's just forget about it."

"Bro, how can you forge—" said Caleb before stopping midway, raising his hands. "You know what, you're right, never mind. Let's just try to forget about this. The sooner we try to forget about this, the sooner I can get that guy out of my mind."

Averting his gaze to the elevator's ceiling, Dustin squinted. "Yeah, you're not the only one who was crept out. Nepotism, it has to be nepotism. I don't see any other reason why they hired him. Like, how do you get hired for a job looking like that? What do they pay him with? Drugs?"

"Dustin, cut it out; you are being very rude," said Ethan sternly. "He was one of the most pleasant and kind people I have ever met. If you don't have anything pleasant to say, it's best you not say anything at all."

Malik's eyes shifted to the left as he looked at Ethan through his peripheral. *Yeah, Ethan has lost it.*

"I'm sorry, but that dude was creepy. As a matter of fact, this hotel reminds me of that movie where that crazy guy was running around with an axe, trying to kill his wife and son. I think it was called *The Brightness*, *The Shining*, what was it?" Asked Dustin as he began

to snap his fingers. “Man, someone help me. It’s the movie where the kid kept repeating ‘Rumcake’ or something like that.”

Caleb gave him a blank stare. “Just stop...please.”

With shoulders hunched, Malik rubbed his hands together as he blew into them, attempting to stave off the cold. “Come on, man; there has to be heat somewhere in this place. I am like literally freezing right now. After seeing that receptionist, I don’t want to see anyone else who works here. Not the janitor, manager, room attendant, no one.”

“Freezing? There is a very pleasant warmth in this hotel. You guys are really out of it today, and I mean really out of it,” said Ethan as he looked about perplexed.

Dustin inched closer to Caleb’s ear. “I think he’s sick. Feeling warm in freezing cold...speaking to nonverbal sociopaths...must be a fever. Once we leave this place, we have to take him to the emergency room.”

It took unusually long for the elevator to reach the ninth floor, and during that time, the group took a moment to observe the appearance of the elevator.

“Man, when was the last time this elevator was updated? In the 70s?” asked Malik as he looked at the worn and dated beige wallpaper. “Looks like they hired someone’s grandma to do it.”

“Seriously, I’m surprised it’s even operational at this point. It smells like mothballs. It is certainly not making me feel any more comfortable after seeing the psycho receptionist downstairs, who looks like he was possibly around when mothballs were invented,” added Dustin.

Connor rocked back and forth as sleepiness began to set in. *I really don't care about this place anymore. I just want to get some rest, wake up, and get out of here.*

“Since we got here, I ain’t see or hear one other person,” said Thiago. Looking down at his feet as he seemed to still be ruminating over the damage done to his sneakers. “Not the new kicks, man, not the new kicks. As I said, someone is paying me for these sneakers. The weatherman should have forecasted this. Man, even the sportsman getting sued for not making sure the weatherman did his job. But what is the official term for a weatherman?” Thiago began to snap his fingers as he looked up. “What do you call them again? Man, it’s like I have the name in my head, but I can’t get it out. I need to know the name; I want to make sure I sound smart in court.”

“Good luck with that,” added Dustin sarcastically.

“Um, meteorologists?” offered Caleb as he shrugged his shoulders with open palms.

“Yeah, that. And I know there is a lot of them...” Thiago began to snap his fingers once more. “What you call them again?”

Dustin’s face went blank. “Meteorologist.”

“Yeah, that.”

Closing his eyes, Dustin shook his head as one staving off the effects of a drunken night. *This guy won't stand a chance in court. Not that he ever had a chance, anyway. 'Hi, your honor. I am here to sue mother nature and the weatherman for co-conspiracy to destroy my newly released sneakers'.*

A brief silence ensued as the group processed the bad series of events.

“And yo, please, if things really do get weird, can we not be like the Scooby-Doo gang and be like, ‘you two go this way, and we’ll go this way’ cause that ain’t going down. We’re sticking together no matter what,” Malik added.

The elevator eventually made it to the ninth floor.

“Finally!” shouted Caleb.

Extending his head slightly out of the elevator, Caleb looked to his right and to his left. “I guess it doesn’t look too bad.”

“Imagine if you stuck your head out, and the first thing you saw when looking down the hall was that weird, drugged-out-looking receptionist,” said Malik.

Thiago placed a hand on Malik’s shoulder. “Or worse, Caleb’s girlfriend.”

Caleb had been with his girlfriend for a while, and while he loved her and she made him a better person, Caleb never forgave her for calling him a lazy jerk one time—even if it was true.

A snort escaped Dustin as he tried to contain his laughter.

“It’s the inside that counts.” Placing a hand on his waist, Caleb stopped and stared at Thiago as he tapped his foot. “You know Thiago, you are really, really annoying. Did you know that?” He asked before whipping his head towards Dustin. “And what are you laughing at?”

“Well, that was not the case, thank goodness. I don’t want to see that receptionist in the hallway, doorway, lobby— nowhere. I say,



let's just get to our room already," said Dustin, clutching his bags as he lifted them from the elevator floor.

Anxiously, Ethan began to look around. "Wait! Wait! Guys, I forgot my bag downstairs. It has all my writing and study pads. I use them to take notes as I read the Bible; I really have to go back and get it."

"Welp! Good luck with that," said Malik as he clutched his belongings tighter as he continued down the hall. "Ain't no way I am going down there with that receptionist, and ain't no way I am going to sit there and watch you communicate and smile like you done lost your mind with a quiet maniac."

"Sorry, I got homework to do," added Caleb sarcastically as he scoffed at the thought.

"It's ok; I will go by myself. I will be right back up; it shouldn't take me long."

As much as Connor didn't want to go back down there, he felt he could not leave Ethan alone, especially as it appeared that he was behaving oddly. "Ethan, no. Don't worry; I will come with you."

"Connor, no, no. I will go alone; you can go inside with the others and get situated. I will meet you all soon. I am literally just going to grab my things and come back up."

"Ethan, I am not lett—"

"Connor, no. Go with the others, please." He looked down as he shook his head. "I know the main reason you want to go is because you feel somehow, for some strange reason, that something is wrong with me. I have been perfectly normal the whole time. It is you all

that are acting odd, so go inside and get some rest. I will be right back.”

As much as Connor wanted to go with him, he knew he could not convince him to agree to let him come along.

“Alright, Ethan, but please, be careful. Do not go exploring. Get your belongings and come right back,” said Connor before letting out a deep sigh.

“Connor...you are my best friend, not my dad,” he said before flashing a grin, shaking his head at the situation. “Be right back.”

Connor watched as Ethan walked a few feet back to the elevator, and oddly, it was almost as if it was waiting for him. Worried, Connor looked on as he watched him enter.

*Man, what a day.* Connor walked with haste to catch up with the others as he had the keys to the room.

“You let Ethan go by himself?” asked Dustin worried.

Out of breath from running to catch up, Connor fought to get his words out. “I let him go alone? I LET HIM GO ALONE? You all did not even entertain the thought of going back down there with him. Besides, I did insist on going, but he felt it unnecessary. I am sure he will be fine. I know the receptionist looked crazed, but I am sure he is not what we are making him out to be. He will be fine, I am sure.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Upon entering the room, everyone was amazed at the sheer size of it. They estimated that such a room would cost hundreds of dollars a night. Yet, they were able to obtain it absolutely free.

“We definitely got a bang for our buck. I mean, look at all of this,” said Dustin.

“Well, not our *buck* since we got it for free, but I know what you mean,” added Caleb.

The room contained two beds as well as three decent-sized armchairs. Best of all, the room had a comfortable warmth to it. The look was not exactly modern, nor was it exactly old fashion. It was just sort of in between.

Caleb closed his eyes as he sighed. “Oh goodness, finally, some heat!”

“I got the bed!” shouted Thiago.

“I got the other one!” responded Caleb.

“I guess Connor, Dustin, and I will take the armchairs,” added Malik.

Malik covered his mouth with his hands, his eyes wide. “Yoo! They got a gaming set here too?”

Connor raised one eyebrow as he nodded. *Rather neat, I must say.*

Both Malik and Connor were pretty big gamers, so they both perked up at the sight. Malik continued to eyeball the gaming system. “And you’re telling me we got all of this for free? Yoo! That’s what I’m talking about!”

“Yeah, yeah, cool, but if you guys decide to play, please keep it down. I just want to get some sleep and get out of here,” said Dustin before giving his shoulder a stretch.

Grabbing onto the gaming wires, Connor studied it intently. “It looks like we have to set it up before we play it.” Squinting, he knelt down before the TV. “Hey guys, look,” he said as he pointed to five walkie-talkies lined up on the second shelf of the television stand.

“Why would there be walkies in a hotel room? And five at that?” asked Dustin as he continued to dry his hair, tapping the towel against his head. “I tell you, soon as I think this day could not get any weirder. It surprises me.”

It was odd for them to be there since they saw no purpose for them. Connor was rather good with gaming and electronics in general, so he knew it would not be long before he figured out the use for them.

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For the most part, everything seemed fine, aside from the occasional thunder. Then, out of nowhere, an eerie moan sounded in the hallway. Connor thought he was just hearing things, but then Dustin whipped his head in his direction.

“Connor, did you hear that?”

“Yeah, I most definitely did,” he responded. Connor was relieved. It was one of those moments where you wish someone else heard or saw something the same as you. Otherwise, it would truly be unraveling. The bed creaked as he scooted closer to the edge. “Do you think it was Ethan?”

“No, I don’t think so. I know Ethan was behaving strangely, but I don’t think he would be going around the hotel moaning weird noises for no apparent reason,” he said before shifting his gaze.

“Look, let’s just forget about it. It could have just been this debilitated hotel making strange noises,” added Caleb. “By the way, shouldn’t Ethan have been back by now? It’s been a couple of minutes.”

Connor ran his fingers through his hair. “Yea, you’re right. Let’s not worry too much; I am sure he will be back any minute now.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Soon, everyone got a chance to change into dry clothing, everyone except Dustin, the last to go into the bathroom. Dustin was the boyfriend of Connor’s sister, Sofia, before she mysteriously disappeared. Authorities and friends would always tell him to stay positive and optimistic and never give up hope. But when someone disappears for as long as she did, at some point and time, you begin to assume the worse has happened. Up to that day, no one had found out exactly what had happened to her. Connor knew she would never just run off because she was a very happy person surrounded by love and family. If Connor had the ability and means to hold the one responsible in his hands, surely, they would regret the day they were born. It had not yet been ruled that someone was responsible, but deep inside, he knew someone was responsible for her disappearance. Connor always appreciated Dustin as he brought happiness and joy to his sister’s life, which made her feel complete. When Connor and his family weren’t always able to always surround her with their love and care, they could always trust Dustin to be there for her.

As Connor sat in the room, memories of his sister filled his mind. How she loved M&Ms in her popcorn so much that she would ask to just have popcorn and M&Ms for dinner from age eight to nine. How when she was younger, she always wore her hair in different braids

because their dad had given her a book about braiding when she was eleven. How she was his *first* best friend. His body jolted from bouts of sobbing as the memories continued to come to him.

Rushing to his side, Malik placed a hand on his shoulder. “Connor, what’s wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing,” he answered, but of course, Malik knew there was something troubling him.

“Connor, something is definitely wrong; tell us,” Caleb said as he knelt before him.

“Sofia...she just came to my mind. She was a very happy person with a loving family around her; she would never just run off. I just want her back,” said Connor as he palmed his face, the tears saturating his hands. “I just want her back.”

Connor remained optimistic, holding onto the hope that one day, Sofia would show up back in his life.

Malik motioned his hands toward Dustin. “Come, if anyone could lift him up right now, it is you. You were engaged to Sofia, and I know you loved her just as Connor did.”

Dustin approached. “Connor, I know you feel saddened by her disappearance, but let’s stay strong and positive. No matter how long she’s been gone, never give up. No matter what, the memories of her will remain in your heart. That is something you can rest assured knowing will stay with you forever.”

Pounding his fist into the palm of his hand, Connor tried to contain his anger. “I know, but no matter how optimistic I try to

remain, I still have that feeling and thought in my mind that tells me, someone did something to her.” With dilated pupils, his sapphire eyes darted about as the thought of such a thing began to break him down mentally. “If so, I only hope that fate allows me to get a hold of that person and end them once and for all. May that person never have an opportunity to stand before a judge.”

Sorrowful, Caleb fixed his gaze upon Connor once more. “Imma finish setting up these wires,” he said, hoping to change the tone of the environment as he saw it was becoming too much for Connor.

It didn’t take long for Caleb to finish setting up the console. “Now, to turn this thing on,” said Caleb as he pressed the television power button. Lazily, he threw his hands into the air. “Just great.”

“It’s only showing static,” said Malik as he made his way to the back of the television. “I mean, everything looks good; all the wires are connected to their proper input. I am not sure what’s wrong.”

Connor eventually pulled himself together. “Try changing the channel,” he said wearily as the intense emotions from earlier zapped him most of his energy.

“Is there even a remote for this thing?” asked Caleb as he looked around. “Guess not,” he said before returning to the television. “I am pressing the buttons but still, nothing. I guess it is just broken; nothing we can do about it.”

“How about we turn on the game to see if it shows up on the television? Maybe there is just bad reception to where it can’t pick up any channels,” suggested Malik.

With a flick of his thumb, Caleb hit the power switch to the gaming system. “Look! It’s showing!”

The title of the game read, “Deciding Hour.” Everything was all fun and exciting until five characters appeared on the screen. Not just any five characters, five characters that very much resembled the five of them. Yet, Ethan did not appear in the lineup of characters.

Malik squinted at the TV as he slowly approached. “Someone slap me because I think I’m seeing things. Someone tell me, is that us in the game?”

“No way! No way!” shouted Caleb, backing away from the television. “That *is* us.”

A spine-chilling moment it was, for them to see their own likeness in a video game was of much concern. The eeriness of it all outweighed all other emotions. All they could wonder was, “how?”

Bewildered, Malik’s voice began to crack as his brown eyes fixated on the TV. “I-is that me? Is that me? Turn it off, man! Turn it off! No, no way!” he said as he rushed to the television. Turning it off, his eyes remained wide as they beamed at the screen; watching his reflection as his chest and shoulders raised in one accord as his anxiety increased. To his horror, it turned back on.

Stepping back with haste, he tripped over his feet, falling onto the floor as his elbows broke his landing. “It just turned on by itself! I-it just turned on by itself! Yo! Did you all see that!”

Connor looked up at the wall, and on it, the clock read 6:10 am. *That’s very odd, considering that I could have sworn that the last time I checked my watch, it was six-something. I’m sure that we have spent*



*a couple of hours in the hotel at this point.* Perplexed, he rubbed his knees as he tried to sort out what was going on.

“No way, no way, and Ethan did not even return yet, and it’s been a while since he went to retrieve his belongings.” Back and forth, Caleb paced. “I knew we shouldn’t have let him go down there by himself. I knew it, I knew it...”

Malik stood as he snatched his bookbag off the floor. “I’m outta here! Who wants to come with me? Imma go see if I can find Ethan on my way out.” He looked around and awaited an answer. “Yo, really? Is no one gonna come with me? Are you just gonna have me walking the hotel by myself with that weirdo out there? If not for me, at least do it for Ethan. I really hope you guys do not plan on staying here. Something is certainly up with this place.”

“Hold up, let me grab my stuff,” responded Thiago.

Not a minute after walking out the door, Malik came stumbling back.

“Damn! What the hell!” he shouted before pinching his nose.

“What now?” asked Caleb.

“You guys don’t smell that? It smells worse than death out there.”

Dustin sniffed the air. “I don’t smell anything.”

“This is not a joke; it really smells terrible out there. How can you all not smell it!” Malik added as he continued to cover his nose.

“Let me check it out,” said Caleb, heading for the door. “Wha-ACK! ACK!” His profuse gagging caused the vessels in his eyes to become prominent.

“See, I told you,” Malik said as he continued to catch his breath.

At that point, the rest of them summoned the courage to step outside for a quick second to see what they were experiencing, and they instantly regretted doing so.

## CHAPTER 3

The smell was worse than a rotting corpse, so horrible that if one was to inhale it for more than a few seconds, it might kill them. Imagine taking a basket and throwing in a couple of dead rats, rotten food, and every other foul smell imaginable one can muster. Compared to what they smelled that day, that basket would have smelled like a bouquet of flowers.

The strangest thing about it all was that the smell never wafted into the room, despite them leaving the door open in their moment of torment. It was as if the room was some sort of haven. It seemed like forever before they finally recuperated from the smell.

Thiago's shag haircut draped forward as he slouched. Placing his hands firmly against his lap, he struggled to catch his breath. "We, we, have to get up outta here...now!"

"Who is going anywhere with that smell out there?" Asked Caleb.

Dustin collapsed in the corridor of the hotel room like a wounded soldier in his final moments. His head went side to side as he sweated profusely. "What's going on man? What's going on...what's going on. Since we left our trip, it's only gone downhill from there."

*This has to be a nightmare. What else can it be?* Thought Connor as he rested his forearm against the wall, burying his forehead into it as he tried to make sense of it all.

Things were certainly spiraling out of control for the group. With Ethan not showing up, it only made the situation that more dire.

“Look at the floor! Look at the floor!” shouted Dustin as he stared through the hotel room door.

“What is that?” Pinching his nose, Caleb ran to the door before sticking his head out for a better look. “The floor is covered with maggots!”

Dustin’s hands tore at his body as he scraped at his skin. *So gross!*

Soon, the sound as if hundreds of drones appeared, as thousands upon thousands of flies filled the hallway. There were so many that a wall of black was all they could see.

“Close the door! Close the door!” shouted Malik.

A loud bang ensued as the door slammed shut. Of the thousands of flies that filled the hallway, one managed to enter the room, where it dropped to the floor. Buzzing and bouncing about before coming to a complete stop.

“We have to call maintenance; this has gotten out of hand,” Connor said before rushing to the hotel room’s phone.

Scrunching his face, Caleb raised his hands before shaking his head amid the confusion. “Do you want the grim reaper coming to assist us? And I am sure he won’t be holding a mop or broom in hand.

I have no idea what is going on, but something is very wrong with this place.”

A look of defeat encompassed Connor’s face as he pressed the phone to his ear. “Oh, come on!” he said, mashing the buttons frantically. “Nothing! It’s useless anyway,” he said as he slammed the phone.

Perspiring, Dustin’s chest continued to heave. “That is not surprising, not at all. Not at all,” he said before swallowing deeply and forcefully. “Ethan, I can only hope he is ok, but after what we just saw...I don’t know man.”

With jaws clenched Malik stared at the ceiling as he recovered from the shock. “I told you that receptionist was probably doing some sort of spell on Ethan, and now, he got him. He got him man; he got him. We should have gone with him; maybe he would have had a better chance. I knew there was something up with this hotel. Everything seemed weird about it from the start, even before we walked through its doors.”

Perplexed, Caleb looked about. “What now? We can’t go out there; no communication. We’re trapped.”

“How do you not have a working phone in a hotel?” asked Dustin.

“Look, man, this is no hotel. What we saw and smelled out there was not normal,” added Caleb. Gawking, he aimed his finger at the television. “Crap Thiago, look.”

The game highlighted the character that resembled Thiago, and a controller was displayed on the screen simultaneously. The game was instructing one of them to pick up the controller, but no one was

brave enough to volunteer. Connor finally summoned enough courage to go ahead and be the first one to do so. The second he picked up the controller, the game gave him directions by displaying words on the screen. The first thing it asked of him was to pick up a walkie. A lot of things began to come to mind, one being, *Will I have to communicate with a crazed psycho or worse, a spirit through a walkie, as he gives us instructions to escape from this place while he, one by one, seeks to extinguish us?* Shaking his head, he stopped the thoughts of the possible things to come and grabbed the walkie in order to deal with the reality at hand.

“Man, we have to get up out of here. This is beyond weird. I don’t know if someone here is trying to play a joke on us, but it is not funny at all, and it is beyond sickening,” said Malik, pacing nervously. “I knew something was off when Ethan was acting weird with that receptionist, and now Ethan is gone. Soon as we saw the receptionist behaving like that, we should have hopped back in the car and found another place.”

“We don’t know for sure if Ethan is ‘gone.’ There is no reason to say the worst has happened to him. We can’t just count him out. For all we know, he could be in hiding somewhere, waiting for us to help him. Things are already morbid as it is; no need to think such things.”

Upon picking up the walkie, the next instruction given was for Thiago to exit the room, and to no one’s surprise, he did not handle it lightly.

“Oh, hell no! *Hell no!* I’m not leaving this room. Maggots all over the floor, thousands of flies. No way! *Sácame de aquí!* No sé qué

está pasando, pero tenemos que irnos de aquí pronto,” shouted Thiago.

Malik stared at Thiago as if he had sprouted an extra head. *What? You know what, never mind. I am not even going to try and figure that out. All I know is that we need to get up out of here.*

Almost instantly after Thiago uttered those words, a timer appeared over his character’s head within the game, displaying twelve minutes.

Connor had a gut feeling the outcome would not be good if the timer had run out if Thiago decided not to leave the room. Surely, that was something none wanted to risk-taking. However, with what they all experienced out there, they did not know how it would be feasible for him to exit the room.

Dustin began to tremble as he stared out the hotel window. “No way, guys, guys! Look at this. Hurry!”

Everyone ran to the window at once.

“No, man, w-w-what’s going on? What’s going on?!”

They could see nothing outside, only darkness. The fog had gotten so thick that it appeared as if they were surrounded by dark clouds. The clouds were a gloomy purple, and there was nothing reassuring about them. With the combination of what was outside the building and what was right outside the hallway, they were definitely trapped between a rock and a hard place. At this moment, it seemed escape for them was not an option.

The realization of the timer above Thiago's character came back to mind; therefore, Connor felt they should ignore the sight for the time being.

"How about we open the door to see if it is still the way it was before?" Connor suggested.

Everyone scoffed in unison in the sound of disgust and disbelief that Connor was even suggesting such an action.

"Have a field day, but I am not opening that door," added Caleb.

Connor knew it was useless, and if they were to know the state of it, he knew he had to be the one to take one for the team. Connor pinched the center of his eyebrows as he readied himself. *Ok, here it goes.*

As Connor summoned the bravery to look outside the door, the rest of them huddled together as a group of meerkats looking on from a distance.

Connor pressed his eye against the peephole. *Everything seems normal from here.* Just to be safe, he proceeded to place his ear upon the door. *No sound of a thousand flies...guess it's all clear now.* Connor slowly stepped back as he opened the door, a creak wailing out in protest. "It's, it's totally clear out here. Nothing."

"What? That can't be possible." Caleb made his way to the door. *No way.* "There were just thousands upon thousands of flies out there. What about the smell?"

"I don't know; I did not step out to find out," said Connor.

Caleb took a deep breath as his shoulders elevated. "Ok, here it goes; I will give it a look." He abruptly stopped just as his foot



touched the entryway. “Ok, never mind,” he said as he had a change of heart.

“Really Caleb?” asked Malik.

Caleb threw his hands up as he narrowed his eyes. “Well, how about you do it then?”

“Thiago, look, just go outside and see what happens. Just step out. I-I can’t explain what is going on.” Connor’s eyes darted to the game, where the timer continued to dwindle. “But Thiago, you have to go, like right now. Just step out, but don’t walk too far yet. Who knows, this may be your way out, our way out; and you may even run into Ethan,” Connor pleaded.

Thiago looked back and forth between Connor and the game, his eyes watering.

It was truly saddening for the group to see Thiago in such an emotional state. They could tell that he was experiencing utter terror.

“Okay, okay, I’ll go, but you guys stand by the door at least, alright? And how do I know if Ethan will be the same? Something had already taken over his body earlier. To be honest, I do not know if I will be happy to see him. I am just being honest; I am still a bit creeped out over the incident that took place earlier.”

“Don’t worry, you know we’re with you,” responded Dustin.

Everyone walked with him to the door but dared to step outside. They watched as Thiago went on his way, expecting to see him gag at the smell. But to their surprise, it looked as if the smell was gone.

“Thiago, is the smell gone? If it is, I’m coming with you,” said Malik.

“Good looking out bro,” he responded as he took the time to look around before inhaling deeply. “Yeah, it seems like the smell is gone, but it is still chilly out here. You can go grab your stuff, and we can go. I suggest you three do the same.”

Eagerly, Malik stepped outside before gripping his stomach in agony. As Malik stepped outside, instantly his gag reflex kicked in. He held his chest as he started panting. “Thiago! You said the smell was gone! You trying to be funny or something?” he asked as he gagged, dragging his body and belongings back into the room.

Thiago taken back by his reaction raised his hands as he looked about the dreary hallway. “I don’t smell anything, and I’m not joking. If I could smell something, do you think I would be outside calm like this? And after what we’ve all seen, nobody should be making any jokes. I am telling you guys, there is no smell.”

It was at that point that Connor knew as the game instructed, only Thiago was meant to be outside and no one else. It also became clear they were dealing with something beyond their comprehension, something outside of the norm. Supernatural.

“Only Thiago can go right now,” Connor stated. “If any of us tries, we’ll instantly be overpowered by the smell. For what reason, I don’t know.”

“But how on earth is it possible that he can’t smell it, but we can?” asked Caleb.

“I wish I could give an answer to that. Guys, wait here. I’m a go check and see what the game is instructing.”

Upon checking, the timer above Thiago’s head had disappeared. He closed his eyes as his shoulders raised, taking a deep breath in

preparation to relay the next request. “Guys, the game is telling us we must close the door,” Connor said, knowing this would not sit well with anyone. Especially Thiago.

Thiago’s eyes widened as he paced angrily. “What! Close the do- nope! that game is tripping. No one is closing anything. The only way this door is closing is if I’m on the other side of it.”

“Guys, we can’t just leave Thiago out there by himself. Hey Thiago, how about you try to come back in and see what happens,” suggested Malik.

The moment he stepped in, the timer reappeared and, this time, started from where it left off, meaning Thiago only had five minutes left to spare.

“Connor, what do you see?” shouted Thiago from near the door.

“Thiago, you must go back outside. The timer started, and you only got five minutes left.”

Thiago shook his head as he began to sob. “Nah! I’m not staying out there!”

“Hey man, just go. You have the walkie, and so do we. We’ll be able to communicate with each other,” said Malik in an attempt to provide some reassurance.

Thiago’s face crumbled in a combination of sadness and anger as he reluctantly walked outside. *Why must I be the first one? Man, I wish I never went on this trip. What is going on? H-how is any of this happening? I have to be dreaming; I have to be. This is something you only see in movies...This can’t be real; I am dreaming.* Thiago

closed his eyes tightly as he squeezed his hands into a fist. *Wake up, wake up.* He opened his eyes, and to his dismay, he remained.

Connor turned back to the door with haste. “Thiago, please, just go and see what happens. Try to find someone who can help us.” Connor wanted to say, “someone other than that weird receptionist,” but he knew that would only make him more apprehensive. Maybe he forgot about him altogether, so Connor did not want to risk bringing him back to the attention of Thiago.

“It’ll be okay, Thiago. Don’t forget, we’ll be with you here using the walkies,” said Dustin before finally closing the door.

As soon as the door closed, the lock sounded, and the “game” began.

In the game, the character, which resembled Thiago, was transported into a hall. It appeared normal at first, but then it changed into an old, rusted, decayed, worn-out hallway.

Suddenly, Connor’s walkie turned on as it began to get a signal from Thiago’. “The hallway! The hallway! El pasillo!”

With urgency, Connor gripped the walkie. “Thiago, Thiago! You hear me?”

“Yeah!” he answered with a bloodcurdling scream.

“What about the hall?” asked Connor. He was already anticipating the answer but wanted to validate it before coming to a conclusion.

“It’s changing! It’s changing!”

The hall went from dreary to outright dilapidated right before his very eyes. The wall paint began to age and crumble as the dragging

sound of metal erupted. The walls were now a dark rusted gray, covered with what appeared to be excess condensation.

Just as Connor expected, what was taking place in the game, was happening to Thiago in real life. The game was not showing them random images. It mimicked what was outside of their very room.

Connor motioned for one of them to come over and grab the controller as he used the walkie. The situation at hand required diligent teamwork.

“Alright, I got it,” said Dustin.

“Thiago, don’t go anywhere until I tell you. We’ll investigate first, and as we figure things out, we’ll update you. Don’t forget! Do not go anywhere until I say so!”

“Alright, alright, man. Let’s just get this over with. I don’t want to be out here any longer. The hall just literally changed before my very eyes, man. What the— how... Yo man just hurry up so I can get the hell out of here. Please!”

Connor buzzed the walkie. “Thiago, you must relax. This is not the time to break down; you have to stay focused. We all need you right now.”

The game had an arrow pointing to the left of the hall, and as Dustin controlled the game, he noticed that a door three down from theirs was highlighted. He entered the door and found a setup resembling a fast-food restaurant.

“What do y’all see! Dime! Dime! Tell me!” shouted Thiago through the walkie.

“A room, a fast-food place of some sort. Thiago, go to the room and enter. It’s three doors down to your left. I can’t really go too much into detail right now, but hopefully, once you enter, you will be able to see what we are seeing,” said Connor.

The room within the game appeared out of the norm. It was almost what one would see at a play, but behind the scenes of the curtain, there was complete darkness. A kind of darkness that appeared impenetrable. The room itself appeared somewhat warped and exceptionally large.

An unnerving silence ensued.

“Thiago, what do you see?”

“It looks like...dummies, and this place... it’s the old fast-food joint I used to work at not too long ago.” Thiago’s breathing began to become slower and heavier. “One of the dummies looks like me, and the other, my co-worker. This is so trippy. How is all of this happening? Yo man, I am getting out of here.”

As he turned around to leave, the door clicked loudly, registering even through the walkie. Running towards the door, he grabbed it by the handle, shaking and pulling it to no avail.

“Let me out! Let me out!” he started screaming before abruptly stopping, gasping as he felt his heart thrumming against his chest.

“Thiago, what’s going on?” Connor asked. “What happened?”

Suddenly on the screen, the dummies became animated.

“Guys,” said Thiago as he swallowed nervously. “They’re... moving. How are they moving?” he whispered into the mic before

screaming into the walkie loudly once more. “How are they moving? Let me out! Let me out!”

The character bearing a resemblance to Thiago was making what seemed to be a burger. He and the other dummy did not speak, but their faces eerily expressed emotions that anyone looking could understand and interpret. Two of the dummies appeared to be communicating with one another, holding bread in their hands as their shoulders bounced with laughter. The dummy of Thiago proceeded to take a bun and rub it across the sole of its foot, and not too long after; it moved as if spitting on the bread. Then nothing. The dummies collapsed and were no longer animated.

A question then popped onto the screen, which read, “Why did you tamper with the customer’s food? A) Because you were bored, B) Because you were dared, or C) Because he complained about his order.”

“T-Thiago...Do you happen to hear or see a question anywhere?” Connor asked unraveling.

Heavy breathing and stuttering could be heard at the other end.

“N-n-no, w-why? Do you see one?”

Connor proceeded to read the question, and as expected, it only made the situation escalate for Thiago.

“But, h-how does it know this? H-how? Man, this is creepy; get me out of here! Get me the hell out of here!”

Suddenly on the screen, a timer appeared over Thiago’s head once more, indicating five minutes. In this place, seeing a ticking timer was the equivalent of them staring down a bomb with an ignited

fuse. Once the fuse reached its end, they knew the worst would happen.

“Thiago, please answer quickly; you only have five minutes.”

“I-I remember that day, shit man... put C, the answer’s C. The damn guy made me mad, complaining about us not moving fast enough.”

Anxiety and fear soon spiraled into rambling, in which he recounted the whole event.

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Thiago and his co-worker were just opening for the day.

“Hey, Dominic, wipe that spill up while you’re over there,” said Thiago as he tossed a rag on his co-worker’s shoulder.

Perplexed, Dominic held the towel between his fingertips. “Why the hell are you giving me this for? You were the one who decided to spill a whole cup of soda, which, I must point out, is yours by the way. I am not about to clean up after you.”

Soon the smell of burning patties ruminated within the air.

In haste, Dominic scurried to the oven. “Damn Thiago! Now you burned the patties. If the manager starts questioning what’s going on around here, you are taking the blame. No way am I covering for your mess.”

The towel moved side to side in the air as Dominic fanned the thick smoke.

Without a care in the world, Thiago casually walked over to Dominic where he grabbed the towel from his hands. “You take care



of the patties; I'll take care of the spill. See? Was that hard? Teamwork, makes the dream work."

"Yeah! Go and deal with the easy mess while I deal with an oven full of burned patties, both of which are your fault, may I add! I should really make you eat all of this and pay for it. All of this has to go in the garbage, and guess whose paycheck it is coming out of?"

"Relax, relax. As I said, teamwork makes the dream work."

"I hope this is all a dream that I eventually wake up from, away from you."

As the two continued to bicker back and forth, an eager customer waited upfront to be tended to. "Where the hell is these darn people! I have been waiting here, calling for someone for nearly three minutes now!" he said to himself. He proceeded to turn his wrist as he looked down at his sterling silver watch. *Crap, I am definitely going to be late.*

As this was going on, Dominic was just making his way from the back. *Oh, shoot!* With haste, he ran to tend to the customer. "I am sorry sir; we were in the back getting things ready. It's been a busy morning, and we are short-staffed," he said emphatically.

"Who gives a damn what's going on back there! What you should be more concerned about is what's going on up here with your customers! Do you know how long I have been waiting for someone just to come and take my order? For crying out loud!"

"S-sir, I apologize; I am ready to take your order."

"Oh geez, really?" the customer responded back sarcastically. "I will take a small coke and—"

“Wait, wait, hooooold up Dominic,” said Thiago as he placed a hand on his shoulders. Hearing the customer hurling insults as he walked to the front, he instantly jumped in to defend his coworker. “Hey, look man, you are going to have to calm yourself down there. Like he said before, we did not hear you; it’s not that serious, so calm down.”

With eyebrows raised, the customer stared him down. “Oh really? It’s not that serious? Just so you know, I have a job to be at, something you two clearly do not value because if my order is not taken in the next minute, I will see to it that the both of you are fired!”

“Thiago, look, let’s just take his order so he can go. No need to make a big situation out of this.”

Slowly, Thiago began to nod his head. “You know Dominic, you’re right. I’ll ring up the order while you go and prepare it.”

“Oh finally, about time!”

“So, what are you having today?”

“A hamburger, fries, and small coke, no mayo.”

“Thank you. Will that be all?”

Annoyed, the customer reached for his wallet. “Yeah, that will be all.”

“Okay, you can wait here sir. Your order will be up shortly.”

Thiago turned around to look at the customer as he made his way to the back. *Oh, don’t worry, I will make sure we fix your order really well.*

As Thiago made his way to the back, he could see Dominic scurrying to complete the order.

“Dominic, Dominic, relax. It looks like you’re losing it over there.”

Sweating profusely, he wiped his forearm across his forehead. “I know, I know, but we have to get this order done. We don’t need any more complaints, and definitely, we don’t want to take the chance of him reporting us to management. I really don’t understand why the other two can’t start working at the same time as us. Clearly, we could use the help.”

Without a care in the world about what he was being told, Thiago walked up to Dominic. “So, how far along have you gotten along with the meal? Don’t worry, we got time,” he said before downing a fry.

Exasperated, Dominic continued to sweat profusely. “The fries are done, and I just finished toasting the bread. Look, are you going to help or just stand there asking questions all day? I am sure there is somebody waiting after him by now.”

The situation seemed tense, for Dominic, that is.

Thiago looked down at his work shoes as he calmly examined them. “You know what? It just occurred to me that it’s been a while since I cleaned my work shoes, and today, I am in the mood to do just that. Pass me the other half of the bread.”

Dominic proceeded to hand him the bread.

Thiago looked to his left and to his right in quick succession. Holding the bread to his face, he proceeded to spit on it.

Dominic turned to Thiago in astonishment. “Bro, what the hell? What are you doing? Is this supposed to be some kind of joke? You just spit on the bread!”

After a few more seconds, Thiago lowered the bread. “I am just preparing to clean my shoes. They could use a scrub.” Back and forth the bread went along the soles of his shoe as he grinned smugly.

Dominic raised his hands in a questioning manner. “What in the world does spitting on a piece of bread have to do with cleaning shoes? I really think you need to re-evaluate your life; you are losing it bro.”

Thiago lowered the bread as he continued to rub it across the top and bottom of his shoes. “Get it now? This will have to do for now as a rag.”

In disbelief, Dominic clutched a fist of hair. “Dude, stop!”

“Ahhh relax, the man deserves it. If anyone should be upset, it should be you. Man up. Are you really going to sympathize with that asshole? I mean, think about what he did to you. You shouldn’t take that disrespect.”

Dominic began to squint as he looked up as he nodded. “Yeah, you know what...you’re right. As a matter of fact, hand me the other half of the bread!” he said before committing the same heinous act as Thiago. Feeling fulfilled with his actions, he proceeded to hand the bread back to Thiago. “That’ll teach him!”

The two of them spent a few more moments preparing the meal in which thankfully, no more wrongdoing was done. But of course, the damage was already done. The two had set it in their hearts not to repent of their actions and went along with it.

Back at the front, the gentleman impatiently paced back and forth. *Where are those guys now?*

Almost as if on cue, Dominic came from the back with food in hand. “Here you go sir. I hope you enjoy and have a great day.”

“Thank you,” replied the man as he began to nibble on his lower lip as if in deep thought. Suddenly, he turned back around to face Dominic as he was leaving. “I, I just want to say that I am sorry for the way that I acted earlier. As of now, there is just a lot going on. I know that is no excuse for my actions, but I truly do apologize. I know it is never right for any of us to impose our problems on others. Thanks again for being understanding, and thanks for the service. I hope you will accept my apology. Have a good day, young man.”

In a state of profound inner sadness and regret, Dominic looked on. Deep within, he wanted to stop the guy, but there was no way of doing so without looking suspicious or possibly angering the customer once more. All he could do was stand and wallow in his guilt and shame.

As the gentleman made his way out of the establishment, Thiago was making his way from the back as he held a broom in hand. “I hope he enjoys every bit of that meal,” Thiago said sarcastically before sweeping.

All Dominic could do was nod. “...yeah.” Dominic’s fingertips rested on the counter as his eyes peered through the glass window of the restaurant, still feeling the ill effects of what he had done. As he looked, he noticed something that truly troubled him. “Thiago! Thiago!” he shouted.

Thiago walked into the area as he swept. “What’s up?”

“The food! It was not for him. There is a kid sitting in the back seat of his SUV. It was for the kid and not the man! I saw the kid take the food and eat it!” He removed his work hat before clutching his hair. “Thiago! What did we do!”

Thiago stopped sweeping and seemed to have found a place in his heart for sympathy. He blew through his teeth and shrugged as he tilted his head. “Oh well,” he said before he continued. “There is nothing we can do about it now. I am sure he will be ok; he will live. Now let’s get back to work,” he said, patting Dominic on the shoulders as he smiled.

Back at the car, the gentleman was ready for the day after making his son happy with a fulfilling meal. “Dad is proud of you for waiting so patiently. Enjoy son.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I am going to drop you off at your mother’s house. I will pick you up after the weekend and then we can watch a baseball game later, ok?”

“Ok Dad,” he said before taking another bite of the sandwich.

At that moment, Thiago lacked the empathy to feel compassion for what he had done.

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Thiago continued to plead his case. “And so that is what happened, and to be honest, I really don’t give a damn about him! Or this damn place! I mean, I never intended for the kid to eat it. But what happened, happened. What am I supposed to do? I can’t go back

and change the past. Man, someone come get me out of here!” concluded Thiago as he stared petrified at the scenery.

Everyone sat disturbed at his account, but they all knew they didn’t have time to be judgmental. Their main focus was working together to find a way out of this place.

Dustin proceeded to select C as everyone stared at the screen in disbelief.

Connor had always been reluctant to eat out for the very reason Thiago just described. But he never imagined Thiago would be one of those people.

How did the game know this about him? And furthermore, who or what was controlling the dummies in the room with Thiago? As things became intensified, they only created further questions, which never seemed to have any answers.

The sound of metal emanated from the television as the door locks unhinged. The game then instructed Thiago to step out of the room and head four doors down.

Out of nowhere, the floor began to vibrate slightly. It was not a constant vibration. It was more like that of heavy, slow, but powerful footsteps.

Caleb turned to Malik as a lump formed in his throat. “W-what the hell is that? Do you guys feel that? What is that!” he asked.

“Not sure, but I’m guessing we’ll find out soon. To be honest, I almost don’t even want to find out,” responded Dustin. “It possibly can’t be anything good.”

“Thiago wait there; I’ll tell you where to go next,” Connor said as he held the walkie to his mouth.

Thiago frantically began to call out into the walkie. “Guys, guys, wait, w-what is that noise? Why does it sound like something is pacing outside? What are you seeing? Yo, if someone doesn’t talk to me and tell me what’s going on!”

“Hold on Thiago. Just wait inside, as I stated earlier. I’ll go take a look first, then inform you when to leave.”

Dustin proceeded with the game, curiosity taking over as he led his character out. He decided to investigate the noise, which was opposite of the game’s direction.

“Dustin, we don’t have time to explore the game beyond what it’s asking. Let’s simply do what it’s directing us to do. The faster we do it, the faster we can inform Thiago of what’s to come,” Connor instructed. Unfortunately, Dustin decided he had his own plans.

“Hold on, hold on. I just want to see what may be causing the noise,” said Dustin as he tried to find a reasonable explanation for his curiosity.

As Dustin approached the noise, the controller came crashing onto the floor as it dropped from his hands. “What is that? Don’t tell me that thing is out there,” he said in disbelief.

A silhouette of a huge beast appeared, causing everyone to gasp at the sight of it. It seemed to be a mix between a human and a bull, a minotaur type of beast towering over nine feet tall. Continuously it paced back and forth as it breathed menacingly.



“Guys! What’s going on?” shouted Thiago from the walkie as he seemed to have heard the panic.

“Nothing, it’s nothing,” Connor said to avoid further unnerving him. Telling him a raging bull-like demon was down the hall would certainly not have helped his situation.

If it appeared that terrifying within the game, they all could only imagine how menacing it would have looked in person.

Dustin finally came to the fourth room down the hall as the game originally instructed, and as with the previous room, it seemed a scene was set up. Just as with the other room, the room’s dimension seemed eschewed and endless. Behind the curtains was complete darkness as before. This time, the room displayed a car, and a man was sitting in it, looking up towards two dummies, one of them clearly resembling Thiago.

“This is too creepy man,” said Dustin.

“Okay, I think we can tell Thiago to proceed.” Connor wearily lifted the walkie. “Thiago, you there?”

“Yeah.”

“Imma need you to listen and listen closely. Walk four doors down in the direction you walked before and do not look behind you. Please, whatever you do, do not look back.”

“Why?”

“Just... don’t.”

As Thiago opened the door, they heard the steps more loudly.

“Guys, what is that? Is something behind me?”

“Just go and do not walk towards the noise.”

Luckily, Thiago did as commanded, finally making his way to the room. “What now! W-w-what is this? How? How is this happening!”

Almost immediately after entering, the dummies within the game became animated.

“They’re moving again!” Thiago shrieked through the walkie

As the dummies came to life, they positioned themselves to act out what took place. The dummies got into what seemed an intense struggle before the dummy within the car grabbed its side, sliding back in its car seat motionless. The dummy of Thiago and his accomplice took off, running into the darkness behind the scenes as everything became eerily quiet. Short and brief, the message was clear.

The scene was surreal to the point that not a word was uttered by anyone for minutes on end. All they could do was stare at one another in astonishment.

“Did he really?” asked Malik.

“No way...” Connor responded.

“F this! This is bullshit! Get me out of here!” shouted Thiago once more.

“Thiago, a question has come up on the screen. I’ll read it to you,” Connor said into the walkie as he was still processing what had just taken place. “Thiago, why did you murder the gentleman? A) Because you liked the thought of it, B) Because you wanted his money or C) Because it was part of an initiation.”

No sooner than Connor read the question, a timer of five minutes appeared on the screen. As before, he knew that letting the timer run out could not be good. This wasn't the kind of timer you would find on your family game show; this timer was meant to induce nothing other than fear. Thiago stayed quiet. It seemed as if the game was attempting to humiliate him, to break him mentally.

“Thiago please answer as quickly as possible; you only got five minutes to do so. Breathe, try to compose yourself Thiago. We all need each other, so please Thiago, try to think rationally here.”

“N-no! Forget this! If he had only given it up when we asked him to, none of that would have happened! Nah, I am not about to sit here and let this place make me out to be something I am not. H-h-here is what happened that day,” said Thiago as he continued to sweat profusely.

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Thiago and an accomplice were walking in the night when suddenly, a thought crossed Thiago's mind.

Thiago began to point as he whispered. “Yo, Thiago, look over there. You seem him?”

“No, who are you talking about? I don't see anyone,” responded Thiago as he turned his head in every direction.

Inching closer to his friend, Thiago stiffly aimed his finger. “Look man, over there!” He continued to whisper.

“Oh, I see; you mean the cab driver. What about him?”

“He probably just finished his shift, and it being the end of the day, you know he has to have some money on him,” said Thiago as he and his accomplice maliciously eyed the cab driver.

“Definitely. If we gone do something, we got to do it now. We can’t wait to think about it. No one’s around, and if he spots us just standing here, he may become suspicious and drive off. So, if we gone do it, we gotta do it now,” he said as he looked around anxiously. “Ain’t no one else around right now. Like I said, if we gone move in, we have to do it now. We have the clear.”

As the two approached in the cold of the night, they lifted their face warmers and then their hoods to reduce their chances of being spotted and identified.

Meanwhile, the cab driver used the time to obtain a little shuteye after a long day’s work. *I’ll rest for a few minutes before heading home. I am just so tired.*

“Don’t move! Don’t move!” shouted Thiago, reaching his hand into the glove compartment of the cab. As he did so, he kept his other hand in his sweater pocket, which contained a concealed knife.

In response, the victim immediately grabbed Thiago’s arm where an intense struggle ensued. Wrapping both his arms around the arm of Thiago, he was able to get a strong enough grip.

“Get the hell off me! Get off me!” shouted Thiago as he struggled.

The man was determined not to have his hard-earned money robbed from him.

Thiago reached in through the window, where he was able to unlock the car door. With haste he reached into the glove compartment where he was able to retrieve \$500. Headlights beamed on his face as a car approached. “Damn, we got to go Thiago; someone is coming!”

Thiago continued to tug. “He’s holding onto me! Get him off me! Get him off! I can’t leave cause he is holding on to me!” said Thiago, panicking.

After a few quick glances between Thiago and the slow-approaching car, Thiago felt it was in his best interest to run. Thiago was left all alone as he struggled to pull away from the cab driver’s hold.

“Thiago!” shouted Thiago in a panic as he saw his friend run off into the night.

“Get the hell off me!” shouted Thiago before pulling his other hand out of his pocket, where he would then plunge the blade into the defenseless driver’s side. Immediately, he released his grip.

Thiago ran off into the night as the cab driver lay wounded.

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Thiago recounted the events that he was aware of that night. Unbeknownst to him, there was much more that took place than what he had knowledge of. The dummies roared to life once more as a few other dummies ran from the darkness, joining the scene as they played out a part that Thiago was unaware of.

Noticing that the two of them had run off, the unidentified car pulled to a stop. Luckily for the cab driver, the occupant was already on the phone with the authorities.

With a cell phone in hand, the occupant quickly exited his vehicle to tend to the cab driver. “He’s been stabbed! Please send help!” he shouted at the phone before placing his hand on the driver’s shoulder. “Hold on there, help is on the way. Hang in there buddy.”

The cab driver could not respond as he took shallow breaths in an attempt to gain air.

Eventually, first responders would arrive. They knew the worst had happened based on the disposition and countenance of bystanders who stood by. It was a look the experienced officers knew too well.

As the officer slowly approached, paramedics stormed past him to assist the driver. One of the officers unrolled the yellow tape before blocking off the area.

Unfortunately, it was not long before the worst was confirmed. A paramedic slowly shook his head from side to side. “He’s dead.”

The cab driver succumbed as the knife pierced his chest, striking a major artery and causing him to bleed out in a few minutes.

One of the officers held their head down as he palmed his forehead. “Damn...”

As all of this was happening, everyone kept hearing the constant beeping and ringing of the deceased man’s cell phone. With many of the officers being fathers themselves, the thought only brought profound sorrow. With it also being so late in the night, they knew the

calls had to be from family, seeking to know the whereabouts of their husband and father.

One of the officers built up the courage to be the first to retrieve the phone, knowing eventually, it must be done to help find the contact information of loved ones.

The officer was preparing to put the phone into his pocket when he read a text coming across the screen. No more than a minute later, he saw another. Suddenly, his jaw began to tremble. “Mercy...”

*“Anvit, congratulations, she had a boy! Oh, I am so happy for you Anvit! I know you always wanted a boy!”*

*“Latha has a baby brother!”*

*“Anvit, he came a day early! We know you are emotional right now, but we all want to hear from you and, most certainly, see you! Congratulations!”*

Overcome by emotions, the officer stumbled to his car; knowing that the victim’s wife and kids would never see their father again tore through the officer’s spirit.

In a moment of untold coincidence, a life was born, and a life was taken. A life celebrated, and a life mourned. An innocent unborn child will not only have to grow up not knowing his father, but he must also live knowing that each year as he celebrates his birth, those around him must mourn a loss. Hopefully, for the unborn child, the family would take the evil of that day and turn it into good, knowing that the young man was able to pass down his legacy to a son.

In a moment of selfishness, Thiago brought a lifetime of hurt to many, though he was never aware of the gravity of his actions.

## The Deciding Hour

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The Dummies collapsed once more, and Thiago could do nothing other than tremble.

After witnessing the dummies, as well as hearing Thiago's testimony, the rest sat silent as they mentally digested what was shown and told. Information that made them view their friend in a whole new light. Even though the account was hard to bear, they all knew they must stay focused as time was dwindling.

"Thiago, we all make mistakes. But please Thiago, please, give an answer," Connor pled, trying to keep the disappointment from his voice.

"Yo man, forget this game! Forget the answers! Why should I have to answer any of this? No one was supposed to know! I never knew the man had died, and it was not my intention to kill him. Look, get me out of here!"

Connor urgently pled with him to give an answer. Time was dwindling fast, and only 50 seconds remained.

"Thiago, please! You only have a few seconds!"

Connor could hear the sorrow coming directly from Thiago's soul.

"Whatever happens, happens! I don't care anymore! Ya no me importa! Al diablo con este lugar!"

Though none of them could speak Spanish, they were certain the words he spoke told the frustration he showed.



“Thiago! Please!” Connor pled for the last time, and then, the timer ran out. The vibration on the floor came to an abrupt stop, indicating that the raging beast either left or simply stopped its pacing. Deep inside, Connor feared the worse. The letter B appeared on the screen, which was, “you wanted his money,” signaling that was the correct answer.

The sound of a clock tower bell radiated throughout the entire building, similar to one that would be heard during medieval times. A clocktower being in a hotel was most certainly strange, but then again, this was clearly more than just a hotel. This was a place beyond the scope of the human imagination.

Fear and trepidation were on everyone’s faces. Silence ensued once more as everyone nervously awaited what was to come next.

“What now?” asked Caleb.

Dustin nervously ran his fingers through his hair, placing a hand on his head as he paced. “I don’t know, and I don’t want to find out. I mean, it’s like it knows things about Thiago that only he could have known. I never knew Thiago was involved in something this bad. If it knows all of this about Thiago, I’m sure it knows a lot about us also.”

Suddenly, the image on the screen changed as it showed Thiago. Though this time, it was no longer the game. Everything the TV displayed was happening in real time as if viewing through a surveillance camera.

“T-Thiago! We can see you!” shouted Dustin as he ran closer to the television.

The extent of the fear and hopelessness on Thiago's face was truly hard to bear. But at the same time, Connor felt uneasy looking at him as shame briefly took over. *He killed someone.*

“Get me the hell out of here!”

“That room looks so odd; it almost appears endless and warped...” said Caleb as he watched on.

“Don't worry! We're here for you! Just keep following the orders we give you. Thiago, you got this man; you got this!” shouted Malik.

The vibrations began once more, and out of the dark background within the room that Thiago was in appeared a menacing bull-like creature, just as the one they saw in the hallway within the game. The details of the beast in the game were very realistic, but the true terror of it in the flesh was incomparable. Its face appeared to be composed of pure muscle as it stood upon its hooves, as its orange-yellow-like eyes constantly moved about aimlessly, as its colossal head swayed.

“Help me!” shouted Thiago as he stared at the raging beast.

Evil and hate were its aura. One couldn't find an ounce of mercy in its body, even if sought out desperately.

Meanwhile, all Thiago could do was cower in fear, sweat pouring profusely through his pores as his eyes widened, trembling but not making a sound. At no point did he remove his gaze from the menacing beast. Eventually, he summoned the courage to cry out once more, though to no avail.

“Help! Get me out of here! Guys, help me!” His knees gave out as he fell to the floor, scooting back into a corner as he desperately

tried to find an escape. With each attempt to stand, his knees gave out as fear crippled him. His shirt sloped to the side of his shoulders, his hair in disarray. His hands moved about his body in an erratic manner. It was as if he wanted to react toward the beast physically, but his mind simply told him it would be futile.

The bull-like creature's head moved about faster and faster, its teeth gritting and gnashing. Veins along its jaw showed through as it continued to gnash, its sheer power being manifested through its internal indignation.

*Th-this can't be happening,* thought Connor as he looked on.

The movement of its eyes became at least two times faster than before, scanning the room aimlessly, yet at the same time, knowing it had a target before it to exercise its wrath upon. Abruptly at full speed, it charged at Thiago, impaling him with one of its massive horns. The wall was counted as dust as part of it crumbled under the power of its charge, leaving a plume of ash and dust descending. As it ravaged him, it continued to twist and turn its massive head with vexation as if trying to drive him through the wall. With each passing second, it clenched its massive hands tighter as it continued to destroy him with every inch of its being. Whatever this thing was, it was built for destruction, and anything in its way was fair game. The rest of the group wished they could look away, but their eyes were glued to the screen in sick curiosity and petrifying fear.

“Thiago! Thiago!” shouted Malik as he ran to the door, attempting to open it. Despite his efforts, it would not budge. Even if he did manage to get the door open, it was already too late; and there was certainly nothing he could have done against the raging beast.

Even if they all managed to team up against it, it would have surely made easy work of them all.

The beast attacked Thiago with its massive horns until his lifeless body hung limply atop them, torn to shreds as his eyes closed for what seemed to be the last time. The beast stepped back from the wall as it dislodged its massive horn; dust and debris followed. Every part of the creature stopped moving but its eyes, which continued to move about rapidly and aimlessly. The beast's massive hand reached over its head as it pulled Thiago's body from its horn. Holding Thiago's lifeless vessel, it looked at it inquisitively for a few moments before holding a finger to his chest. To all of their surprise, as it did so, Thiago's body was reanimated once more.

"Help meee! Help!" These were the first words he uttered as he let out a blood-curdling scream. The kind of scream to permeate bone and marrow, reaching the very soul of any who is unfortunate to hear it. Despite his cries, there was nothing anyone could do.

The beast threw Thiago over its shoulder and walked slowly into the dark void. Thiago could be seen reaching his arms out for help, but it was too late. His screams slowly faded until they were no longer heard.

## CHAPTER 4

**A**s the others remained, they tried to make sense of that which seemed incomprehensible.

The door continued to rattle as Malik tried to get it open. “Thiago! Thiago!”

Caleb clutched his dusty blonde hair. “Malik, Malik... Thiago, he’s gone. There is nothing we can do anymore. I know you want to save him, but there is nothing any of us can do now. W-what can we possibly do? That thing we just witnessed, it was a monster, a literal monster. This has to be a nightmare. Monsters don’t exist, monsters don’t exist,” said Caleb as he rocked back and forth; the moment testing his sanity. Only time would tell if he would falter or keep composed amid the inconceivable.

Dustin anxiously bit his lip, his legs slightly bouncing up and down. “What’s next? Who’s next? We can’t just sit here and wait for that to happen again. We have to try and do something.” His Adam’s apple descended as he swallowed deeply. *How did it know everything about Thiago?*

“Well, what’re we going to do! Just sit here and wait for us to be next? Sitting ducks that is basically what we are right now,” said Malik.

“No way Ethan is alive with that thing out there. I am sorry if I come off a bit too direct, but we have to deal with reality, and the reality here is that we are dealing with something out of our realm of understanding. After seeing that, who knows what else is walking this building,” said Dustin as he paced nervously, running his hand through his hair. “First Ethan, now Thiago...What are we going to do?”

“I don’t care what happens. I’m not leaving this room, no matter what. If my character comes up on the screen, or should I say, ‘if I come upon it,’ I am staying right here until the timer runs out. If I sit the time out, nothing will happen, right? I don’t know about you guys, but I know what I’m going to do,” said Caleb before stretching his legs as he clasped his hands behind his head. “I know exactly what I’m going to do.”

The game returned to the title screen where it displayed the words “Deciding Hour.” It seemed the game would not continue, at least for the time being.

Connor noticed Dustin seemed to be the most distraught and in deep thought at that moment. With his hand cupping his mouth, Dustin paced back and forth. Connor knew a big part of it had to do with being in this place, but something else was getting to Dustin; he just knew it.

A lump formed in Dustin’s throat as he blinked rapidly. “B-but, how does it know so much about us? And why is it doing this? What does it gain from revealing our deepest secrets? Do you think it will try to do this with all of us?”

“Man, look, I don’t care if it tells me to go out there just so it can tell me what I ate for dinner last night. I am not leaving this room,” continued Caleb.

Malik crouched down, shaking his head as he wept. “This can’t be real. This has to be a dream. Thiago... he’s gone. Someone wake me up already, please.” Thiago was Malik’s first friend; they were inarguably the closest of the group. The group’s heart went out to him.

Leaning against the wall, Dustin’s head went side to side. “We can’t leave, no food, no water. When will all of this end? How does returning home from a trip lead to a horror hotel? If this is a nightmare, I just want it to end. W-what the hell was that on the screen though? What if each of us goes through different experiences as we are out there? This can’t be real.” Dustin was spiraling.

The time on Connor’s watch read 6:21 am, which once again came as unusual. Connor knew that his watch worked fine. It was as if in this place, time operated differently. Connor was once more drawn to his cross necklace, which he then clutched. Even though he did not know many scriptures, he prayed to the best of his ability. The event caused him to ruminate on his past, though he could not think of anything to justify him being in such a place. Still, the moment forced him to recollect his most recent doings.

One lighthearted recollection that came to mind was when his mom sent him to the grocery store to pick up a few items to make for dinner. Though lighthearted, he saw some of the seriousness within it.

Connor breathed deeply. *At least the humor in this recollection may ease some of this nightmare.*

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Connor sat in his room as he played the latest Call of Service.

“Connor! Can you go and pick up some ingredients from the store? I am making some lasagna and garlic bread tonight!” his mom shouted from the base of the stairs.

That was enough to send him out of his room with great urgency. “Guys, I will be right back; my mom wants me to get something from the store really quick,” he said before placing his gaming headset on the bed. Lasagna was one of if not his favorite meal. The walk to the supermarket was not that long of a trip—about seventeen minutes on foot and five minutes by bus. He did not have a car at the time to drive there, and he wanted to build up more of an appetite, so he decided on walking.

Once arriving at Path Foods, he decided to stroll around to see if the new and latest snacks were out. Instead of the plain ole regular Froot Hoops, he hoped he would possibly see the Froot Hoops with the dinosaur-shaped Marshmallows. Then there were the Oreo cookies, which were another one of his favorites. One month, the regular double stuffed could be there, and the next, mango crème filling. Such findings were always a surprise and adventure for him.

Grabbing hold of the special edition Oreos, he kissed the package. “Thank you! Been waiting for ages for these to come around again.” After laying his hands upon a few other snacks, he decided to finally shop for what he came for. His next stop was the pasta aisle since it was not too far off from the snack aisles.

Once in the aisle, it was a pretty fast grab and go since the pasta and sauce were in the same aisle. Since there was nothing else to grab



his attention, he progressed quickly. He did make sure to grab a few cans of lasagna ravioli; they always helped out when he needed a quick lunch. Now that he had the lasagna shells and sauce in his possession, he made his way to the meat section to grab a pack of ground beef. He made it his duty to carefully inspect the pack due to previously bringing home gray-colored ground beef, which emitted a frightening odor upon opening.

Things did not go well between him and his mom after bringing home the strange colored meat, and unfortunately for him, he had to make a second trip back to the store. To avoid his mother's scorn and an unnecessary trip back to the store this time around, he made sure to inspect the package carefully. Turning it carefully in every direction, ensuring the pack was free of any gut-churning gray matter. He gave a triumphant head nod as the meat passed his standards. After passing the food inspection, he was ready to pick up the final ingredients. With the ricotta, mozzarella, and garlic bread in hand, he was finally ready to check out.

At the end of his shopping trip, it felt as if he had spent more time than necessary at the supermarket, so he was ready to head home. The line wasn't too long, maybe about three people ahead. Out of the three people ahead, two of them had full carts, so he knew it would be a couple of minutes before it was his turn. He gathered all his patience and weathered it out. Everything was moving smoothly until the woman at the register, who already had a massively large cart, decided to do a bit more shopping.

“Is it ok if I grab the paper towels on sale? I promise it would be really fast.”

All the while, Connor stared at the cashier, trying to communicate telepathically. *You better not. YOU.BETTER.NOT.* Unfortunately, she did.

“Sure, but make it really fast, can’t hold up the line too long.”

There was not much he could do but accept it. The customer at least kept her word, returning no later than a minute. As he waited, the elderly man before him entertained him for the time being.

“I forgot to buy that stupid dog, dog food again,” grumbled the elderly man.

Connor slowly blinked as he shook his head. *So now, what is that poor dog going to eat for dinner tonight?*

Looking into the man’s cart, he could see two packs of chicken. He stretched his neck out to get a better look. *I hope he at least gives the poor dog the bones after he is done eating them.*

It would not be long before it was the elderly man’s turn to bring his things to the cash register. The elderly man began to bend down for what seemed an eternity to pick up a card that fell out of his wallet.

Connor debated about helping him. “Sorry fella,” he said as he carefully skipped ahead of him. It seems the man did not realize he was skipped, and it seemed the cashier did not either, so he went through with it. *Besides, I only got about four items in my basket.*

As the lady rang up the items, he took a moment to look to the left and saw that the man was still having a bit of difficulty picking up his card. He was ready to help then assist the man, but another customer beat him to it. It was then that he began to feel a bit of regret.

His recollection of that day was not a justification for him being in such a horrible place now. It only caused him to reflect on things that he considered to be trivial; but in actuality, had lasting impacts.

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Connor was startled from his thoughts as Malik punched the wall, creating a loud thud. Malik still reeling from Thiago's death, seemed as if he might never pull himself together. "Damn! Not Thiago man, not Thiago."

Drenched in sweat, Caleb's shoulders slowly raised up and down. "What's next? Who's next? I can't do this man. Where the hell are we? What about our families? Friends? Is anyone else going through this? I can't see myself wishing this on anyone. That creature is something I've only seen in movies and nightmares; but they don't even come close to what I am experiencing now.

Lost for answers, all they could do was sit in complete silence, waiting in anticipation of the events to come. The realization that Ethan and Thiago were no longer with them, on top of what they were experiencing, truly tested their willpower.

"Oh man, look!" said Dustin, pointing at the screen.

The game activated once more, and four players remained on the screen. The character that used to be of Thiago only displayed a black figure, signifying his departure.

"This is way too scary man. What is it doing now? What is the point of all this? Why us?" asked Dustin.

The game displayed the controller symbol once more, and to everyone's surprise, Caleb stood along with it.

The bed creaked as Caleb jumped out of it where he began pacing about. “No way! No way! I’m not going out there; no way! I already said what I was going to do, and I am sticking with it.”

“But what if something bad happens if you don’t go out there?” asked Malik.

“What if something bad happens if I *go* out there? Didn’t Thiago go out there? I’ll take my chances. All that will happen is that the timer will run out and hopefully throw this stupid game off course. If my name comes up again, I will wait out the time again, and again, and again. You guys can fall for this sick and twisted ‘game’ and go out there if you want, but I will not.” Caleb plopped onto the bed as he remained confident, yet at the same time, petrified. “I am staying right here.”

The game had yet to display the timer that would have signaled Caleb to leave the room. This was, of course, a relief to everyone, but none were more relieved than Caleb. At the same time, they all felt that comfort might soon come to an end.

“Hey man, it’s up to you, and at this point, anything is worth a try. I honestly don’t know what I’ll do yet when it is my turn,” said Malik.

They were able to remain in deep silence for a while longer before the timer finally appeared. Everyone sat in deep thought during those moments, each seeming to be in their own little world. Pinching the center of his brow, Connor kneeled on the ground in an attempt to calm himself. *I just hope this is all a nightmare, a bad dream, a prank. Yeah, a bad dream this is... this reminds me of the incident that took place with Thiago way back...except then, he made it out alive.*

## The Deciding Hour

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One Halloween three years ago, Connor, Thiago, Dustin, Caleb, Malik, and Sofia decided to visit a ghost house within an amusement park. Ethan decided to sit out, as he was not a fan of Halloween. Connor remembered it like it was yesterday. Their entrance into the ghost house began with what was “supposed” to be a scary guy, telling them what to expect once inside, and to be honest, it was not in the least bit scary and, instead, rather corny. The six of them fought to suppress their laughter, exchanging looks of boredom as the guy continued talking.

Connor’s eyes scanned the entrance. *Since we are already here, may as well go through with it.*

“Gentlemen, prepare for a thrilling adventure! And most of all, make sure the ghouls don’t get ya,” said the man as he expected a reaction, but instead, all he received were awkward stares in complete silence. A few moments passed.

“Booo! And I don’t mean ghost boo; I mean boo, as in that was corny. *Boo* as in find a new career, *boo* as in go home,” said Thiago from the back of the pack as he heckled.

Caleb nudged Thiago in the ribs. “Come on, that was not nice,” he whispered.

“Yeah, Thiago. Let’s just have fun,” Sofia chimed in.

Malik, Dustin, and Thiago chuckled as they attempted to contain their laughter.

“Ouch, what was that for?” Asked Dustin as he felt a prod in his side.

“Dustin, don’t be so mean,” Sofia whispered.

Feeling second-hand embarrassment, Connor rubbed his eyebrow, a reflexive reaction in response to not wanting to appear impolite. *I have to admit, this guy’s attempt at being scary is atrocious, but Thiago didn’t have to embarrass him in such a way.*

“I knew I should have stuck with my day job,” the man somberly said under his breath as he opened the door. The man began to blink rapidly as his breathing increased as if contemplating his next move. Swallowing deeply, and with a few glances of his eyes, the guy scratched at the air like an animal—a futile attempt to seem scary once more. “Raar...The ghost house will show thee who is in charrge! Raar!” he said as the door closed behind them. His antics would only escalate the behavior of the others.

Once the door shut, the man planted his ear against it as if anticipating a reaction. *I bet that one scared them!*

“Bwahaha!” was all he could hear from the other side as they laughed at him.

Caleb held his stomach as he fell to the floor. “I can’t! I can’t! HAHAHA!” His face became bloodshot from the continuous laughter.

“Hahaha, you can’t make this up, HAHA!” shouted Malik as he slapped and pounded the door.

“That’s it, I am not going by this stupid script again!” the embarrassed man shouted from behind the door to himself, which made the moment even more hilarious as the group could hear him rage.

Caleb turned around to Thiago. “On second thought, I think it was right you told him that earlier.” Tears continued to tread down his cheek. “Please stop, I need to catch my breath.”

“Guys, be nice,” Sofia prompted.

Malik wiped tears from his face. “We came for a haunted house and instead got a comedy show. You couldn’t make this up, man; this is too hilarious.”

Once inside, they were met with the pretty typical ghost house experience. Mummies reaching out to grab you, vampires with glowing eyes and old witches screaming as they laughed. However, all of the haunted houses were made of props. Besides the guy who let them in, there were no actors in makeup jumping out at them, just people behind the scenes occasionally flicking lights on and off or pulling the rope on a fake vampire. The experience of the ghost house was so lackluster that they resorted to making entertainment for themselves.

“Hey, Caleb is so ugly that I am sure when we exit this place, he will have a check signed, ready, and hand-delivered to him. They are gonna hire you on the spot! Think how much money they’ll save on makeup,” said Thiago as he held the side of his fist to his mouth as he cackled.

Malik and Dustin snorted with laughter, barely containing themselves.

“Yeah, I guess spending so much time with your mom has really rubbed off on me,” Caleb replied.

Laughing, Thiago bent over as he palmed his stomach. “Hey man, it’s a compliment! At least you’d be a better door guy than the one back there!”

“Guys, guys, I know this is a sad joke of a haunted house, but let’s at least experience it the way it is supposed to be,” said Connor as he tried to find value in it. The childish back-and-forth jokes only lessened the already sad experience of a ghost house. Plus, he felt bad for the workers who may possibly hear them talking about it, who may take pride in their work.

Sofia nodded her head, agreeing with her brother’s sentiments. The others continued to chuckle but made an attempt to settle down out of respect for those who wanted to enjoy it. Dustin wrapped his arms around Sofia’s waist and held her close as they continued through the haunted house.

Suddenly with great urgency, Thiago reached out and gripped his shoulder. “Ahhh! Ahhh! What the hell! Ahhh!”

“Ok Thiago, we get it. This is the worse haunted house ever created, and you’re bored. So now you’re yelling for no reason. Your yelling is a bit much. Sounds like you’re being murdered,” said Dustin.

“No, I’m serious! Something stabbed me! Ahhh!” responded Thiago as he writhed in pain. He spun himself around, hand still on his shoulder as he tried to get a look at the spot that throbbed in pain.

Thiago was such a jokester that unfortunately, it took a few more shouts for them to actually stop and see that he was not crying wolf. Reaching his hand out from over his right shoulder, they could see his hand covered in blood.



Sofia fainted upon seeing the blood; but luckily Dustin's arms were still around her waist, where he was able to quickly catch her. The next few minutes were full of commotion.

"Ahhh! Ahh!" Thiago continued to scream in pain.

"Thiago, are you oka—" Connor's concern for Thiago was interrupted when he saw his sister unconscious. "Sofia! Dustin, what happened?"

"It's okay Connor. She just fainted. I'll take care of her. You help Thiago," Dustin instructed.

It was a bit dark, but they could see he was hurt rather badly. Having no idea what happened, all they could do was try to provide some words of comfort as they were panicking themselves. The biggest confusion was rather, how did it happen?

"Crap man. You were stabbed! You were stabbed!" Caleb screamed.

While Malik and Caleb tended to Thiago's pain and Dustin tended to Sofia, Connor decided to walk a little to see who or what may have stabbed him. As he continued his search, he suddenly noticed strange movements that did not appear mechanical like the other props. The movements seemed intelligent and realistic. Then, suddenly, from the shadows, came a figure storming towards Connor with a large knife in hand. The strange man screamed.

Connor put his hands up in a defensive posture. *We are in a ghost house; this has to be an act.* Realizing what just happened to Thiago, his thoughts quickly changed. *Or is this guy really about to stab me?*

“Grab him!” shouted Dustin who was now fanning Sofia with his hat as she regained consciousness. All he could do was look on in fear, wishing he could help.

Charging full speed ahead, the man who appeared to be in regular clothes swung the knife. Connor managed to dodge it, grabbing his arm and bringing down the crazed man in a tussle. Hearing the chaos, Malik ran to help while Caleb stayed and tended to Thiago.

As they held the man down, they could not help but think about the man they made fun of upfront.

Connor continued to hold the man down by his biceps. *Is this the guy from earlier possibly getting revenge on us for laughing at him? I hope he did not take what happened earlier to heart. We never meant to hurt him to the point where he would lash out like this.* He tried to get a good look at his face, but due to the darkness and his erratic movements, it was hard to do so.

“Help! Help!” shouted Connor as he continued to hold him down.

Luckily, a group of teenage girls who entered the ghost house were now making their way in their direction. Their dramatic reactions to the haunted house props could be heard throughout the building. Soon enough, they finally arrived at their location.

“Please! Please! Go get help!” shouted Caleb as the girls approached.

One of the girls placed a hand over their mouth as they looked on. “Like, oh my gosh, I never saw something like this in a haunted

house before. They are such good actors. I really would like to know where they attended acting school, like, really. Like, right now.”

“Like, oh my gosh, me neither. Is this a scene from *I Know What You Did at the end of Last Summer*? It like, looks so much like it, like oh my gosh, they totally nailed it. Like, totally nailed it,” said another.

“You dumb blondes! This is not a joke, we need help!” shouted Connor.

“The props understand us! Technology really has come far, my gosh. I knew a friend who always told me artificial intelligence would turn on us one day. But like, oh my gosh, I never knew they would become so rude.”

“No, Rachel, they're real people. But gees, they could have asked more nicely like, oh my gosh. Why scream at us? Like, so rude,” one of them said before they all ran out screaming in unison.

The group stared after them, dumbfounded, hoping beyond hope that their vapid minds remembered actually to go get help.

Even though Thiago was hurt, even he had to stop and blink at their sheer stupidity. It was not long before the lights were turned on and help arrived. One of the people to arrive with the cops was the guy they laughed at earlier.

Connor closed his eyes as he blew through his lips. *I am just glad it was not him. Thank goodness.*

Once the lights were on, they were able to see just how crazed the guy was. He thrashed about with widened eyes as his hair and face appeared ungroomed. He was eventually escorted away by the police. They later found out he was a homeless veteran whose PTSD was

triggered by the haunted house's effects. He was given treatment and set up in a housing facility for veterans. Since then, extra precautions have been taken to ensure the safety of future visitors.

Thiago was escorted to the local hospital, and of course, they all went with him. Luckily for Thiago, the large knife only slit his back. They were just happy that things turned out the way they did, knowing the situation could have ended much worse.

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Though Connor could end his reflection on a happy note, it did little to quell the realization that Thiago was now gone.

After sitting in deep thought for what felt like an eternity, the timer appeared once more within the game. Dustin pointed to the screen as fear covered his face. "Oh damn, Caleb. Look, there it is."

With his arms crossed, Caleb shrugged his shoulders. "So what? Like I said earlier, I'm going nowhere."

Deep down inside, Connor wanted to convince him to go out, thinking it was the wrong decision to stay, but then again, no one had tried this yet. So maybe, it would work.

A sigh escaped Malik as he leaned against the wall. "I don't know man. As for me, I'm going to just go out there and answer the questions in all honesty. I mean, what can it ask that can be so bad? At least for me, that is. If you keep playing the game then hopefully, it'll release us. It asks questions and you answer them, simple. I'm just speaking for myself. You can sit and wait it out if you want Caleb. Besides, you're here in the room with all of us, and it seems pretty safe."

Everyone sat frightened, watching the time dwindle, slowly getting down to one minute.

The muscles in Dustin's throat flexed as he swallowed nervously. "Caleb, are you sure about this?"

"Like I said, I am going nowhere."

The timer neared its final seconds. Three, two, one. Everybody sat tensed not blinking as they looked at the screen.

Caleb sat trembling; his eyes fixated intently on the TV as he gave a nervous smile. "S-s-see... I told you guys nothing would happen," his hands patted his body as if to make sure he was still in one piece as he laughed nervously. "From what I see, I'm still fine."

"I guess you were right, but what next? It just went back to the title screen. Hey yo Connor, you've been quiet for a while. What do you think?" asked Malik.

Connor was surprised that he was asked for his thoughts on the situation. The unusualness of the situation made it difficult for him to find an answer.

"I assume we just wait it out and see what happens. No point in guessing in a place like this. I just hope something good comes out of it. That is all we can do at this point," he responded. "Just hope."

As they waited and waited, the character representing Caleb turned black, as with what happened with Thiago. From what the group understood with Thiago, once that happened, that meant the person was gone for good. They were hoping that the game did as Caleb thought it would do and forgot about him altogether.

“Oh man Caleb look. Your character is blacked out just like Thiago’s,” said Dustin as he aimed his finger toward the television.

“Well, I’m still here, aren’t I? All it probably did was skip me entirely. What I did was outsmart the game, that’s all. I guess all my years of playing video games paid off after all. Not every game is meant to be played fair, and this piece of crap place is certainly not fair in the slightest. It’s just...evil.”

“I guess you’re right. Malik, what will you do if you’re next? Will you wait it out as well?” asked Dustin.

“I don’t know to be honest. I don’t know what to do at this point. I just want to go back home to my family. I could use them right about now. I know from time to time I may take them for granted, but in situations like this, you learn just how valuable family is. At least I have you guys. Really, it makes you appreciate everything,” said Malik as he pointed toward Connor’s chest. “That there,” he said as he continued to point.

Connor looked down puzzled, trying to see what he may have been talking about.

“Your pendant. Since Sofia went missing, there has not been a day where I have not seen you without it. In times such as these, it’s a good sight to behold. You did not let her absence separate the two of you; you always keep the memories of her near you.”

Connor wiped his eyes with the back of his finger. “Thanks Malik. I appreciate it. I just know Sofia would not have run off. What reason would she have to? She had a loving family. She had a loving boyfriend,” Connor put his hand on Dustin’s tense shoulder. “Sometimes I have to convince myself that she has run off, just to

avoid the other possibilities. I just have hope that one day, she will return home. Even if I never make it out of this place, I just hope she will remain safe and sound.”

Next to him, Dustin bit his lip, holding his head back to fight the tears. *What is this place? Why is it doing this? Why? I have never had a nightmare this long and this real. Please wake up Dustin, please. I can't take this anymore.*

Malik's words shook Connor to his core as he received the spiritual boost he needed at the perfect moment.

“Thanks for the words of encouragement Malik. It's very hard to get over, especially since it has not been long since it happened. If I never make it out of this place, I still have faith Sofia is out there, and my parents will get answers. I know it.”

Turning his head, Connor looked toward Dustin to see if he needed comfort since he was his sister's boyfriend. It seemed that they were really in love. They had to be. For a young twenty-two-year-old guy like Dustin to become engaged so young, it just showed how much he really loved Sofia. Connor was definitely not on board when they first got together, but then he realized, who better than his best friend to take care of his sister for the rest of her life? Dustin's eyes remained closed as he tilted his head, tears slowly trailing down his face as he pressed his lips.

A sigh escaped Caleb's abdomen as he sat up from the bed. “Yeah, me too; I really wish I was with my family. It's just so crazy to think we may never see them again. I mean, we still might, but Thiago... he won't. I could never in a million years imagine something like this happening. If we were to escape, how would we

even be able to explain what happened to his parents without appearing insane?”

They were lost for words regarding the question. It was hard to imagine that anyone would believe their story if they escaped. People would probably think it was just a case of a bunch of young guys tripping out on the latest drug. But they couldn't worry about that; they just wanted to find a way out.

Suddenly, the air in the room began to feel heavy. Immense fear and agitation took over, and worse of all, they had no idea what could have been the cause behind it. They looked around at each other to see if they were the only ones, and to their surprise, it looked as if everyone else was experiencing the same thing.

“Guys, do you all feel very uneasy? I can't describe the feeling, and it just came out of nowhere,” asked Connor as he sat profoundly.

Malik's jaw dropped as he looked at Connor in shock. “Yo, I was just about to say something. I have no idea why, and even now, it feels like it's increasing. It's like, I'm getting goosebumps for some reason. Caleb, how about you?”

“Yeah man, I definitely am feeling it.”

Have you ever felt like someone was standing next to or behind you? But you knew no one was actually there? It was like that, but times one million. It was the feeling that made you paranoid all over, causing you to constantly look over your shoulder.

“Same here,” added Dustin.

They all stared at each other, unsure of what to do next.



As the presence continued to overtake the room, suddenly, they all began to hear footsteps, slow and getting closer. Not just any footsteps. With every step came the sound of clanking, as if whatever it was that was in the hallway had talons of some sort.

Immediately, Malik ran to the furthest corner of the room and covered his mouth. “You guys hear that? What the hell is that? Yo man, this is creepy. First, we feel all weird, and now this?”

The others were paralyzed with fear as they continued to listen to the footsteps outside.

“What if it is that bull creature that got Thiago, coming back to finish us all off?” Caleb suggested.

“No, that can’t be it. Why have us play this sick game if it is just going to kill all of us now?” Asked Connor.

Out of nowhere, the game displayed the word “Paused.” Dustin could not move anything within the game at that point. Seeing this, he gestured at the others to look at the screen.

Returning his petrified gaze to the door, Malik tried to wedge himself further into the corner of the room, but there was nowhere to go.

Dustin ran to the window, shimmying it in an attempt to open it. He knew it was unlikely to open, but his panic begged him to try. “Useless!” he screamed.

“Bro! Why are you going to the window? Do you not see how it is out there? We have nowhere to go,” said Caleb.

As the steps got closer and closer, Connor’s heart rate increased. As noted earlier, Connor was not very spiritual, but his parents did

raise him as a Christian. He remembered the times when his mom would read a couple of scriptures with him. He also could not forget the moments he and Ethan had in Bible study. At the time, he did not care much for it. It was at that moment, that he wished he had taken it more seriously. Whatever these monsters were, he knew he needed something beyond the human scope to deal with them mentally.

He tried to piece together bits of scriptures that came to his mind. He was unsure what the names of the books were, that he was mentally quoting, but some words did clearly come back to him, and they were:

*“He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death and broke away their chains.”*

He had no idea if the words were from the scriptures or just words that came to mind; but he settled on that as being good enough. Then, his attention was brought back to the approaching sound.

Caleb scooted to the edge of the bed, fearfully staring at the door as well. Malik was still cowering in the corner, mumbling something about Thiago and Ethan and wanting to see his family.

This fear continued until the footsteps seemed only to be a few feet away. Whatever it was that was outside, they suspected it could move faster but was purposely taking its time only to torture them psychologically.

As Connor looked to his left once more, he noticed that Caleb and Malik were drenched in sweat. He was sure he was too. They just wanted to be back where they should have been— home. Connor didn’t think it was possible to live with such fear for so long. Every

part of his inner being was full of fear, and no matter how hard he tried to contain it, it proved impossible.

Dustin, who had given up on finding an escape suddenly snapped to attention. “We need weapons.”

Connor, Caleb, and Malik looked over at him confused, especially after seeing what Thiago faced.

“We aren’t going down without a fight. Whatever that is out there, it sounds like one thing. We are four. We have a chance. Let’s find something we can use as a weapon and fight.”

Connor, Caleb, and Malik continued to stare unconvinced.

“Connor, you still have your parents to get home to. And Sofia to find... Malik, you are telling me the toughest guy in our group besides Thiago is going to miss his opportunity at revenge for what this place did to Thiago? Caleb, where is that fire that you had when you chose not to play the game on your turn? Come on, guys! We can’t go down without a fight, not if it means getting back home to our families.”

Dustin’s speech lit a spark, albeit a small spark, in all of them. It was worth a shot. All at once, they began tearing the room apart, looking for sharp objects to stab with or blunt objects to swing with. Occasionally, they would look toward the door, feeling the unknown creature’s presence drawing closer.

Malik chose the bedside table’s lamp as a hopeful weapon. Caleb hoped to use the hotel room’s phone cord as some type of choking mechanism. Dustin picked up a chair that was sitting in the corner, holding it in front of him as if he was a lion tamer. And

Connor, well Connor picked up the Bible that was on the side table, fully realizing the irony of the whole situation.

Once they were “armed,” they took various positions around the room. Malik went back to his corner. Dustin and Caleb each stood by one of the two beds, and Connor stood by the gaming console, hoping if they did survive, the console would at least be broken in the commotion as he had the sense that simply trying to break it with his hands wouldn’t work in whatever this world was.

The footsteps finally stopped precisely near the door. To make matters even worse, Connor was the closest to the door. He was terrified to the point where he could not get up to move further away, even if he wanted to. All eight of their eyes remained fixed on the door, their skin as pale as wax. For Malik’s skin to go from dark brown to near gray truly indicated the fear they were experiencing. It came to a point where the only way they could communicate was with their eyes, for the fear they felt prevented anything else.

Suddenly in one accord, all summoned the willpower to run back to their initial positions.

They were able to look toward the direction of the door but could not see the door itself due to their seated position. If anything was to come in, it would have to walk a few feet before it would be in view, which would do nothing at all to make the experience less terrifying than it already was.

The dreadful suspense continued as they wondered what exactly was outside. They stared and stared until they heard the lock slowly unlatching. Connor tried to imagine ridiculous things to ease the fear, like running among colorful unicorns, skipping along a candy road

with Care Bears, and singing the most childish song. Soon enough, with the lock still turning, his positive thoughts were devoured as if they were never there.

Malik and Caleb's chests heaved violently as hyperventilation set in. Dustin's mouth remained dropped. Connor was sure he was able to see his shirt move slightly as his heart thumped. That only gave a small idea of just how truly afraid they were.

Another click reverberated through the room, and then the door began opening slowly, creaking loudly as whatever was behind it pushed it. Silence ensued once more. The group had a deep feeling that whatever it was that was entering the room, it was intelligent and knew it was psychologically getting to them by proceeding in such a methodical manner.

The sound of talons scratching against the floor intensified, but this time, it was right inside their room. Slowly, the unknown presence walked in, though they could not see it yet because they did not have a complete view of the entryway. As a result, all they could do was sit and guess at the horror, waiting for it to show itself. The weirdest and most inhuman figures began to pop up in their mind as they tried to conceptualize what may soon come around the corner in an attempt to prepare themselves at least.

The methodical pacing continued, and it seemed like forever before they got their first glimpse of it. They did not see its actual body yet, only the shadow it cast upon the wall. Not too many details could be discerned through its shadow, but they could tell immediately that it had significant height.

*Why? Why!..Mom, Dad, someone, help me!* Thought Dustin as his body shook violently.

Finally, its leg came into view, scaly in texture and greenish-gray in color. All they could think was “*oh crap,*” as it slowly continued to walk in. All thoughts of fighting back had fled their minds as the intimidating figure continued its way into the room.

Slowly, inch by inch, it continued its walk in. Its countenance was void of emotion, yet fear emanated from its presence to attached itself to everyone in the room. It maintained its disposition, never once looking to its right or to its left.

What stood before them was the embodiment of horror— a ten-foot being with scales all over, like a gargoyle statue but without wings, and bearing the characteristics of a human’s face. From its head protruded four horns, and its smile was full of jagged teeth. In its hand, it held a great, menacing, dark sword.

It continued walking slowly until it stopped in front of Connor. Trembling, he shook in a sweat, his heart thumping out of his chest. He could not discern everyone else’s state at that moment as he was too afraid to move his eyes off the being.

Standing still, the creature placed its sword in front of it, leaning on the handle and crossing one foot over the other. From its menacing face came a sadistic smirk that displayed its dagger-like teeth. Its yellow, snake-like eyes, which glowed, were now fixed on Malik and Caleb, both on the same side of the room, Caleb being closer since he stood in front of the bed. Whether it was staring at them both or only at one of them, Connor could not discern immediately. Even if they could run, no one wanted to run in the hallway by themselves. Just

the thought of it chasing after them as they tried to make a run for it made it impossible to even budge. Their “weapons” shook uselessly in their quivering hands. It was altogether a lose-lose situation.

Connor summoned the strength to turn his head slightly towards Caleb and Malik, and that is when he realized the creature was focused on Caleb.

Not blinking once and continuing to smile for minutes on end, they had to simply endure its presence. Whatever this was, it was a master of terror. From its walk to the room to its behavior once it entered, they were able to witness the true sadistic nature of it. This was something that had an eternity to master its terror, to strike fear into anyone or anything, just from its presence alone.

Connor’s heart rate sustained what felt like two hundred beats per minute. *When will this end?* Was all he could think. Ten minutes of it just standing there turned to twelve minutes, then twenty. You would think that at some point, they would have at least gotten slightly used to its dreadful presence. Not at all. Rather, their fear only intensified.

As they continued to stare fearfully, suddenly, the sound of claws could be heard in the hallway. This time, it was not moving slowly but fast. The sounds came closer and closer until dreadful continuous growling could be heard. Three four-legged horrible-looking beasts ran into the room. They were a deep crimson red, and their bodies were composed of what seemed pure muscle. So savage was their charge into the room that one ran into the edge of the bed, completely shattering it. Caleb tried to slide off the bed before the impact, but before he could even land on the floor, one of them

clamped its massive jaws around his face. Another one was not far behind as it charged into the room, wrapping its massive jaws upon his leg. The sound of bones cracking and the phone clattering to the floor was immediately heard; the other beast grabbed Caleb by the legs where they then dragged him off into the hallway. To see him suffer such a fate right before their very eyes was very difficult to behold; he did not even have a chance to scream for help. The raging beasts ran off into the hallway with Caleb's body until they could no longer be heard.

The terrifying being did not stay long after. Its smile gradually faded away into a menacing scowl before lifting its sword, turning to leave the room and never once making eye contact with Connor, Dustin, or Malik, not acknowledging them in any sense. It came there with one mission, and that was to retrieve Caleb. Connor wondered had Caleb decided to go along with the game, would he have survived? But there was no point in dwelling on such a thought. It was too late and there was no bringing him back.

Connor continued to sit in complete silence as it left, listening to the door close and lock behind it. He wanted to immediately get up and see if it actually left, even though he was sure that it was gone. Though there was still that part of him that said it was hiding around the corner, just waiting for him to come take a look to scare him senseless.

Malik had slid down to his knees, eyes wide in astonishment.

As Dustin sobbed uncontrollably, Connor could hear him mumble something about "who is next?" and "No way around it."



Eventually, Connor was able to function once more. He turned around to survey the area only to see a few spots of blood where Caleb had laid. Slowly the bloodstains began to disappear as if into thin air until there was nothing left. The sound of a clock tower bell was heard once more, and Connor was again drawn to the time. His watch read 6:42 am. Looking down, he held his cross necklace tightly.

The game remained paused, and Connor utilized the time to reflect further. The event caused Connor to think of an event that occurred many years ago when Connor and Caleb were just little kids. Caleb and Connor were only about thirteen years old when the event took place.

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One day, they decided to go to the beach and enjoy a hot summer day, play a little football, and throw a frisbee. Everything was going perfectly— nice weather, lots of sun and great food. After playing frisbee for a bit, they decided to grab a bite. Unfortunately for Connor, he had forgotten to get money from his mom.

*Now what? I am really hungry, but since I don't have any money on me, I won't be able to get anything to eat,* thought Connor. With a look of defeat, he turned away from the food menu. *I really wanted that double cheeseburger.*

“What’s the matter Connor?” Caleb asked as he took notice of the change in his countenance.

“I forgot my money,” Connor answered.

There was a brief silence as Caleb looked on.

“It’s ok Connor; I can share mine with you. I was buying the large double cheeseburger and large fries,” he said.

Connor’s eyes beamed as a smile formed on his face. “Really? Oh, thanks, Caleb.”

With soaking hair and their beach towels around their backs, Caleb and Connor waited a few minutes in line.

“Order number 97,” the cashier called out.

Caleb walked to the register with his ticket in hand and retrieved the food. The two stood as they looked for an available table amid the crowded restaurant. Luckily for them, there was one table left.

The two dragged their beach slippers as they ran to the table.

“How are we going to do this?” Connor asked as he stared at the food, his mouth watering in anticipation of taking his first bite.

“Just take half of the burger and half of the fries,” Caleb said as he ran his hands through his dusty blonde hair, removing the last remaining bits of sand.

The fact that he let Connor divide the food showed just how much of a friend he was. Connor gripped the sandwich with two hands as he prepared to divide it. *I hope I gave an equal amount.* The burger was not sloppy and oversaturated in sauce, so luckily, the burger did not break apart in his hands. Connor was able to break the burger in half, but he did a poor job of dividing it equally. Connor instinctively gave Caleb the larger half since he knew he was only eating due to his generosity.

“Connor, you can have the bigger piece. I am not that hungry,” Caleb said.

Connor was very surprised by the gesture. Caleb could have easily taken the larger half, but instead, he chose to give it to Connor.

“You sure Caleb?”

“Yeah, go ahead, take it.”

“Thanks, Caleb.”

Dividing the fries between the two, on the other hand, turned out to be an easier task.

After eating, they did not wait too long to head back out to the sandy beach and enjoy the remainder of the day. Grabbing their football and frisbee, they decided to take a stroll across the hot sand. Along the water they walked down towards the end of the beach, where there were fewer beachgoers.

“Caleb! Is that a jellyfish?” Connor asked as he ran deeper into the water to get away from the jellyfish. Connor never knew how to swim and always made sure never to go in water that was more than knee-deep. Connor’s body propelled forward as a large and sudden rip current dragged him further out into the water.

“Caleb! Caleb! Help!” cried Connor as he reached out.

Caleb was inexperienced himself, only having a little over a month’s training in swimming lessons. Surely not enough time to feel secure swimming out in the middle of the ocean, let alone saving someone from it.

“Help! Help!” Connor continued to cry out. His hands flailed in the air as he struggled to stay afloat. As Connor fought for his life, he could see Caleb standing near the water’s edge as if debating. All of a sudden, Caleb placed his hands over his head and leaped forward.

As Caleb jumped in, Connor could see other people running in his direction.

“No! Don’t go in there!” shouted a bystander as Caleb leaped in.

It was not long before other bodies were jumping into the water to try and save Connor and possibly Caleb.

Caleb’s inexperienced body went up and down as he fought against the powerful ocean water. The water seemed to be getting the best of him, but his determination to save his best friend drove him to fight on.

Connor was fighting a losing battle as his lungs had already taken in much water. His attempts at flailing his arms soon became nothing more than a flick of the hands until his body could fight no more. Connor felt his time on earth had come to an end as he slowly began to descend. That was until he saw through his blurry vision, the face and hands of Caleb.

“C-Connor!” cried Caleb as the water muffled his words.

Caleb tried to use whatever strength possible within his small frame to help bring him and Connor to safety. But it would not be long before he was in the same position as Connor. Despite his own safety, he fought to keep Connor’s head above the water.

“C-c-on—” With water continuing to enter his mouth, Caleb found it very difficult to speak.

The sound of blaring whistles could be heard, and luckily for them both, coast guards were on their way to save them.

At that moment, Connor's eyes were barely opened as he lingered between life and death. Even still, he could feel the tugging and dragging motion as he was being pulled closer to the beach.

"Clear the area!" shouted one of the coast guards as he prepared to do chest pumps. The guard continued to do this until he saw water expelled from Connor's mouth. This was a good sign as this showed his body was reacting to the procedures.

Connor's eyes slowly began to open. As he lay on his back, his chest slowly went up and down as he began to cough. *Caleb, where's Caleb.* Connor slowly turned his head, only to see Caleb laying not too far from him as coast guards performed the same procedure on him. Unfortunately, at that moment, Caleb was having more difficulty recovering from the ordeal.

"N-no, no," said Connor in a mumble as he fought to stand. Soon, he gained a burst of energy.

"Stay down!" shouted one of the coast guards.

Connor ran to the side of his best friend, standing over him only to see that his eyes remained closed.

"Caleb! Caleb!" he cried as his tears mingled with the ocean water upon his face.

"It's ok, stay back and let them help him," said the coast guard as he tried to comfort Connor amid the unfortunate sight.

Unlike Connor who only needed a few chest presses, Caleb had to receive CPR.

"1,2,..." the coast guard counted as he did the CPR.

“Caleb!” Cried Connor as he swung his arm, breaking the soft hold the coast guard had on him.

Conor kicked sand in the air as he rushed to Caleb’s side.

At that moment, the coast guards truly felt that they had lost Caleb. One began to run after Connor but stopped midway, believing Caleb was gone and felt that he should at least be able to see and be by his friend’s side for what possibly was the last time.

With knees planted in the sand, Connor remained by his side. “Caleb! Caleb!” cried Connor as his voice cracked. “Caleb... Caleb...” The tears trickled down his face as they landed on Caleb’s chest.

The coast guard performing CPR felt that Caleb was long gone but still performed the CPR until paramedics could arrive.

Connor placed both his hands on Caleb’s left shoulder, where he called his name once more. “Caleb...” he said solemnly as the sorrow consumed his already weakened body.

Suddenly, water gushed into the air as a geyser as Caleb’s body ejected a massive amount of water; his body jolting amid violent coughing.

“Oh, thank you!” cried a woman who looked on with clasped hands as she gazed into the sky.

“Caleb! Caleb!” cried Connor as he saw his friend moving once more.

Caleb’s belly and chest moved in short bursts as he slowly regained function of his breathing. Gradually he began to open his eyes and the first person he could see was his best friend, Connor.

*Connor, are you ok?* Caleb could not yet speak, still coughing and sputtering. His immediate concern was for his best friend and not for himself.

The sound of blaring sirens radiated down the beach as the ambulance arrived. A stretcher was rushed beside Caleb where he was gently lifted and placed on it.

Connor could do nothing other than look on. As he looked on, he noticed that Caleb though struggling, lift his thumb towards him as he gave a gentle smile.

Connor saw Caleb as a friend, a friend who would put his friends first, before himself.

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Connor awoke from his reflection as he silently mourned. Knowing he was alive because of the help of Caleb hurt him to the core, knowing he was not able to do the same for him. As much as he knew he would miss his best friend, for himself, Malik and Dustin, he knew he had to stay strong. Malik was nowhere to be found, so Connor decided to look for him. After sitting petrified in the same position for what seemed an eternity, getting up took a toll on his legs. Extending his legs, he proceeded to give each one a good shake. He had to gradually warm up his body as his legs had fallen asleep.

As he continued to look for Malik, he walked to the other side of the bed to find him sitting slouched against the wall. His eyes were wide and unmoving as he hyperventilated, appearing to be in a complete state of shock.

“Malik! Malik! Get up! Malik!” Connor shouted. He tried calling out to him a few more times, but there was no response. He decided to slap and shake him a few times gently, and that did the trick. “Malik! Wake up; you alright?”

Gently, he blinked as he raised his eyebrows. “Y-yeah, I’m fine... Caleb. Did you see what happened to him? No way man, did I just see that? What is this place? First Ethan, then Thiago, now Caleb. What does this place want from us?” covering his face with his hand, tears proceeded to trail down. “Why? Why? Why did they have to go out like that? This can’t be real. It just can’t be.”



## CHAPTER 5

A few more minutes passed without anyone speaking after Malik's statement. They all seemed to be in their own world, trying to grasp the reality of the situation that three of their closest friends were now gone.

Dustin finally appeared to have gotten his sobs under control. He looked pensive. Gripping the collar of his shirt tightly as he tugged before turning to Malik and Connor as if having a nervous breakdown. "G-guys." He wiped the sweat from his forehead as he swallowed deeply. "I think I figured this game out. If I am next, I-I am going to go out there; it's clear now, we have no choice. But what this thing wants us to do is give the worse answers possible."

Scrunching his face in confusion, Connor stared at him. "But why? From what I saw, it appeared that Thiago knew of the things they showed him doing. He never denied it happened. He *said* it happened."

Dustin's pupils began to dilate more and more as he clutched his sweat-drenched hair. "Y-y-yeah, I know, but I still don't believe that any of that happened. Maybe Thiago was just responding out of fear...telling the game what it wanted to hear. I-I just don't believe he did those things." Dustin stopped and stared, petrified as if looking for some sort of cosigning from the others.

Malik let out an exasperated sigh. “I don’t know man. Thiago never in the least bit denied any of the things brought before him; he even gave details about what happened.”

“Y-y-yeah, but I am almost one hundred percent positive my theory is the right one.” Dustin sat at the edge of the remaining bed, appearing as if he was trying to convince himself more than the others of his theory.

No sooner did he sit down did the game become active once more, showing the controller with Dustin this time. No matter how much any of them prepared for the inevitability of being chosen to go out next, none of them could truly prepare themselves for what they may have to encounter. This was very evident based on everyone’s facial expressions.

Whimpering and panic ensued. “Oh man, I can’t do this. Guys, please help me. I don’t want to go out there,” cried Dustin.

“You have to, if you want a chance to live, to make it out of here. You saw what happened to Caleb,” Connor rationalized. “Please Dustin. It’s your only chance, our only chance.”

Malik had been very quiet for a while. Thiago and Ethan’s loss was a big hit to him, and now seeing Caleb killed before his very eyes, he struggled to pull himself together. Dustin and Connor sometimes wondered if he would ever be able to pull himself back together.

Clenching his hand into a fist, Dustin stood up. “You know what, I said I’ll go out there. Y-y-yeah... go out there is exactly what I’ll do. I will make it out for you guys, and when I do, I will make sure to return with help.” Dustin proceeded to swallow deeply before looking back at the others.

“Good luck Dustin and be careful. This is a strange place, an evil place. We already lost Ethan, Thiago, and Caleb. I don’t want to lose you too man,” said Connor.

Dustin sighed deeply. “Don’t worry, I’ll be okay. Why waste any more time? I can do this. I’m a man, and if they are going to take me out, I will not go without a fight.”

“I’ll control the game but Malik, I need you buddy. I need you on the walkie. Please, this isn’t over yet. Keep yourself together,” Connor instructed, trying to sound confident and authoritative but also still be sensitive to Malik’s feelings.

Connor took the initiative to avoid wasting any time, time which was of the essence, yet at the same time, having no bearing in this strange place.

“I will,” said Malik, rising to his feet, more composed than ever. “No matter what, we’re getting out of here. We just have to stick together and do whatever this thing says. No matter how gruesome and terrifying whatever is out there looks, we can’t let it mentally get to us. We can’t let it make us lose focus. Thiago broke down and let whatever it was out there get to him mentally to the point that he could no longer go on. It’s easier said than done, I know. Our willpower will truly be tested once we’re out there.” Malik walked toward Dustin, giving him a brotherly embrace before patting him on the back. “Hey man, don’t forget about us once you make it out.”

Dustin gave each of them a hug, hoping it wouldn’t be his last. “Well, here it goes. Stay strong guys. I’ll be okay.”

“We know you will, and, as you know, we’ll be able to communicate with you through the walkie. Stay positive, stay focused and know you’ll make it through,” added Connor.

Dustin was steps away from exiting the room when he turned around unexpectedly. The adrenaline flowing through his body caused him to reach the others in a short time. Only this time, he made sure to focus on Connor. Standing before Connor with eyes of terror, he gently placed a hand on his shoulder. “Connor, please do not believe anything this place tells you.” After uttering those words, he stopped and stared into Connor’s eyes before averting his gaze to the floor.

Lost for words, all Connor could do was watch as Dustin walked off into the hallway.

As Dustin left, the locks on the door clicked shut. At this point, there was no turning back for him.

The walkie buzzed as Dustin immediately called in. “Man, this is worse than I imagined. You can just feel the evil in the air. Everything looks worn out and decayed. I just hope that by me doing what this game wants, it will allow me to make it out.”

“Hey man, just stay positive. We’re here with you,” responded Malik, talking through the walkie.

As Connor controlled the game, it was directing him to walk to the very far end of the hall. As with Thiago, they would go ahead first and then inform Dustin on where to go based on the instructions of the game. Of course, this wicked place could throw in random surprises, but for the most part, whatever took place in the game, that

is what was to happen in real-time, so the smartest way to go about it was to walk forward first in the game.

As Connor reached the end of the hallway, he was met with an elevator. Next, they were instructed to go to the fifth floor. Connor was certain that walking the hall of such a place would only escalate Dustin's fears, but he had to give him the instructions.

"No way, I have to walk across this whole hall? I can barely see what's in front of me; who knows how far this thing goes. What if that bull creature is waiting for me at the end? Or that thing that got Caleb?" His last words came out in a whisper, fear gripping his windpipes so tightly that he found it hard to speak. "Please, I don't want to do this."

"Hey, don't worry. Connor just walked ahead in the game, and from what we saw, there were no creatures or monsters lurking around any corners," said Malik.

"Alright... If you guys say it's safe to go."

Dustin's pace was slow; Connor couldn't blame him. If he was walking down a creepy monster-infested hallway himself, he would more than certainly proceed with caution also.

"Whoa! Did you guys hear that?" shouted Dustin through the walkie.

The sudden outburst startled Connor as he squinted his eyes at the screen.

"Hey, what did you hear? We heard nothing," responded Malik as he turned to Connor.

“A woman. I heard a woman call my name. I don’t know, maybe it was all in my head. Yeah, that’s it, it’s all in my head.” Dustin’s jaw began to tremble. *It sounded so much like... Sofia.*

“No, we did not hear anything. Just ignore it and keep moving. It could just be your mind playing tricks on you. Remember where we are Dustin, don’t expect much relief from this place,” responded Malik.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. It’s all in my head... it’s all in my head. By the way, did you guys go to the fifth floor yet? How does it look? Do I have anything to worry about?”

“From my observation, it did not look any better or worse than the previous floor.” Those were the only words of assurance Connor could leave him with.

Malik began to shift about in his seat anxiously. “Dustin, it is taking you rather long just to reach the elevator. Everything okay there?”

“Yeah, so far, everything seems to be okay. I’m walking to the elevator right now, just taking it slow to make sure no boobytraps are lying about. Oh great, I think I see the elevator up ahead.”

“Good, let us know when you enter.”

It took all their strength to put what happened to Caleb and Thiago out of their minds. They knew there was no choice other than to stay focused.

“I’m at the elevator now,” Dustin called in.

“Good, now go down to the fifth floor. Let us know when you are there.”

A couple of minutes would pass before Dustin's voice was heard on the walkie again. "Okay, I'm on the fifth floor. What now? I can't see anything again," he said nervously.

The game was instructing Connor to walk two doors down and enter a room on the right side of the hall. In the room, there were women's clothes hung about. It struck him as very odd because he was certain that some of them looked similar to his sister's. He did not know whether to be happy to see them or feel a bit upset. Nonetheless, Connor kept on.

Looking at the clothes, his mind flashed back to him and his sister's childhood.

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"Are you sure about this?" Sofia asked hesitantly.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure. Aren't you mad that mom and dad make us wear each other's hand-me-downs? You shouldn't have to wear basketball shorts if you want to wear a skirt," Connor reasoned.

They were both at that awkward age between child and teen, so their body types were similar. Apparently, to their parents, that meant that they could indulge in the two for one sale at the local mart, as well as have them share clothes.

What they saw as frugal, Sofia and Connor saw as cruel.

Now, standing in the backyard with a pile of their clothes and some lighter fluid, they were prepared to take a stand.

Suddenly, a loud scream came from the house, "What in the— What are you two doing!?" their mom screamed.

“Taking a stand Mom!” Connor said bravely.

“Connor, if you burn those clothes, I promise you will be going to school naked.”

“Naked!” Sofia shouted, fully ready to ditch the plan and continue to suffer in silence.

“Mom, you have to let us be individuals. My school counselor said it is a crucial time in our lives where our personalities are supposed to flourish. How can we do that looking like hobo twins?” Connor argued.

Their mom looked back and forth between the two of them, contemplating his words. Finally, after what felt like eternity, she relented. “Oh, fine... We will go to the mall tomorrow. But no name brands! You two are already eating me out of house and home.”

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Teary eyed, Connor smiled to himself, remembering how dramatic they were back then. *Just one of many crazy things we did, huh sis?*

The game suddenly presented a question, and it read: “Did you love your sister, Connor?” There were two choices. A) Yes, and B) No. Of course, he loved her, and the fact that the game even asked him such a question, sparked a bit of rage within him. He felt it was only right that Dustin should hear the question also. This came as new to them since the game usually presented the questions to the person who was instructed to leave the room. He did not know where it was going with it, but he did not like the look of it.



“Hey, Malik, let Dustin know what the game is asking me so that he can be on top of everything that is going on.”

Malik shook his head, gnashing his teeth at the distasteful question, equally put off by it. He pressed his lips together and sighed in frustration. “Hey Dustin, the game just put up a very distasteful question for Connor. I’m not sure why it is asking this, but we thought we should let you in on it anyways.”

“What’s the question?” asked Dustin nervously.

“‘Did you love your sister?’ And it just gives the choices: A) Yes, and B) No. Before we answered, we just wanted to let you in on what was going on. You were of course dating her and loved her, so Connor and I felt it would only be right to let you know what’s happening. We figured the question would make you angry, but as we said Dustin, stay strong. That is what the game seems to be looking for. It wants to break us down mentally until we just give up. Don’t allow that to happen Dustin.”

A moderate pause followed, causing Malik to become somewhat worried.

“Dustin? Did you hear me? If something is wrong Dustin, tell us.”

“Y-y-yeah... But why the hell is it asking about Sofia?”

As expected, Dustin was very put off by it, but his reaction was much greater than anticipated as he rambled on for minutes before coming to a stop.

“I don’t know why it asked us that, but it did,” answered Malik.

“S-should I go into the room that you’re in?” asked Dustin nervously, deciding to quickly change the topic.

Connor felt there was no need for him to enter the room that he was in within the game; believing it would only affect Dustin negatively, as it seemed the game was trying to only get to Dustin by bringing Sofia up.

Connor clicked the obvious answer, which was A. He was then instructed to walk seven doors down and enter the room on the left side. He was honestly hoping that would be the first and last time it brought up Sofia. Unfortunately, it would only get much worse. Some things in life will shake you to the core, and what Connor was soon to experience was one of them.

As he began to walk about halfway down to the destination, another random question popped up. It was technically the same question, but this time, it was presented to Dustin. Connor believed and assumed the answer was obvious, so he had no idea what it was trying to get at.

“Oh man, this is so wrong,” said Malik, shaking his head at the offensive question. Malik quickly buzzed Dustin. “The game is asking us another question, and it’s meant for you this time. The question reads: ‘Did Dustin love Sofia? A) Yes, or B) No’. Dustin, we all know the answer is yes, but we need to hear you say it just to be on the safe side. With this ‘game,’ you can never be too careful.”

Heavy breathing and stuttering followed. “No, n-n-no, why is it asking these questions about Sofia? Guys please, you know what this thing is capable of. If it begins t-t-” he paused to catch his breath, inhaling and exhaling rapidly. “If it begins to ask way over the top

questions, just know we must answer it to what m-m-may seem most sadistic. This place loves things of wickedness, so at times, we have to give answers matching that. B-but of course, the answer is A. I truly did love Sofia.” His breathing became heavier as he talked into the walkie. “Connor, please don’t believe anything this...this thing asks or says. I will answer the question the way it wants to be answered. Connor, you know I loved Sofia.”

Malik gave the cue, and Connor entered what he once again thought was the obvious answer, A.

“S-s-see, I told you, this, this game, it’s wicked. We can’t believe anything it says or shows. Like, we all know I loved Sofia,” Dustin said as his Adam’s apple descended into his throat. “S-so, where am I to go next?” He asked before wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“Hold on, Connor is going to walk to the room now. We just wanted you to relax and calm down before proceeding,” said Malik as he nodded towards Connor, giving the cue to proceed.

Continuing with the game, Connor commenced walking to where he was instructed, continuing to ask himself, “Why?” Why was the game suddenly so focused on his sister, who was not part of their torment? In the room were two dummies. One was clearly of Sofia and the other of Dustin. As Malik and Connor looked upon the scene, it appeared as if all the air escaped their bodies.

With haste, Malik placed his hand over his face as he shook his head. *No, no, no way it is doing this.* Lifting his head, he produced a great sigh. “Connor, just... don’t.” He struggled as he tried to find the

words. “Connor, just look away.” With great lament, he leaned forward as if the world rested on his shoulders.

What they would soon experience will make what took place just previously pale in comparison.

As Malik looked towards Connor, he could see that his hands were trembling violently, the controller shaking under the tremors. Examining Connor’s frame, he could see that Connor’s breaths were not full as his shoulders moved slightly with each gasp of air he took. Carefully, Malik reached his hand out to him. “Connor, you do not need to go through this anymore. I can take control over the walkie and the game on this one; it is not an issue. You should not have to be a part of this Connor.” Malik looked upon him with great sorrow as he awaited a response.

A moment of silence ensued as Malik could no longer find or summon the words to even attempt to bring Connor the comfort he may have needed.

Before them on the screen was an image of a room, and as expected, scenery accompanied it. Though on this occasion, there appeared to be two sceneries that were separated by a large divider. On the right-hand side appeared two dummies, one of which was that of Dustin and the other his sister Sofia. She appeared to be sitting on a stool near a counter, which resembled that of one in Dustin’s own home. The Dustin dummy was behind the counter and opposite her as it stood with its hands gripping a glass jar. Its head was looking back as the Sofia dummy gripped its stomach in what appeared agony.

On the other side of the divider was a scene of great dejection, enough to touch the hearts and souls of any who happened to lay their

eyes upon it. In this scene were not only the Dustin and Sofia dummy but also Connor, his mom, and his dad. They appeared to sit in great despair before the Sofia dummy as she lay in what seemed a gurney, wearing a pink hospital gown. It appeared to be a time of great mourning for them. The Dustin dummy stood by her bedside as it rested its hands on her shoulders.

In a state of shock, Connor began to mumble to himself. “I remember, I remember...I remember.”

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The story goes back a few years when he was in the hospital with his family and friends, as they tried to figure out how and why their dear Sofia became gravely ill. It had been two days of continual grief as they desperately sought the answers needed as to why she was in such a condition.

“What about her blood samples? Urine? Is there anything? Anything you can use to detect as to what is causing my daughter to go through this?” Cried Connor’s mom hysterically as she stood in the medical room.

The sound of shoes clicked as the doctor approached Sofia’s bedside, looking down upon Sofia with great uncertainty. “We are still doing more tests, but as of yet, we have no conclusive explanation to show what may have caused this. The only thing we found out through x-rays and tests is that she was pregnant, and sadly due to her complications, she has lost the baby. We are still in the process of figuring out if she had a miscarriage before or after she was sick. Once we determine this, we may come closer to getting to the bottom of

what made her ill. As of now, we cannot provide you with any conclusive answers.”

Full of tears, Connor’s mom looked Dustin in the eyes. “Why didn’t you guys tell me? Why Dustin? Why!”

Feeling the sadness and agony expressed through Sofia’s mother, Dustin struggled to get the words out. “Sofia wanted to wait a bit before letting you guys know, so that way, it would have been a surprise. She was a bit nervous as well, knowing your best wishes were for her to save herself for marriage. I do want to apologize Mrs. Beckett for what has taken place, but she did in fact plan on telling you guys. I am sorry I did not tell you either, but I did not want to go against her wishes. She felt since we just got engaged, she was ready to have a child,” he said before looking down in shame, knowing he had taken her daughter’s innocence before marriage. “At the moment, one thing led to the next. I just want to apologize if I offended you in any way,” he said before looking to Mr. Beckett. “Please, will you guys accept my apology?”

Dustin was Sofia’s first and only love. Never had she known another.

Mr. Beckett walked over to his wife’s side before rubbing her shoulder. “Dustin, it’s ok. You did go against our best wishes, but now is not the time to address it. Let us just continue to pray and hope the best for our Sofia, that she makes a full and healthy recovery.” Walking to her bedside, he laid eyes upon her before breaking down in tears. “Oh, Sofia!” he cried as he broke.

Connor and the nurse rushed to his side.

“It’s ok, come, take a seat,” said the nurse as she escorted him.

Connor's dad was one who did his best to appear strong in troubling times so that he may be able to help those who are broken. Sadly, this was too much for his soul to bear and for once, he was the one who needed solace.

As Dustin sat, all he could do was hope for the best. Excitedly, he looked towards the door as Malik and Ethan walked in.

"Hey guys, thanks for stopping by," Connor said somberly as they entered.

"Hey Connor, nice to see you too. I am very saddened to see Sofia like this. Man, I wonder what happened. It's like, she just got like this overnight. I will continue to keep her in my prayers," said Ethan.

"Thank you, I appreciate it."

Malik stood by the bed, shaking his head. "Man, I really hope she recovers soon. One day she was fine, the next... What could have happened?"

"I wish I knew Malik," Connor said before holding his head down. "I wish I knew. Dustin called us, letting us know she had become severely ill. That is how we all found out."

Malik looked up before nodding to Dustin. "Hey Dustin, nice to see you are holding it together. Staying strong not only for Sofia, but Connor and the rest of her family."

"Thanks," said Dustin as he anxiously bit his lower lip. Swallowing deeply, he immediately proceeded to bite his nails as anxiety continued to set in.

Connor's dad walked over to Dustin as he stood over him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "All we can do is pray; all we can do is pray. Let's continue to hope the best for Sofia; God will pull her through."

"Yeah Dad, all we can do is pray."

Connor's friends, family, and Dustin would spend the day with Sofia well into the night. The end of visiting hours was the only driving force that could have separated Sofia's family from her side. Sofia would eventually make a full recovery, but to this day, no one knew exactly how Sofia had become so gravely ill.

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As Connor continued to sit before the screen and watch on, he seemed to be staring into a reflection of his past. His hands continued to tremble as a tear descended down his face before the controller eventually fell from his hands. The two of them could only sit in silence, reliving a moment they never expected to experience again in their lifetime. From the total silence, the only discernable noises were from the occasional sounds which were emitted by the building.

Startled, Malik snapped back to, sitting upright to tend to the walkie as Dustin buzzed In.

"Guys," Dustin whispered as he awaited an answer. The deafening silence was of great concern to him. "Guys!" he whispered frantically once more on the brink of tears. His eyes darted about in a state of terror as he stood alone. *Are they dead? No, please don't tell me I am alone. Please, please. Why is this happening to me? Guys, please answer, please.*



Wearily, Malik gripped the walkie with what energy he had left, as the moment took much out of him. “D-Dustin.”

Relieved, Dustin’s eyes shot open. “What are you guys doing?” he said sternly as he whispered into the walkie. “What’s going on? Malik, Connor, talk to me. Don’t just leave me out here guessing. Tell me what is going on!” He said as he continued to look around the dark and gloomy environment in perpetual fear.

“S-sorry, we were...it’s just that...” Malik stopped talking as he looked at Connor. “Should we?”

With eyes widened, Connor slowly turned his head toward Malik as he sat in shock. “Y-yes, tell him,” he said in a strange yet calm tone.

“Dustin, before you head into the room for yourself, just be prepared for what you will see. I am warning you, it is...You already know what this place is capable of Dustin. Just keep yourself composed. But as I warned you, what’s ahead is just...repulsive.”

“Malik, please don’t tell me there is something in that room. If there is, I am not going in. Do you see some sort of creature? Malik, talk to me here. I have already been waiting long enough. I need you to talk to me. Just tell me, what do you see?” asked Dustin.

“N-no, it’s a scenery, but it’s a scenery of—” Pausing, Malik closed his eyes as he braced himself. At this moment, he wished he was not the one to bring such news to the attention of Dustin.

“Malik, you are making me more scared than I need to be. What is it? Tell me already!” he whispered into the mic in hopes of not attracting any would-be creatures that may be lurking about.

“The scenery, well, there appear to be two sceneries in one. One scene shows Sofia on a hospital gurney. It appears to be the time when Sofia was severely sick in the hospital for a couple of days. Dustin, I am so s—”

“Wh-what! No! No!” shouted Dustin at the top of his lungs. He yelled so loud that if there were any creatures walking about the building at that moment, every single one would have found his location. It was such a high pitch scream that it would have radiated through anyone at the forefront of it.

Squeezing his eyes tight, Malik attempted to recover from the unexpected shriek. *Woah.*

“Malik! Malik! Please, turn the TV off, please!” cried Dustin. “Neither you nor Connor needs to see this.”

Connor turned to Malik as they both squinted their eyes in unison.

“But why?” asked Malik.

A moment of silence ensued as heavy breathy came through the walkie. It was heavy to where Connor was able to discern each breath, even though he was a considerable distance from the walkie.

Trembling, Dustin fought to get his words through. “Ok, don’t turn it off, but please, just as I said before I left the room, we cannot believe anything this...this wicked place says or shows. It will think of the worst lie against me. Guys please, just know whatever question it asks, I must answer them the way it wants me to. That doesn’t necessarily mean I did it!”

Malik squinted once more as he turned to Connor. “I-I guess. But we shouldn’t keep you waiting out there any longer. Are you ready to go where we instructed earlier?”

“Wa-wait. You said there were two sceneries, but what you described was only one. What other scenery do you see?” asked Dustin.

Seeing how unraveled Dustin was after hearing about the first scene, Malik thought it would be best for him to walk into the room and find out for himself. After deep consideration, he decided to let him in on It.

“The other scene appears to show you and Sofia in what seems to be a dining room. You are standing next to a glass cup, and she is just sitting on a stool holding her stomach as she’s slouched. Usually, the dummies become active, but in this instance, they did not. That is all we can see from our end.”

Dustin stopped to think about what the other scene may have been. Curious yet anxious, he was ready to see. “Ok, guys, I am walking down the hall now.”

Dustin walked down the semi-lit and gloomy hall, proceeding with caution not knowing what to expect. He walked and walked until he stopped next to the door, he believed was the one. Grabbing hold of the knob, he attempted to open it. *Guess this is not the one.* Walking two doors further down, he tried once more, and there, the door opened. Upon opening the door, the walkie dropped from his hand as he stumbled back. “N-n-no, no. Don’t do this! Stop!” He reached down with great haste to pick up the walkie. Trembling, his mouth became parched. “Guys! Guys!...I remem—” he stopped abruptly.

“M-Malik, Co-Con-Connor...Will you guys believe anything it shows?”

As Dustin stood in the room, the door slammed shut behind him with immense force.

“Damn! What was that,” said Malik as he sat startled.

Sweat proceeded from Dustin’s face as great fear and anxiety encompassed his body. Not one part of his body was exempt from these feelings. Recomposing himself, he buzzed in once more. “It’s all lies! Lies! Malik! Con—”

“Wait! Dustin, the dummies are moving!” Said Malik.

“What’s going on!” screamed Dustin as he also saw them moving on his end.

The first scene in which the dummies became active was the one showing Dustin and Sofia at the counter. As the Sofia dummy sat rocking, gripping its stomach in what seemed great agony, the Dustin dummy could be seen looking back and forth anxiously between the Sofia dummy and the glass cup which it gripped. Reaching into its pocket, it retrieved what appeared to be a pill bottle before tapping it gently over the cup. It proceeded to walk to the Sofia dummy where it handed her the cup. Gripping its stomach with one hand, the Sofia dummy reached out to grab the cup with the other as it made a drinking gesture. Then suddenly, the dummies collapsed.”

Jumping to his feet, Connor’s eyes shot wide as he slowly walked toward the screen. Standing before the screen, he blinked as if he was trying to register what he had just seen. Turning to Malik, all he could see was him palming his mouth in astonishment.

Immediately after the scene came to a stop, the other became active. There was not much activity. All that could be perceived was the bouncing of the shoulders of the Connor dummy, his mom, and his dad as the Dustin dummy stood by the bedside. After a few moments, the dummies collapsed, and that was it.

As his knees began to buckle, Connor struggled to walk back to the bed as his body gave off slight but forceful tremors. Taking notice, Malik jumped to his aide.

“G-guys, I did nothing wrong! I did nothing wrong!” shouted Dustin as he buzzed into the walkie. Receiving no response, Dustin became increasingly worried. “Are you guys there? Hello? Hello! I said do not believe this! Please! Hello!”

After helping assist Connor back to the bed, Malik walked to retrieve the walkie. “D-Dustin, I’m here.”

“Thank you, thank you. Malik, please, whatever the game says or asks, just know I did not do it. I must answer it the best way I know will work. Remember, we have—”

“Dustin, wait a question arrived. It is asking, “Dustin, why did you give Sofia the pills? A.) You thought it was vitamins B.) You felt like it. C.) To abort the baby D.) All of the above,” read Malik as shame took over. Shame knowing, he had to be the one to not only be a part of this, but also knowing he had to be the one to present such a heinous question.

“Ma-Malik, please, is Connor there? Let me speak to him, p-please. He has to kn—”

“Dustin, we have no time for that. The timer just appeared, and you have just five minutes to answer. We need you to answer now Dustin,” said Malik sternly.

Gripping his hair, Dustin paced back and forth. His hair appeared mangy, and his pupils dilated. *What do I do? What do I do!* “Ok, ok. Malik, Connor, as I said before, we have to answer the question that is the worst of all; that is how the game is played. We all know to say ‘You felt like it’ would be the worst, but this game...it’s wicked, Connor. It wants specifics. Specific things that are cruel...to hurt us. Malik, tell Connor the answer is C. I am not saying I did this at all, but please, just believe me guys.”

Malik faced Connor, only to see him gripping the controller with enough force that made it appear as if he would break it. As his jaw trembled, he stared towards the TV, his face flushed crimson red. Malik could only hope that one of his best friends was not capable of doing such a thing, but in this instance, he could do nothing other than accept that Dustin may have done it.

“C-Connor...what are you going to do?” Asked Malik,

Mumbling, Connor stared off in a daze. “What I’m going to do? what I’m going to do?... Let him die! Die Dustin! What did you do to Sofia? What did you do!”

Dustin trembled as he heard Connor’s vexation through the walkie. “Malik! Talk to him! Please!”

Malik looked at the timer on the game, only to see that two minutes were left. All Malik could do was sympathize with both, but respectfully in the end, he felt such a decision could only be left in the

hands of Connor. “Connor...what are you going to do? There is only two minutes left. If you are going to give an answer, now is the time.”

“Two minutes! Malik, you put the answer in, please!” cried Dustin before exhaling deeply. “Ok! Ok! I will explain why I did it but please, if I tell you Connor, would you hear me out and at least put the answer in? Please Connor, I will tell you everything.”

Malik held the walkie out towards Connor so that he could hear Dustin’s request and respond if he decided he wanted to.

Connor debated whether to let him live, or die, but then a moment of profound horror came to his mind. A moment of “what if?” He remembered that Sofia was missing. *I have to know.* Connor turned to face Malik as Malik held it towards him. “Dustin, you only have one minute left to explain to me why you did this to Sofia.”

“Ok! Ok! Please, hear me out. Thank you Connor, thank you.”

Feeling that there was nothing left to lose, Dustin explained everything.

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Standing in the middle of the living room, Dustin paced as he held his cell phone to his ear. “Yeah, great. So can I come pick it up now?” He asked as he smiled with enthusiasm. “Peter, that is why I can always depend on you. I’m heading over now.”

Leaving his home, Dustin was soon on his way to meet his friend. For those who knew him well, he was given the nickname “Pete the Supplier” due to the fact that he was always able to get his hands on any drugs, whether it be legal, or illegal. Dustin was about twenty minutes or so into his drive when his phone ringed. “Hello?

Hey, babe,” he said as Sofia was on the other end. He continued to listen as he looked through the window of his dash. “Nothing, I am just going to hang out for a bit; I should be home a little later. Yeah, ok, love you too. Bye.”

He would drive a little while longer along the highway before arriving at his friend’s apartment.

\*knock knock\*

“Hey! Dustin, come right on in,” said his friend Peter as he walked about shoeless, wearing a tee and pajama pants. Choosing to dress carefree as he indulged in paraphernalia.

Dustin waved his hand in the air as he fanned away the smoke. “Gosh Peter, tone it down a bit.” Even though Dustin was good friends with Peter, he never shared the same interests as him, drugs being one of them.

Smiling with eyes half shut, Peter raised his blunt before taking a puff. “This is not just any smoke, it’s the finest of the finest. Grown by yours truly.”

Dustin’s hand continued to wave frantically back and forth as he coughed. “Yeah, yeah, where is it?”

Peter uncrossed his legs as he stood from his smoke-stancher sofa as he put out his blunt. He reached into his bag where he pulled out a bottle of pills. Still half-baked and lungs full of smoke, Peter spoke in a muffled voice. “Yeah, you just give her \*cough\* one of these once a day for three days, no more than that. \*COUGH\* wait,” he said before walking to the counter and grabbing a small bag. “I don’t want you making any mistakes, so Imma take the rest out and only leave three in, one for each day.”



“Ok, got it.”

Peter reached out as he handed the pill bottle to Dustin.

“And for goodness sakes Peter, just give up smoking already, and whatever other stuff you are doing.”

“Dustin, why do you want to get rid of it? Don’t you think it’ll be cool to have a mini you running around? Ya’ll can play football and attend sports events. You know, cool guy stuff. Well, that’s if it is a boy. If it’s a girl, you can still do fun things with her.”

The question presented to Dustin appeared to make him anxious as he began to pace. “I know, I would love to keep the baby too, but I have so much going for me right now, and I just feel like the baby would get in the way. I have investments here and there, and my uncle recently just had me come on board and help him with his advertising company. I am a young guy with a bright future; a baby will only get in the way.”

Walking a short distance, Peter grabbed his lighter before sparking another blunt. “Yeah, if you feel this is best, who am I to stop you,” he said before blowing a plume of smoke.

Securing the pills, Dustin wasted no time in getting fresh air. “See ya Peter. And—”

“Wait, wait, you forgot the money. You are my boy and all, but nothing is free in life,” he said before taking another lengthy inhale of his blunt. “And it was not easy getting my hands on this either.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” Dustin said before reaching into his pocket, retrieving the \$50.

“\*Cough\* Alright, see \*cough\* you later,” said Peter.

Exiting through the front lobby doors, Dustin stopped before inhaling deeply. *Ahhh, fresh air.* Looking down at his watch, it read 4:20 pm. Grinning, he shook his head from side to side. *The irony.* He walked to his car where he drove and headed back home. Driving down the road gave him some more time to think about what he was about to do. To think about if it was the right or the wrong thing. His mind was set at this point, there was no turning back. A little over an hour would pass before he finally arrived. Though he had his heart and mind set on doing what he sought to accomplish, there was still that small voice within that at times caused him to question it.

Entering his home, he was met at the door by Sofia who greeted him with a passionate hug. “Dustin, you smell it? I am making your favorite.”

“Hmmm, let me guess,” he said looking up, tapping his chin playfully. “Steak and potatoes?”

Kicking a leg back, she hopped with glee. “Yes! And it is just about ready.”

“Haha! Alright! Can’t wait.”

Her eyes came alive as they sparkled. “And guess who else is going to be enjoying your favorite meal,” she said as she rubbed her belly referring to what was supposed to be their baby to be.

Instantly, immense dejection encompassed his countenance. His eyes became teary as he fought them back, staring over her shoulders to avoid any eye contact.

“Hunny, is something wrong?” she asked as she took notice of his sudden change in disposition.

“N-no, it’s nothing,” he said before removing his jacket.

“Well, I am just glad you are ok,” she said as she blinked awkwardly, still sensing that something was wrong. “I am going to go finish everything up so we can eat.”

“Ok babe.”

Upon her walking away, he made his way to the adjacent wall where he leaned upon it, resting his forehead upon the back of his hand. *I can't do this, I can't do this... What to do Dustin, what to do. Think Dustin, think. If I keep this baby, my whole life will be ruined. I won't have time to fulfill my plans, my dreams. We can always have another one.* Walking to the dining room table, he sat nervously with his hands clasped. Looking about as his eyes darted, he reached down into his pocket where he retrieved the bottle of pills, holding it under the table to make sure he kept it obscured. With trembling hands, he held it as he debated within. Flinching, he stuffed the pills back into his pocket.

“Here you go Dustin. Steak, potatoes, and broccoli. And the broccoli, oh you are going to love it. I think this is the best they ever came out. Try it and tell me what you think,” she said smiling at him with clasped hands.

Lifting the fork to his mouth, he took a big bite. He nodded as he chewed. “Oh wow, it tastes amazing. I really love it.”

“Oh great, I am going to go make my plate so we can eat together,” she said as she stared into his eyes. Standing by his side, she placed a hand on his shoulder. “Dustin, are you sure everything is fine? It seems like a lot is on your mind,” she said before giggling and rubbing her belly once more. “Oh, I know what it is, you are all

nervous about being a dad. It will be your first child, our first child, so that's normal to feel a bit anxious. Don't worry Dustin, I know you will be a great dad," she said before leaning down to kiss him on the cheek. "Ok, be right back."

As she walked into the kitchen, Dustin took the time to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand. *I have to do it and get it over with, as much as I hate to do this. I have to do it. I mean, no one knows about this, and like I said, we can always just have another one.*

Pulling out a chair, Sofia sat next to Dustin as he sat at the head of the table. Her eyes lit as she took a bite. "Oh, this came out so good."

"Yeah, it's really good babe. Thank you."

The chair dragged along the wooden floor as Sofia scooted back. "Oh babe, I forgot the drinks. I'm a go gr—"

"No, it's ok, I got it. You did enough already."

"Oh, thank you," she said before playfully patting him on the right cheek.

Standing from his seat, Dustin walked to the kitchen where he grabbed two glass cups from the kitchen cabinet. Softly he tapped his chin. *What should I have to drink...I guess I will have iced tea, why not.* "Sofia! What would you like to drink!" he shouted across the kitchen.

"Fruit punch is fine."

Moving a bit further out of view of the dining room, he retrieved the pills once more. Upon opening them, he began to shake his head side to side. *Peter tsk, he said he would only leave three pills, but*

*there are four. I guess all those drugs warped his judgment.* Turning the bottle, a pill dropped into his hand. His face scrunched as he looked at it. *These are so tiny. I know Peter said one pill, and one pill only, but these are super tiny. I am sure they won't do anything.* Turning the bottle once more, another pill dropped into his hand. *Two shouldn't hurt.* Having placed the dissolvable pills into her glass, he poured the fruit punch before grabbing a spoon. Thoroughly he mixed it to ensure proper dispersion and to hide any traces. He held his iced tea in his left hand as he carried Sofia's drink in his right.

"Here you go babe," he said, placing down the glass before her.

"Thank you, I am so thirsty," she responded as she grabbed hold of the glass, taking a few satisfying gulps. Turning to him, she smiled as she playfully tapped his plate. "Hurry and eat your food before it gets cold."

The two of them sat down and enjoyed their satisfying meal; after which, they decided to sit in the living room to enjoy an evening movie. Everything seemed fine until things began to spiral.

"Dustin, I do not feel too well," said Sofia as she rested her head against his arm, snuggling under the blanket. "I have been having intense stomach pains, and I feel so dizzy and nauseous."

Suddenly, his heart raced as his breathing increased. "Maybe it was the food we just ate or the dessert. Drink some water, maybe that will help."

"Yeah, I guess you are right," she said as she wearily stood to her feet. "Be right back, I am going to grab some water."

Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved the pills once more. *I guess that means it is working. I am sure she is fine; this must be a normal reaction.*

Sofia returned some minutes later where she gently laid next to him once more as she gripped her stomach. “I think that should have helped,” she said as she grimaced.

The two continued to finish watching the movie before heading to bed. Sofia hoped the next morning when she awoke, she would feel better; but instead, her pains only increased.

The next morning, Dustin woke up to the smell of toast and eggs. *Smells so good, I guess Sofia is feeling better.* Walking down the stairs, he stopped midway as he looked through the stairs’ railing. “Sofia, are you ok?” he asked as he noticed her stopping mid-walk, gripping her stomach in profound agony.

Grimacing, her knees buckled where they touched. “I’m fine Dustin.”

“Sofia, you didn’t have to make me breakfast. If you are not feeling well, then you should rest. I can grab something to eat on my way to work.”

“No Dustin, I want to make sure you have something to eat before heading off. It’s ok Dustin, I will be fine. Come, eat breakfast before you are late,” she said as she struggled to stand in the erect position.

Rushing to her side, he helped escort her to a chair. “Sofia, are you ok?”

“Dustin, I said I am fine, now eat,” she said as she struggled to look up in an attempt to smile.

Averting his attention, he could no longer stand looking into her eyes as the guilt was overpowering. “Are you going to eat?” he asked standing over her.

“No, I am fine. I’m going to go sleep on the sofa for a bit. I am sure that once I wake up, I will be okay. I just need some rest.”

“Ok babe,” he said before leaning down and kissing her on the cheek. Helping her to her feet, he held her hand as she walked to the sofa where he tucked her under the blanket.

Dustin sat and enjoyed his hearty breakfast with a little over an hour to spare before heading to work. Reaching down into his blue house robe, he retrieved the pills once more. He looked into his hand with contemplation. His hand dragged across his face as the decision to finish the pills weighed on his soul. *I guess what she’s going through is normal. There are only two small pills left. After this, she’ll recover and be fine.* Standing to his feet, he walked to the living room as he stood over the sofa where Sofia rested. “Would you like a glass of water?”

“Yes, thank you,” she said as she began to gnash and grind her teeth.

Once in the kitchen, the water ran down the faucet as he leaned upon the counter. After great contemplation, he dropped the last two remaining pills into the cup. Giving it a few stirs, he then carried the water into the living room to hand over to Sofia.

Using her elbows to nudge herself into an upright position, she took hold of the cup and took a sip. “Thank you honey for the help. Go finish getting ready; I don’t want to make you late. I’m fine Dustin.”

Leaning over, he kissed her upon the forehead. “I am going to go shower; if you need anything, let me know. OK?”

“Ok.”

As Dustin showered, he used the warmth of the showers as a form of therapeutic treatment to calm his nerves. All he could do was hope that in the end, what he set out to do would be successful without causing any lasting harm to Sofia. He would spend a little more time than usual in the shower before exiting.

Dustin would soon be dressed, and ready to go on his way to work. Keys dangled as he grabbed them from the hook. “Sofia, I’m heading out now; I will see you soon,” he said as he looked upon her weakened state.

Her health seemed to have deteriorated further to the point to where she could no longer utter any words. Rather, she was only able to give him a barely noticeable nod of her head as her eyes remained shut.

Standing in the doorway, he continued to stare. *I don’t think I should leave her alone like this.* Continuing to look, he put on his trenched coat. *She just needs some rest; she will be fine.* Heading out the door, he was soon on his way to work.

A couple of hours would pass, and it would already be time for Dustin to clock out from work. This particular workday was especially difficult as he was a bit concerned about Sofia. But there was also that other voice that told him it was ok and that what she was experiencing, was a normal side effect of taking the pills. *Let me give her a call.* He thought before placing his phone into the phone holder of his car. He waited and waited, but there was no answer. *Let me call the house phone; maybe her cell phone died.* To his dismay, there was also no answer on the house phone. As much as he tried to convince himself that she was ok, in the back of his mind, he felt the situation took a turn for the worse. Having a smooth drive on the road, he was able to get home with little to no effort.



“Good afternoon,” he said to his neighbor as he got out of his car.

“Hey! Dustin! Good afternoon, how is everything?”

“Yeah, everything is fine. You know, just working,” Dustin said, slightly distracted with his efforts to check on Sofia.

Fumbling with the keys, he inserted them slowly before opening the door. Upon opening, the first thing he was able to see was the sofa. *I guess she is walking around, so that's a good sign.* On the floor next to the sofa was the blanket she used to cover herself, along with the cup she drank from. Reaching down, he picked up the blanket, placing it back onto the sofa. “Sofia!” he called once more before hanging his coat on the hook. As he slowly continued to move about, he looked around as he continued to call her name. The deafening silence began to get to him, and he could feel the anxiety start to brew in the pit of his stomach. “Sofia!” As he neared the corner to enter the dining room, he could see the heel of Sofia’s foot and immediately ran to her. “Sofia! Sofia!”

There she laid on the floor collapsed. It appeared as if she was trying to reach the phone but was not able to make it in time.

Clutching a fist of his hair, he paced back and forth. *I have to call Peter.* As he awaited an answer, he knelt before Sofia where he placed a finger on her neck. *Ok, she's got a pulse.* “Hello? Peter, I need your help.”

Peter sat in his apartment as he used his bong. In his own mind, he was on a whole other planet altogether. “Whoa man, you should visit this place. Like, dude, it’s so colorful and everyone’s waving hi to me, so friendly. I always love visiting this place.”

“Peter, now is not the time; this is serious.”

“Ok, go ahead \*cough\* what is it?”

“Sofia. I came home only to find her laying on the floor motionless. I do not know what’s wrong. This all started after I gave her those pills.”

“Bro, \*cough\* call the ambulance! Why are you calling me?”

“I know, I am going to get to that eventually. It’s just that I thought maybe you could help me out first. If I call the ambulance, then you know, the cops could come. I am just afraid they will find out that I gave her something unknowingly.”

“Did you give her all the pills?”

“Yeah,” he said as he paused. “Actually, you accidentally put four pills in the bottle. The pills were really small, so instead of giving her one at a time, I just gave her two. Just to make sure it was successful.”

The sound of the bong crashing came through the phone as Peter stood to his feet. “YOU DID WHAT! Dude! Call the ambulance. If you don’t call for help like, right now, she will die.”

Sweating profusely, he began to pace back and forth debating. “Peter, I can’t go to prison.”

“Dustin, she needs your help. Whether you call the ambulance or not, they will do tests on her to see if she may have taken something. If they’re going to find something on you, they’re going to find it, but there is no point in letting her die. Call for help. Even if she does live, she does not know you gave her anything, so she can’t even testify against you.”

Sucking his teeth in frustration, he proceeded to blow through his lips. “Alright, alright, fine. I will call you later.”

“Dustin, wait, listen to me. I clearly told you to only give her one pill a day, for three days. You gave her two pills at once. They are small but powerful; I told you to be careful with this. Bro, if you go down, you better not bring my name up, and I mean that,” said Peter as he became furious.

“Don’t worry about it; I won’t say anything. I’ll call you later.” Upon hanging up the phone, he continued to pace back and forth over Sofia’s body, still debating if he should call 911. *I just hope they don’t find out.*

“911, what’s the emergency?”

“My girlfriend, she’s unresponsive, please send help.”

“An ambulance is on its way. Stay with her until help arrives. Does she have a pulse?”

Kneeling, he placed a finger on her neck once more. “Yes, but it’s a very slight pulse, barely noticeable.”

“Ok, help will be there shortly. Try to stay on the line until help arrives.”

Dustin kneeled before her body, hoping she would pull through. Whether or not this optimism was for the well-being of Sofia, or for his freedom was questionable.

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As the timer continued to dwindle, Dustin was in the process of concluding his story.

“Connor, I didn’t mean to hurt her! I was just not ready for a kid; I had my whole life ahead of me. I began to think irrationally. I should not have given her that in the first place, I know. I was just panicking

and did not know what to do. Please! Please! Malik, speak to Connor, please.”

Malik sat trembling as he tried to register what Dustin had just told them. His brows furrowed and contracted as he tried to as humanly possibly make sense of what Dustin did. But he found it impossible to do so. *All that Sofia had gone through was because of...Dustin? All the pain her family had to endure. Dustin was the cause? Why Dustin?* As Malik stared off in a daze, the TV caught the attention of his eyes as the scenery soon switched from the game, to what was actually taking place in real-time with Dustin.

“HELP! HELP!” shouted Dustin as he buzzed the walkie.

As Malik looked at the TV, he could see that Dustin was a complete wreck. His eyes were bloodshot as the veins bulged through his neck and face. His eyes darted about at great speed as he knew the worst was coming.

From the dark void of the scenery came a horrific groan, a long, drawn-out groan. The groan was accompanied by other hellish grotesque sounds. The sounds induced a fear into them they have yet to experience.

“CONNOR! MALIK!”

Whatever it was that was producing the sounds had yet to make its presence shown, but it was only a matter of time. Looking at the screen, Malik noticed only ten seconds were left. “C-Connor...What are you going to do?” he asked.

*I need to know.* Down came his finger upon the button as Connor selected the letter C.

Suddenly, the sound of a door unlocking ensued. The grotesque groaning slowly subsided until it faded back into the darkness. Whipping his head back at the dark void, Dustin continued to remain petrified from the sounds. “What was that? Malik! Help! Help!”

Malik focused his attention on Connor who was rocking back and forth violently.

“I need to know. I need to know. I need to know,” was all Connor continued to utter as he rocked back and forth. The account in which Dustin gave affected his mental state to the point that he could no longer speak. Not blinking, he appeared to stare past the TV. “I need to know. I need to know.”

“HELP!!!” cried Dustin once more.

Still shaken, Malik lifted the walkie. “D-Dustin, Connor put the answer in. I think you are good for now.”

“W-w-what! H-he?” he said before patting his body to make sure he was still alive. “Thank you! Thank you, Connor, I promise once we leave, I will make it up to you! I promise! Things will be back as it was before, us being best friends. M-Malik, can you put Connor on?”

Sighing as he shook his head, Malik turned to Connor once more to see if he was interested in responding.

“I need to know. I need to know,” Connor continued to mumble as he rocked back and forth violently.

“Dustin, I really think now is not the time,” said Malik.

Though Connor was out of it, he was still able to register the instructions given next within the game, which was to walk three

doors down. Wasting no time, Connor followed the game as instructed.

Upon entering the room, they could see that the scenery seemed to be near a roadside. Sofia's dummy was sitting in the car on the passenger side while Dustin's dummy was outside of the car, leaning over the Sofia dummy with what seemed a menacing scowl. The car was a red Corvette, the same one Dustin had back home. The dummies were not yet animated, but the one resembling Dustin was positioned over Sofia in a way that made Connor more unsettled. Connor could only watch and wonder.

Suddenly, Connor's rocking came to a still as he stared at the screen with tears. *Now I know.*

Snapping to, Connor at this point felt he had enough rage to rip the door off its hinges and destroy everything that was present in the building with his bare hands. Connor clenched his jaw to where the muscles showed through as he lashed out.

Malik stumbled towards the sofa as he took a seat. "Wow, I'm sorry about this. After what you just had to endure, there is no point in having to look at or endure this any longer. Connor, just let me take over from here. I can use both the walkie and control the game."

"No Malik, you continue to use the walkie. Malik, tell him to walk three doors down," he said calmly. But as Malik looked into his eyes, he could see the rage seething within him.

"Hello, Dustin... you there?" Asked Malik.

"Yeah, what am I supposed to do next?" Answered Dustin as he looked around in a paranoid state.

“Walk three doors down to your left; that is where you are to go next.”

“Can you guys tell me what you see in the room? Please.”

“Sofia, it shows her—”

“No!” said Connor sternly. “Tell him to walk three doors down as the game instructed, now!”

Malik became worried as he had never seen this side of Connor before. He did not bother challenging his directions in any manner. Especially after what he had to endure hearing and seeing concerning his sister.

Dustin buzzed in once more in a great state of panic. “Guys, please, I don’t know what it’ll show or ask next, but please don’t believe anything it says. This p-place, it’s wicked. I know I’ll soon have to answer the question how it wants me to. Connor, please l-l-listen to me.” The fear he was experiencing seemed to thwart the realization that he just held back a morbid secret concerning Connor’s sister. “Ok, I don’t expect you guys to trust me any longer, but please, not everything it says is true!”

Shutting his eyes, Malik shook his head in disgust. *Dustin, at this point, you have completely lost the trust of Connor, and even me. Whatever is revealed next, I fear you will be at the complete mercy of Connor.*

Upon entering the room and seeing what they saw on the screen, Dustin immediately began to freak out. Hearing Dustin freak out through the walkie, they knew Dustin was finally in the room. Tears descended from his eyes as he knew the worst was soon to come. As much as Connor did not want to see it, he knew he “had to know.”

While Connor was wrestling with his emotions, Dustin was rambling on and on. “See! S-see! I told you! Do not believe anything it says or brings up. I admit that what it showed last time was true. But, but, oh shit man, this thing, i-i-it’s wicked! Connor, look, trust me. I’ve already found out how to satisfy this wicked game. We have to play more to its liking; say things it would want us to say as an answer. That’s all! Some things it presents are true and some are not. Please, Connor.”

*Dustin, just admit it. There is no point in trying to convince us now otherwise.* Malik’s face rested in the palms of his hands as he could no longer mentally handle what was taking place. He was not sure what the setup meant, but he knew it would be gut-wrenching.

The door locked behind Dustin, and that was when the dummies became animated.

The Dustin dummy snatched something from the Sofia dummy’s hand, which appeared to be a cell phone. Angrily, it held it to the Sofia dummy’s face as it looked away, cowering in fear.

Connor watched, hoping it would not go where his mind was imagining. Deep within, as much as he knew it was going there, to see it play out before him was more than he could handle.



## CHAPTER 6

**A**fter witnessing the gruesome end of Caleb, it felt as if Connor could not bear anymore mentally. With what was being presented before him with Dustin and Sofia, the sequence of events could not have been worse.

“Please! T-this is a lie! It’s lying, I tell you! Don’t believe what you see!” shouted Dustin. “Please Connor. Just look away!”

Neither Connor nor Malik answered, watching the TV in dismay. The only thing they could have possibly been at that moment was lost for words.

“Connor! Malik! Are you guys there? Please don’t look! It’s lying! Whatever it’s trying to say I did to Sofia is a lie!” He continued. “Yes, what I did before was true, but not this! Please!”

As Connor watched the dummies act out what happened, the Sofia dummy reached its arms up to Dustin’s dummy, almost as if it was begging for mercy. Instantly, something clicked in Connor’s mind and the rage within his body slowly began to rise. An anger and rage which he had yet to experience since his existence began to envelop his body and spirit.

As the Sofia dummy begged for mercy, its hand was slapped away as Dustin’s dummy looked back and forth between her and the phone.

The Sofia dummy continued to cower as the Dustin dummy went around the trunk of the car to retrieve a rope.

Tears began to stream down Connor's face. It was as if a sauna was lit as he began to fume within. The palms of his hands were planted on each side of his face. *Please no, no. He can't possibly do what I am thinking, please. Please no...*

"Connor, d-don't look," said Malik, knowing where this was going. At that point, it was evident to all that the unimaginable was about to happen.

As much as he wanted to look away, Connor felt he had to watch. He knew that he would have to take vengeance into his own hands, and he didn't want to have any second thoughts about breaking Dustin to pieces if given the chance to do so.

In a moment of rage, the dummy placed the rope around Sofia's neck. Kicking and flailing, she struggled to fight him off. Even though no sounds could be heard such as yelling or screaming, Connor was able to see the struggle was intense. His sister was defenseless against the much stronger Dustin.

"Please! Connor, don't believe this! Don't believe it! It's lying! Why would I do this? Yes, I did accidentally poison Sofia before, but I was not trying to kill her! It was a mistake!" screamed Dustin across the walkie.

At this point, Connor just wished he was gone.

The Sofia dummy continued to put up a fight until it finally stopped moving. Realizing that she was no longer alive, the Dustin dummy placed the Sofia dummy on its shoulders where it then carried what was meant to be her lifeless body to the back of the car, placing it inside the trunk. Then instantly, the Dustin dummy collapsed.

Connor felt his body go numb as he became light-headed. A plethora of thoughts took over, almost all of malicious intent. In a rush he ran to the door as he tried to pry it open with all his might. “Sofia! Sofiaaaa!!!” With every bit of muscle fiber in his body, he tried to get the door open. “Why! Why Dustin? How could you!” He shouted as he tried to rip the door off its hinges.

“Connor! Don’t let this get to you! We will get justice, but we have to get out of here first,” shouted Malik from across the room.

It was as if Connor had become a different person. Something else completely took over him.

Carefully for fear for his own safety, Malik approached the door with caution to calm Connor as he continued to try and rip it off its hinges. Malik wasn’t sure if the psychological trauma made him oblivious to all around him; therefore, he had to proceed with caution. Gently, he placed a hand on his shoulder. “Connor... Come.”

The walkie buzzed in once more, and there was loud weeping on the other end. “Connor, Malik, I didn’t do this! It’s lying! Please believe me!”

The more Dustin tried to convince them of his lies, the more Malik became disgusted with him. To know the things he put Sofia through, it made him see Dustin in a whole new light.

Connor was a mere second away from taking the walkie and smashing it onto the floor as he could no longer stand hearing Dustin’s voice. Every syllable he uttered brought up the kind of hate he never knew he could feel for a person. Connor utterly despised everything about him. Hearing his voice was torment in and of itself.

All that time, Connor thought if she didn’t run away, it was then a sick and twisted psycho who took his Sofia away from him and his

family, when in reality, it was his best friend. Nervously he began to fidget with his fingers. *How could he, how could he...* Connor thought back to the day when they first looked for Sofia. Not only did Connor and his parents participate in the search, but everyone in the neighborhood, including Dustin.

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Dustin, Connor, and a few officers searched a nearby field not too far from where Sofia lived. The brown grass crumbled under their foot as they searched through the chilly day into the brisk night.

“Dustin, this is not like Sofia to be gone for so long and not say anything. It has been 48hrs and she has not reached out to anyone.”

Dustin kept his head down as he searched through the field. “I know Connor, but all we can do is keep looking. I know we are to expect the best, and unfortunately even the worse, which is why we are doing what we are doing now. But you have to expect the best Connor; believing that she will come back. I am sure she will.”

Wearily, Connor slowly tilted his head side to side. “Yeah, you are right.”

Swallowing deeply, Dustin briefly lifted his eyes towards Connor’s direction. “So, how are your parents handling it? I am sure this must be a difficult time for them.”

“This has been a very difficult time for them; they are so distraught. Sofia is their baby, our baby, and my dad always did everything to make sure she was safe. He was very protective of her, eyeing every guy that she brought home, he eyed them like a hawk. None ever even got the chance to be with her. Until you, of course. I

just hope she comes home soon. I don't know how much more they can take.”

“Yeah, I hope so too.”

A moment of silence ensued as they continued to walk through the fields.

Connor sighed deeply. “I feel bad that the cops also view you as a suspect; I know you would never hurt her. But once Arabelle, Sofia's friend told them that she called her phone the night you guys were out, and it was the last time she spoke to her, that just gave the cops more reason to investigate you. To be honest, even if this was not the case, they would have still more than likely considered you a suspect,” said Connor as he tried to ease any shame Dustin may have felt.

“It's ok Connor. I don't blame them for investigating me. Once I prove I am innocent, that leaves more time to focus on finding Sofia. After we left the movies, she said she wanted to visit her friend Arabelle to drop something off. But her friend is pretty far away, so I dropped her off at her home and I guess she went back out that night. I knew I should have just dropped her off at her friend's place myself, especially considering the time of night it was. Damn it...”

“Don't beat yourself up over this Dustin. This is not your fault.”

The search for Sofia continued well into the evening where the air would become frigid. No matter how cold it may have gotten, Connor would have made it his sole duty to go out in search of Sofia.

An officer calmly approached Connor. “Hey there, so we have been searching all day diligently for your missing person. We even had our men canvassing the entire area; there is yet to be any signs of

her. The search for her will be concluded for today. Tomorrow, we will pick up where we left off.”

“Do you think we will find her soon?” asked Connor as he looked the officer in the eyes.

The officer took a brief moment to think of the best way to answer the question, knowing the more days that passed with the person being missing, it meant the less likelihood they would find them alive. But in all situations like this, the officer was trained to give the most assuring news, while at the same time being realistic. “There is still a good chance of finding her. As long as you, the community, and law enforcement all work together to find her, there is a good chance she will return safely. But there is also a chance we may not find her alive.”

“Man, I just hope she is ok. I just want my baby sister home. I know we will find her safe and sound,” Connor reassured himself.

“I believe so too young man,” the officer said before placing a hand on his shoulder. “It’s time for us to get going. It is getting late. You should go in and get some rest; save your energy for tomorrow. We will also continue posting flyers around the town in hopes someone may recognize her and reach out.”

“Thanks,” responded Connor half optimistically. Before heading back inside to meet his parents, he approached Dustin.

“Thanks for all the help today. My mom, dad and I definitely appreciate it. I just hate the fact that we must look for her. What good things can come out of looking for a lost person? If they do come back safe and sound, that doesn’t mean something bad didn’t happen to them.”

“C-Connor.” Anxious and lost for words, he continued to fabricate responses that seemed pleasing to the ear. “Maybe she traveled and got stuck somewhere, who knows. But keep expecting the best Connor, not the worse.”

“I appreciate it Dustin. Imma head in now; I will catch up with you later.”

“Take care man.”

Sadly, and unbeknownst to Connor, the very culprit behind his missing sister was standing right beside him. Her very killer assisted him and his family in finding the very person he murdered. Giving them false hope that one day, Sofia would return.

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As Connor sat and became emersed in his thoughts, he felt within that he was becoming like the monsters which dwelled in that place. Executing the worse revenge possible on Dustin was all he desired. “Th-that monster, soulless monster. I hate him! He searched for Sofia, knowing he had taken her life. Dustin, I hate you. I hate him. For years he walked by my side, pretending to be my friend knowing what he did. I ate beside this murderer, laughed and even partied with him, not knowing he took Sofia away. Please, just let me kill him, let me be the one. Dustin...I despise you.”

Malik looked on as he eyed Connor nervously. Connor’s eyes remained wide, his body rocking back and forth rapidly.

“Connor...Connor,” Malik called gently as he kept a safe distance.

Connor whipped his head toward Malik’s direction, eyes still widened as he rocked back and forth. In what seemed a trance, his

eyes began to shift back and forth from Malik to the game. Turning his body to face the television, his rocking came to a still. It would not be long before the television showed what was happening to Dustin in real life. Which meant his final moments were nearing.

From the darkness of the scenery emerged a hideous being. Its skin was gray, clammy and decayed while its overly elongated neck dangled to the floor. A longer third arm protruded from its back, which it used to help hoist its head from the floor.

“What is that!” Screamed Dustin from the top of his lungs. “Help me!”

In each hand it held a great chain that seemed to move about on its own and with its serrated teeth, it latched onto one of the chains. Using its hand, it grabbed the center of the chain, bit upon it, and lifted its head off the floor where it began to walk. Its teeth scraped the concrete as its head was dragged forward. The arm coming from its back carried an old, worn-out sitting stool. Placing the stool down, it sat upon it as it continued to latch its jaws onto one of the chains.

For once, Connor was happy to see one of these hideous creatures appear. Knowing it would soon bring an end to someone he had come to utterly despise.

“Help! Oh gosh! Malik! Connor! Help! Heeelp! Do you guys see this! Get me out of here! Do something!” screamed Dustin across the walkie. To Connor, his screaming was not loud or great enough. He wanted him to experience the pain Sofia endured a thousand times over.

Suddenly, a question appeared on the screen. “Where did you hide the body? A) In your bedroom closet, B) At Connor’s house, C) In the park, or D) In the lake.”



After reading the question, a timer of five minutes appeared on the screen. Connor expressed detest both at the game and towards Dustin. Instead of five minutes, he wished it had only given him a mere few seconds as he could no longer stand to hear Dustin's voice.

Malik's hand quivered as he nervously raised it. "S-s-should we read the question to him?"

Connor surely wanted Malik to read the question to him. That way before Connor could watch retribution take place, he could find out exactly why he deserved every second of it.

"Dustin, I really hope none of this is true. Please, let this all be a lie," said Malik somberly. "Man, Sofia? Connor was your homeboy, man...Sofia loved you. Dustin, how could you? You put Sofia through hell, only to end her life in the most inhumane way. Dustin...why?"

"It is a lie, you have to believe me Malik, don't believe this! Who do you believe, me or this place? I mean, look at it. It's evil! Look, Malik, please, you have to help me."

Malik let out a sigh, tears trickling down his face as he shook his head. "You got a little less than five minutes to answer Dustin."

"Come on, can't you guys tell it's doing this on purpose? If anyone was to do this, the obvious answer would be D. Please, hurry, put the answer in, I'm telling the truth. I did not do this! This place is sadistic! Evil! Once we get out of here, you all will realize everything was a lie!"

Malik jumped to his feet. "Dustin, look. I am getting tired of you lying to us and most importantly, to Connor. If you are going to sit there and lie, it is best you do not say anything because I am getting sick of it," said Malik through the walkie. As much as Malik

considered Dustin a close friend, he could not and *would not* tolerate the disrespect he was showing toward Connor any longer.

Dustin's breathing came through the walkie as he waited; increasing greatly with each passing moment until finally, he broke.

"Okay! I did it! I did! But listen to me. When we used to get into arguments, she would always threaten to leave me. What was I to do? Sit there and endure that? It was in the spur of the moment, and I just seemed to have blacked out. It was as if I had blacked out and lost it; I couldn't control myself. What about me? P-p-please, I hope you guys understand. This is not like me." Dustin began to hyperventilate. "P-please! Get me away from this thing! Please! Put the answer in! Please!"

Connor began to grind his teeth against one another, unable to contain his anger. All he could do was sit down in a daze, trying to make sense of that which was irreprehensible. Every muscle in his jaw contracted. The fact that he had the audacity to blame Sofia at that moment made Connor despise him even more. Connor could feel the anger forming; it was anger he had never felt before. It was anger he thought he was never capable of achieving. It seemed as if he was a different person altogether.

"Oh damn... Oh damn, Connor, I'm- Oh man," said Malik lost for words. His hands tugged and pulled against his face as he continued to wipe away his tears. "So, a-a-are you going to put in the answer Connor? I honestly don't know what to do here. Whatever happens at this moment is between you and Dustin, I can't get in between this."

Red flashed in front of Connor's eyes as he lashed out. "Hand me the walkie... Now!" he shouted.

Connor had to use every bit of concentration to speak as he sobbed bitterly.

“Y-you bastard! You took Sofia away from my family and me! I treated you like a brother, like family. I accepted you, and this is what you do? This is what you do?! You deserve every bit of what is coming to you. You’ll perish here, and maybe I will too. But if I live, I must live knowing that someone who was supposed to be my best friend did such a horrible thing. You’re a monster! You deserve to be trapped here forever with the rest of these soulless creatures.” Feeling the blood rush to his head, he took a brief second to breathe. The wall trembled as his fist landed upon it. “How dare you? How dare you Dustin! After my family accepted you, this is what you do?”

“Connor, please! I’ll explain my side more once we make it out of here. Please, Connor!”

“Make it out of here? Make it out of here! D-do you really think you’re leaving this place? I’ll make sure you never leave! And if you do somehow make it out, I will be sure to exact revenge upon you. I promise you Dustin, there is no good outcome for you. You are an evil individual, a vile and disgusting person. To hurt Sofia even though she loved you with all her heart. She would do anything to make you happy, to please you and what did you do? Dustin...you deserve every bit of what is coming to you, all of it. May you never leave this place, and may you feel the pain and suffering you put everyone through by taking her away. May you suffer eternal pain, a deserved sentence. Not even prison is worthy of such scum; you rightfully belong here,” Connor said before throwing down the walkie and clutching his hair.

“Connooor! Connooor! Please, put in the answer! Please! If you don’t, I’m gone! Please! Malik! Connor! Please!” Cried Dustin.

Connor stood in front of the television as the timer ticked down, every second that counted down signaling that justice was soon to be served. With every second that counted down, all he could think was *finally*. Finally that justice would be served, for Sofia. The anticipation of seeing Dustin receive his sentence brought much relief. Someone who was one of his best friends in an instant became his mortal enemy. Just the thought of him repulsed Connor more than the environment itself.

The timer continued to tick until it reached the last minute. As Connor stood at the television, the creature which sat in the room with Dustin began to become enraged.

Malik had placed the walkie on the bed before putting his head between his knees as he rocked back and forth. He had vowed to stay out of things, but he was also racked with guilt, knowing he had to be involved in such a decision.

“Help! Malik, please, if anyone can help, it’s you! Please!” In a state of profound fear, his eyes stood towards the hideous creature. “Ok! Ok! Look, please hear me out, this is what happened!”

## CHAPTER 7

**D**ustin and Sofia stood in the living room as they prepared to venture out for the afternoon. The two planned to have a good time out at the movies where they planned to enjoy the afternoon well into the night.

“Ok, let’s go. We do not want to miss the next showing and plus, we want to get there early to get a seat. If we miss this one, then we will have to wait a whole two hours before the next showing,” said Sofia.

Dustin playfully dangled his car keys. “I was just waiting on you. Oh, and by the way, did you let your mom know we are heading out today?”

Playfully, she jabbed at his shoulder. “Stop it, I am twenty-two years old. I am not a little kid.”

“I mean, you never know, but never mind. I say we get going.”

“Ok, let’s go,” said Sofia gleefully before hugging him.

The two drove to the theater as they enjoyed the beautiful brisk afternoon. From the outside looking in, one would have thought these two were the relationship of dreams. It was not long before they arrived at the theatre and were enjoying the horror film.

Sofia held a single popcorn to her mouth. “Please don’t go in there, hide woman!” she said under her breath. The movie seemed to have kept her entertained. The popcorn was tossed into her mouth. “Dustin, she is like *so* dead.”

They continued to sit and enjoy the movie for another hour or so before it concluded.

“See, I told you he was the killer! He was just too calm in certain scenarios,” said Sofia as the two exited the theater.

“I mean, it was between him or Matthias. I was still pretty close though.”

“Close doesn’t cut it,” she said as she smiled before placing her jacket into his arms. “Here, hold this for me. I need to use the restroom.”

As Dustin sat and waited, he took the time to text on his cell phone, smiling as he did so. His fingers continued to type as he responded to the incoming messages. Upon seeing Sofia exit the restroom, he quickly put his phone away.

Sofia walked out of the restroom excited as she held her cell phone to her ear. “I am telling you Arabelle, you have to see this movie! It was even better than I thought. It was so good in fact when you decide to go see it, invite me out. I want to see it again.”

Sofia continued to smile as she remained on the phone. “Ok Arabelle, Dustin and I have to go now. Talk to you later.”

The two got in the car where Dustin began to drive Sofia back home.

“I had such a great time Dustin, been a while since I saw a movie so good.”

“Yeah, I have to agree.”

The two continued their journey home, but it was not long before Sofia noticed that Dustin was very distracted by his cell phone. Sofia was not too bothered by it at first, so did not pay it any attention. When minutes passed before Dustin said anything to her while his joyful attention remained on the phone, she then felt the need to say something.

“Dustin, you are really into that phone; don’t you think it is a little too dangerous to be texting while driving?” She stared at him as she crossed her arms.

Dustin continued to smile as his attention remained glued to the phone. “Yeah, yeah, one second.” He only periodically looked up to watch the road, but never once looked toward Sofia. What turned out to be a pleasant night for Sofia, was beginning to feel like one of the loneliest.

Sofia thought about asking him who he was texting but felt it best not to, as she did not want to ruin the good night that they had. She decided to rest her eyes a bit, hoping it would speed along the drive back home. She was able to get a few minutes of shuteye before waking once more. Shivering, she cuddled her body with her arms. “Dustin, it is so cold in here.” Not only did she become aware of the cold, but she also became aware that Dustin’s eyes and attention remained glued to the phone.

“Ok, let me grab my spare jacket,” Dustin said as he turned around to grab it from the back seat. As he turned to grab it, he took the time to set down his phone momentarily. That is when she noticed.

Sofia gawked at the notification of a kiss emoji with a heart, followed by the words, “That is why I love you so much.” Even though Dustin had his phone locked, the phone still showed any notifications that arrived for a few seconds upon the phone’s lock screen.

Sofia grabbed the phone as her eyes watered.

“Here you g-,” Dustin stopped and stared at her as he held her jacket. “Why do you look like that, and what are you doing with my phone?”

Sofia began to cry and sniffle as she nodded. “Oh really, ‘That is why I love you so much’? Who are you talking to Dustin? And do not tell me it’s nothing because I saw it,” she said as she stared into his eyes as she held the phone.

Turning the key, Dustin stopped the car’s engine and reached across to grab the phone. “Look, I don’t have time for this. I was just texting one of the boys. Now hand me the phone. It is late, and now is really not the time for this.”

Sofia pulled away as he reached. “Guys don’t send messages like this to their guy friends, Dustin; do not take me for a fool.”

*Gosh that was a terrible excuse.* Dustin took a moment to sit and think as he rested both hands on the steering wheel, knowing he had been caught. “Sofia, please give me my phone.”

“No Dustin, I am tired of you, and we have been through this before. I forgave you and here you are back doing the same thing.” A



moment of silence ensued between the two before she continued. “You know what Dustin, I am through with you. You can consider our relationship over. I do not deserve any of this.”

“Sofia, it is not that serious. She is just a friend, that is all. You do not have to do this.”

“Oh ok, so friends send heart emojis and say, ‘That is why I love you’? What happened to your story about you just talking to the guys?”

Dustin sat in silence as he could no longer justify his actions.

She crossed her arms as she sat brokenhearted. “Dustin, take me home; we are over. I do not *have to* and *will not* put up with this anymore.”

“Sofia, I am sorry...”

“I don’t care what you say Dustin; it’s over. You think you can keep doing this and apologizing?” she said as she continued to cry bitterly.

“Sofia! You are going to shut up about this right now, you hear me!”

“Dustin, take me home! I am through with you!”

With jaws clenched and lips pressed, Dustin exited the car and slammed the driver’s door behind him.

He walked to the passenger door as Sofia leaned away terrified. Upon opening the door, he furiously shoved Sofia in the face before reaching down. “Hand me the damn phone right now!”

Her hand caressed her face as she stood up to him. “D-Dustin, did you just hit me? Did you hit me?”

“I told you to cut it out! I am going to tell you one more time, and one time only. Hand me my phone!”

Gently, she placed her fingertips upon her face. “You just hit me, Dustin, you just hit me...” She reached down into her bag. “I am calling the cops.”

He punched her once more before snatching away her phone.

A bloodcurdling scream ensued as she cowered in fear. “Stop it Dustin!”

He closed the door and walked to the trunk of the car. As this was happening, all Sofia could do was sit in trepidation and fear for her life.

Dustin returned with a rope in his hand. He said no words but the anger from within showed through his countenance. His face was flushed red as he scowled. He had become a completely different person; there was no longer any reasoning with him as the fury continued to build within.

“Dustin, no!” shouted Sofia as she fought against him. “Dustin, please stop! You’re hurting me! Dust-” As the rope became tighter, she grasped it with her fingertips to pry off pressure, but to no avail. In her last attempts, she began to kick, but that was not enough to ward off the much stronger Dustin.

Sofia continued to flail her legs as she in her final attempts try to loosen the rope. A few moments later, she stopped moving. Her lifeless arms collapsed over to her side as her body hung over the driver’s seat.

Dustin still in a fit of rage began to panic as he paced back and forth. *What did I do? What did I do? She’s, she’s dead.* Storming

towards the car, he grabbed Sofia's lifeless body along with the rope which still clung to her neck. Placing her upon his shoulders, he put her in the trunk and drove further off the edge of the highway. Getting out, he walked through a thicket and down to a riverbed where he then disposed of the body. Returning to his vehicle, he noticed that no one was around to witness the crime. Even after committing such a heinous act, he left with peace of mind believing, he may get away.

A day that began so full of love and laughter, ended in ruin.

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Dustin continued to plead as he summed up the account. "That's what happened, but again, what was I supposed to do? She not only threatened to leave me but threatened to call the cops. Was I supposed to go to jail because of her? My life would have been ruined if I had allowed her to do that. I-I know it sounds crazy me trying to justify this, Connor, but please, understand me."

The fact that he had the audacity to try to obtain an iota of empathy regarding his situation made Connor want to kill the creature, just so he could get to Dustin before it could.

Connor was surprised Dustin was able to get all of this out in less than a minute, but it served no purpose. In his mind, Dustin was already good as dead.

The only people Connor felt a profound sadness for at that moment were of course Sofia, and also that of Malik. Malik was torn between saving one of his best friends, while at the same time understanding that what Dustin did called for the gruesome actions which were to take place. Seeing Malik sob bitterly with his head in

his lap brought upon a bit of remorse, but even if Malik wanted to put the answer in to save him, Connor knew he could not allow him.

As the last seconds ticked down, the creature's rows of teeth which dragged upon the floor began to contract rapidly causing pure concrete to crumble under its jaws.

"Connor! Maliiik!" Said Dustin as he gave his final cry. "M-Malik, please, if Connor is not understanding, I know you will!" said Dustin through the walkie.

"I am sorry, this is no longer my issue," said Malik under his breath, knowing Connor would not save him this time around

The image on the TV shifted to what was happening in real life. Connor was able to see the utter fear and pain on Dustin's face. When he imagined the pain and fear on Sofia's face, he could in no way, shape, or form feel any compassion for him. For each and every time he cried out, he felt justice was being served for the times Sofia cried out.

Clenching his fist, Connor decided to let it all out. "You vile disgusting monster; you soulless being. The only reason, THE ONLY REASON! I let you live that last encounter was because I needed to know. I needed to know for sure that you took Sofia away from my family and me. That was all I needed to know Dustin, and now you can rot away for all I care. The hell you put her through, how could you Dustin? You had her suffer in the hospital, all because of your selfishness. If you did not want to be there for the child, I would have been there! Her family! We would have cared for it! We would have helped you!" He cried before pressing his finger to his chest. "Do you know what you put me and everyone through when we had to watch her in that state? Do you! My mom and dad had sleepless nights just

hoping she would pull through. She pulled through, only for you to accomplish in the end what you sought to do before. Take her life. Sofia is at peace now, but the hell you put her through while she was alive... I hope you endure that and more for all eternity. Dustin, I despise you. May I never see or hear from you again. What a monster you are.”

“Connor! Malik!”

The chains which the being wielded began to move rapidly upon the floor as its teeth continued to tear through the solid concrete. The creature remained sitting as a chain instantly whipped across the room, wrapping around Dustin’s neck. So forceful was the impact that every vein in his head and face became visible before blood began to seep from his ears. As one chain remained around Dustin’s neck, it continued to bite upon the other, using its arms to lift its head from off the ground. With its remaining empty hand, it seized Dustin as it dragged him off into the darkness behind the morbid scenes. Connor didn’t feel any remorse at that moment, only redemption. All he could think of was the justice that was finally served for Sofia. A sense of justice that he felt was long overdue.

When the authorities found out that she was missing, of course they saw Dustin as a suspect and had him under investigation, but the act he put on was so great that he fooled everyone. They hadn’t found anything linking him to the crime. Connor finally knew, and that was sufficient enough. More importantly, he knew the person who was responsible for taking Sofia was removed from life itself.

Once more, Connor had a strong urge to check the time. Glancing at his watch, it read 6:52 am.

Tears slowly descended upon Malik's face, landing on his charcoal jeans. "This just isn't right."

As much as Connor wanted to listen to Malik, he was still processing what Dustin had done to Sofia. He always protected Sofia, and the one person who he trusted the most took her life away. He could only think if he did manage to leave this place, how would he reveal such truth to his mom and dad? How could he tell them someone they accepted and treated as family took their Sofia? In all, he was just grateful that justice was served and that there was finally some sense of closure.

If he appreciated anything about this place, it was the fact that at least a small period of time was granted before the game proceeded to the next person. Such time was crucial for both Malik and Connor at that moment since they had to be at optimal thought capacity to deal with the situations ahead.

They sat and waited. Connor did not feel fear or care about anything anymore. Whatever the game may have presented his way, he was surely ready for it. After the things he saw, it seemed nothing could unravel him beyond what he endured. Some more time passed, and the game once again activated. This time, it was Malik's turn. Malik was the last of Connor's friends, and he only wished that he could see with his own two eyes that at least one of them make it out alive.

Connor focused his attention on Malik. "You can do it... I know it. Stay strong, if anyone can make it out of here, I know it's you."

Malik sat somberly as he seemed to prepare himself mentally. Looking at him, Connor could tell he had also somewhat become

numb to the whole situation. Seeing all his friends go in such a terrible fashion weighed heavily upon his psyche.

Malik let out a long exhale. “Who knows Connor? Whether or not I survive, stay strong. That is all I want. What exactly does this place want from us? Clearly, its whole purpose is to mentally destroy us before eventually taking us out. I feel like there is no way to escape this place. This whole place is wicked. Evil. After me, you’ll be the last and I’m not sure how this thing will operate when it’s just you. Whatever happens, I know you’ll find a way. The years I spent with you, Caleb, Thiago, Ethan, and even Dustin, I’ll never regret it. Just sad it has to end this way.” Somberly he blinked before wiping away the tears. “And I am sad you had to see and hear that Connor.”

“Malik, it’s ok. Worry about you right now; that is what’s most important.” It was weird. Even after witnessing all that trauma, their will to survive and focus on the task at hand overpowered their urge to crawl into the fetal position and give up.

Malik’s lip quivered, his eyes gently closing as he embraced the moment and accepted his fate. Before leaving, they felt it was only right to give each other one last dap and a brotherly embrace.

“Stay strong Connor.”

As Malik exited the room, Connor informed him to do as the others had previously done, which is to do only as the game informed.

“Malik, hold on, it’s instructing me to walk down to the end of the hallway. Wait there until I see what’s up ahead,” Connor instructed, alternating between the walkie and the game controller as he had no one to assist him.

As Connor progressed through the hall, aside from the creepy and downtrodden atmosphere, he did not run into anything of much concern.

“Alright, Malik, walk down to the very end of the hallway until you reach the elevator. Don’t worry, what you see before you now is basically what you’ll see as you walk.”

His walk to the elevator took some time as he was in no rush to meet his demise. After some time, he finally arrived.

“Ok Connor, what’s next?”

“Alright, wait there. The game is instructing me to take the elevator to the basement.”

Connor never really liked going into basements no matter where they may have been. Of all places, this hotel is where he hoped he would never have to face one.

Upon reaching the basement, he saw that it was in the worst state of all the floors. Connor thought he saw something run along the ceiling at great speed, but quickly brushed it off as he thought it was his mind playing tricks on him. Most of the walls were broken and crumbled. Four doors down Connor was commanded to walk and enter on the left.

The setup appeared to be an office of some sort where there was a stage door situated in the middle. On the door, it read, “The Help of the Poor”, which Connor guessed was some sort of charity organization.

“Hey Malik, you can take the elevator down. Just a heads up, this floor appears to be the worst I’ve seen yet, but don’t worry. I didn’t run across anything that may present any harm to you. Go to



the basement, walk four doors down and enter the one on your left. As you know, just be ready for anything.”

Connor did not tell him he may have seen something run across the ceiling as he first wanted to be sure. He knew the situation for Malik was difficult as is and sought not to make matters worse.

“Alright, I hear you.”

Connor did not hear too much fear or anxiety coming from Malik. Most likely due to him becoming partially numb from seeing what happened to his close friends. After a couple of moments, he reached the basement.

“Yeah, you were definitely right. This floor looks much worse than the one I was just on, but whatever man. Let’s do this. Did you say walk four doors down and enter the one on my left?”

“Yeah.”

Malik would soon be introduced to a piece of his past, and the sad part was that Connor knew it would be in a humiliating fashion as with the others. Connor only hoped the scenario would not surpass the sorrow of what had taken place previously.

“Oh man, yeah, I remember this place. I worked here about three years ago as a volunteer. Whatever man, let’s get this over with.”

With those words, the dummy that appeared to be Malik began to move about. The dummy was sitting at a desk where it then got out of its seat and walked a small distance. After looking in both directions, it reached into what appeared to be a donation box and took something. Clearly, it was money. The dummy returned to its seat and that is when the replay of the event ended.

Nonchalant, Malik shrugged his shoulders. “Hey man, I’m sure we’ve all stolen something at some point in our lives. Bring up the question so I can get this over with. As a matter of fact, let me tell my story.”

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It was a beautiful sunny day as Malik made his way to the, “Come Together for the Poor” homeless foundation, an establishment meant to help the needy with food and funds. Most of all, the funds were to help keep the program running. The program not only hired people willing to help physically by volunteering their time, but it also brought in people wanting to donate their hard-earned money to help a good cause.

Malik was one of the few to work at the organization, but not of his own will. His mother sought that he volunteered his time there, not only because she saw it as a Godly thing to do, but also to keep him off the streets where he usually ran into trouble.

“Good morning,” said Mrs. Brownwood, the lead coordinator of the organization.

“Good morning,” replied Malik.

“Today you can man the front desk. Brandy has called out today. Also, you can bring the donation box to the back around your lunch break; it should be rather full now.”

“Okay Mrs. Brownwood. Will do.”

The day was going well as people came in and out, those seeking assistance and those seeking to give assistance. It would not be long before a middle-aged woman walked in and left a lasting impression.

Not only did she leave a donation for the organization, but she also made sure to leave Malik with a few words.

“Young man, I am so proud of you.” She adjusted her purse strap as she continued to smile. “To volunteer your time for such a good cause is such a noble thing to do. You will truly be blessed for all your time and effort.”

With enough effort, he was able to force out a smile. “Yes, thank you, I try.”

“Well ok now, I must go. Thank you young man, and may you have a blessed day.”

“You too, take care.” He looked down as he resumed texting on his phone. *If I had a choice, I would rather be at home right now.*

It would be a couple more minutes before Malik’s attention was removed from his phone. Suddenly, he scooted back in his chair before looking down at his watch. *Dang, I ain’t even know it was almost lunchtime already. Better bring this donation bin to storage before my break.*

A slight frown formed upon his face as he listlessly walked to the back room. *I’m just ready to go home right now.*

He dropped the donation box onto the table with a loud thud. The impact in which it landed caused the improperly secured lock to become detached.

Seeing the error, Malik reached out to secure the lock, but then suddenly, something caused him to stop in his tracks. Anxiously, he began to look to his left, then to his right. A sigh of anxiety came forth as he carefully lifted the lid, making sure not to make any noise in the process. He nervously looked behind him once more. Upon looking

inside, he saw bills and loose change. He reached his hand into the box as he continued to look behind him. As fast as his hand went in, it came out. In his hand sat a single one-hundred-dollar bill. Quickly he placed the lid back. As he was about to secure the lock, he decided to walk towards the door. Peeking his head carefully, he looked to make sure no one was around or approaching. Seeing that the coast was clear, in haste, he made his way back toward the donation box. Opening it once more, he reached inside and secured two more one-hundred-dollar bills. *I am sure this will not make or break them. Plus, I have to buy the new kicks that just came out. Besides, I am sure I am not the only one who does this and, this is my first time doing it. Ok not, my first, but I am sure others do it more than I do.* Feeling satisfied, he shut the lid before securing the lock.

After lunch concluded, he not only felt good that his belly was full, but it also brought him great satisfaction knowing that his pockets were full. Unfortunately, not with his own hard-earned money. Rather from others who donated, seeking to do good in the world.

Knowing he had only two more hours left before leaving, Malik walked back to his station in a brighter mood than when he left.

“I hope you enjoyed your lunch Malik. I see you brought the donation bin in the back and brought out a new one. Thanks for all you do Malik; you have been of great help here,” said Mrs. Brownwood. Mrs. Brownwood truly took pride in seeing the youth standing for something positive and keeping themselves out of trouble. She was seen as a motherly figure to all in the community; everyone truly appreciated her.

Halfheartedly, he smiled. “Thank you, Mrs. Brownwood.”

Upon walking away, Malik sat at his station where he continued to be occupied by his phone. The daily sports highlight and social media helped the time pass, and soon it was time for him to leave.

“Bye, Mrs. Brownwood.”

“Ok Malik, you take care.”

Malik wasted no time heading home and changing back into his regular street clothes, where he would then venture out to the sneaker store to acquire the new \$300 pair of sneakers. They were newly released, so he could not wait to be one of the first to wear them.

“Hey, what’s up man!” said Dennis who worked at the store. “Yo, the new retros just released, and we only got about two left; their selling out like crazy. Imma probably try to get them tomorrow when I get paid. What about you?”

Nodding slowly, Malik proceeded to give him a wide toothy grin. “Yeah, you already know I’m getting them. I came today to pick them up. I was just hoping I could even find a pair right now, so I am definitely grabbing them while I can.”

“For real? Man, out of one of the two pairs left, one is in your size. Hold up, let me run in the back and grab them for you before someone else comes and gets them.”

“Alright, cool.”

Malik sat and waited excitedly for his new pair of sneakers, never once seeming to consider the act he had done earlier.

It would not be long before Malik saw his new pair of sneakers being carried from the back.

“Come over here, I will ring you up.”

Soon Malik held in his hands his new prized sneakers.

Malik reached out as he gave his friend Dennis a dap. “Good looking out. I’ll catch you later.”

“Alright, later.”

Malik headed back home where he wasted no time coming back out as the day was still young, and he wanted to show off his new kicks. As expected, everyone was giving him the attention he craved. In all of this, he still never really seemed to consider his wrongdoings from earlier.

Two weeks would pass since the purchase and all seemed well. That is until one day when he entered the building to perform his volunteer duties; he witnessed an unfortunate scene.

“Please! Oh please! Just give us a little more time, we will have the money!” cried Mrs. Gaines.

In a sense of worry, Malik approached his volunteer partner, Brandy. “What’s going on here? What happened?”

“It turns out that one of our most frequent contributors lost her job, and the landlord evicted her due to one missed payment. She came to Mrs. Brownwood yesterday, a day before the payment and asked for help.”

“But why did she wait so long to help?”

“She was always one to give and help, so she did not feel comfortable taking away from the organization. In the end, she knew she had to reach out for help but by then, it was too late. The money we raised was already paid out and donated just a day prior.”

Scratching his head, Malik began to shake his head in shame. “How much was the rent?”

“She only had \$600 of the \$900, so she needed \$300. The craziest part is that all the money we had gathered was just enough to pay off to the charities we had in mind, we just didn’t have \$300 to give to her on such short notice.”

Almost instantly, Malik’s jaw dropped as intense shock radiated throughout his frame. His hands trembled as they flexed open. In his mind, he remembered the \$300 dollars he took just two weeks prior. It was then he realized that his greed and selfishness caused the pain and suffering of another.

Brandy continued to shake her head. “The landlord showed no compassion, no sympathy, and it’s no surprise. They are trying to get rid of the current residents there and bring in wealthier tenants to rack in more money and increase the property value. That is all they care about, money.”

Malik continued to talk as his eyes remained down. “S-so, all she needed was \$300?”

“Yeah, and as I said, we could have helped, but she asked for assistance too late. By then, we had already paid off all the money we gathered to charities and to help with this organization.”

His body began to perspire. *I mean, it’s not my fault. If I had not taken the money, it probably still would have been used for something else. I am still puzzled how everything paid off was to the dollar amount raised; we were not off by one cent. If only the \$300 was there...they could have helped her. I can’t blame myself; I am sure*

*the money would have went to something else by the time she came. Yeah, that's it. It wasn't my fault, it wasn't.*

The scene drifted away as everyone watched Mrs. Brownwood continue to weep over the mishap of her good friend, Mrs. Gaines.

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Malik continued to plead his case, “And that’s what happened? What was I supposed to do?”

Connor understood him when he said everyone takes something that does not belong to them at one point in their lives. Though, he could never understand or agree with anyone who steals from the poor. It was not long before the question appeared.

“Malik, listen up. The game is now presenting the question. When you stole from the homeless donation box, what was your motivation? A) You wanted extra money, B) You felt you needed it more than them, or C) Times were tough.”

Static emitted as Malik sighed into the walkie. “Imma be honest, I didn’t really need the money, but I felt I could use the extra money. Besides, it was not like I did it all the time, and from what I saw, a lot of donations were coming in. I probably did it once or twice, maybe three. I’m sure I was not the only one doing it. I was sure what I took didn’t make or break the organization or prevent anyone from being fed. But I guess I was wrong...So, there, you can put A. I just wanted some extra money.”

As much as Connor wanted to tell him that was completely the wrong attitude to have, he just could not, knowing that he and Malik were already in a difficult position. As much as it was good for his



mental state to be as confident and nonchalant as he was. Connor had a feeling that Malik's nonchalant behavior could anger whatever was in control of this place.

The questions that were being presented were not to keep them in a calm state of mind. They were meant to arouse another part of them that they kept dormant and hidden.

“Connor let's keep this thing going. Where do I go next? Just be quick and simple about it, the faster the better. I have nothing to hide.”

“The game is telling me to walk eight doors down and enter the one on the right. Wait here while I check it out.”

The further Connor walked down the hall in the game, the creepier it became. Earlier, he questioned whether or not he saw something running across the ceiling, but this time, he was certain as to what he was looking at.

A four-legged reptilian beast of some sort with massive claws stood before him in the game. The claws were relatively short but wide. Its head broad and stout with large limbs. It had no nose or eyes as it turned its head about. By the looks of it, Connor guessed it was about seven feet in length at best. It ran from the floor onto the wall and back into the dark ceiling until it was no longer in sight. He was still able to hear it move as it scurried across the ceiling, which was in a way more unsettling than the sight of it.

Eagerly, Connor contacted Malik through the walkie. “Hey Malik, just a heads up. I went ahead in the game and came across something very disturbing. I have no idea what it was, but it ran on all fours and climbed walls. Just be on guard.”

“Climbed walls? Oh, hell no!” responded Malik.

“Malik again, don’t let it scare you. Once you go back in the hall, just keep moving to where I tell you, and if possible, try to avoid looking at it. Wait a while longer until I enter the room it’s directing me to, then you can head out.”

It only took a few more steps before he reached the door and entered. The scenery consisted of a street, a house, and a car. In the car were three dummies, one of them resembling Malik. In the house altogether were about four dummies. They consisted of two female-like dummies, a child, and a male. The room was able to accommodate the large scene due to the fact that the room’s dimensions were exceptionally larger than one would expect from outside of it. The best example would be looking at a small house from the outside, but once you walk in, the dimensions resemble an endless field.

“Malik, whenever you’re ready, you can make your way out. Again, there’s for sure something out there, so be prepared. Just be careful. From what we saw with the others, there is no present danger unless you fail to answer the questions. Nonetheless, be careful Malik, and stay focused.”

A deep sigh radiated through the walkie. “How can I really brace myself for a four-legged demon running across the walls? Never mind. Like I said, let’s just get this over with.”

Connor waited patiently for him to arrive, knowing Malik was far more nervous than he was.

“Oh damn! Connor! Connor! I see it!! Yo, I’m not walking that way,” said Malik as he looked on in a state of profound fear.

That was the first time in a while Connor was able to perceive fear in Malik.

“Malik, the first step in trying to get out of this place is mentally preparing yourself. Just walk ahead. Don’t let it intimidate you.”

Connor could hear the fright in Malik’s breathing as it sped up. He not only heard Malik’s breathing, but worse, he could hear the four-legged being scurrying about the area.

Suddenly, Connor heard a loud bang as Malik ran into the room, slamming the door behind him.

Short bursts of air came through the walkie as Malik caught his breath. “I-I’m here, I don’t think I can go back out there. W-whatever’s out there, I don’t wanna see it again.”

“Malik, does the environment ring any bells?”

As Connor asked the question, he could hear Malik’s breathing slow down. It took a while for him to respond, indicating he was thinking heavily upon it.

“I remember this, yeah... I do.”

The dummies soon began to become active as Malik’s dummy was searching for something eagerly in the glove compartment of a car. As it did so, the other dummies appeared to glance around nervously, almost as if they were lookouts of some sort. Connor’s attention was diverted to the home which showed a young boy on the floor playing with some toys. Turning back to Malik’s dummy, Connor saw that in its hands was a firearm. Holding the weapon, the Malik dummy proceeded to step out of the car where its hands jolted, symbolizing the ejection of bullets from its chamber. Then, Malik’s

dummy simply reentered the car where it once again became inanimate.

Connor's attention was once more diverted to the home, and he could see that all those within the home were standing over a child dummy. A woman seeming to be its mother held the child in her arms, resting its head on her knees. One of the other dummies knelt next to the mother and child, comforting them while another one ran to the phone. Then, they stopped moving altogether.

It was clear what was happening in this scene. Connor was just hoping deep inside that Malik would never do such a thing. The thought that he killed a child brought on a plethora of emotions. It is very sad and unfortunate when people die to senseless violence, but when a child is involved, it takes on a whole new light. It was time for Connor to read the question to him, a question that pretty much validated Connor's suspicion.

"Malik, the question I must ask you is here, and it reads: 'Did you intend to kill the seven-year-old boy? A) No, B) Yes, C) you were looking for someone else, or D) It was intended for anyone living there.'"

"Yo, this is crazy, I-I didn't know he passed away," said Malik crying bitterly. "When I got home, I saw the incident on the news. They said the young kid was shot, but it seemed like he was going to live. I-I guess he passed maybe a few days later. N-no, I have to explain what happened."

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The story goes back to that eventful day as Malik sat in his room with two of his best friends. They were planning a night of partying, a way for them to forget the cares of the world.

“Hey yo! Yo! Look quick! Renae responded to my message! I told you she was feeling me!” said Malik as he held the computer on his lap.

Jamal scooted off the couch in a hurry to confirm his statement. “No, you’re lying. You’re lying man!”

Soon all three of them were gathered around the computer as Malik became the center of attention, seeing that he got the notice of one of the hottest girls from their high school. Even though they were no longer in high school, it was still a game for them to see if they could land what was considered to be the most attractive girl in the entire school.

Excitedly, Jamal began to tap Malik’s arm. “Yo! Write her now and see if she responds. Man, this is crazy, how you get her to respond to you?” He began to beckon with his hand. “Josiah, look! He is telling the truth.”

“How did you do it?” Josiah asked as a slight moment of jealousy took hold. “Man, I was writing her for nearly a year at one point and she never responded.”

“Haha, I guess I am just that good,” said Malik.

After a few minutes, the excitement died down. Malik decided to write her back where he awaited a response. Malik’s brows soon furrowed. “Yo, what?!”

Josiah sat up excitedly. “She responded to you already! Man, I have been writing her for like the last week and she ain’t respond yet. What’s your secret?”

Malik sat in silence as he shook his head, his nostrils flared with vexation. “Someone just tagged me in a post that Timothy wrote about me. Yo, I told that dude to keep my name out of his mouth. He really thinks he gone just keep playing with me.”

“He still talking! What he wrote?” Jamal asked.

Malik held the phone up as they read the tagged post.

“He went too far now; he is really testing you. I am sure almost everyone has seen this by now, and they already knew the two of you were beefing. He trying to punk you,” Josiah said.

Malik hopped off the sofa where he took one last puff. “We going to see him right now.”

Malik and his friends threw on their coats and were on their way to exact retaliation. The more they drove, the more agitated and enraged it seemed they became. After about fifteen minutes of driving, they were finally near Timothy’s residence.

Josiah stopped across the street. “Ya’ll see him? We already been out here for a while now. What if he not even here? Hey man, I say we leave and come back for him another day.”

Malik stuck his head out the window as he peered around. “Nah, I don’t see him yet. He probably inside still talking crap on social media, but he gonna learn today. I know he scared to come outside.”

The three of them continued to wait for him to step out. A few people passing by from time to time did not think anything suspicious

of the car. The windows were dark enough to where the occupants would be hard to spot, but they were not altogether tinted.

Malik continued to look around as he continued to clench his jaw in anger. “He ain’t coming out, I doubt it. He knew not to talk all that smack and come outside. You know what.” Malik opened the glove compartment before looking down as he cocked a pistol. Aiming it at the home, he began to fire shots.

“Yo, chill! What you doing?” asked Jamal as he did not expect that. “I ain’t know we were immediately going that far. I thought we were gone rough him up a bit, aint know we was gone start shooting.”

After Malik fired a few shots into the residence, Josiah drove off before they could be spotted.

Malik tucked the smoking pistol into his waist. “Relax, those were only warning shots and I doubt anyone got hit. I am sure he got the message; if he wants to do it again, the next shots won’t be warnings.”

Meanwhile, inside the residence in which the shots were fired, a plate shattered to the floor as a woman dropped it to tend to a blood curdling scream.

“Mom! Mom! What’s wrong?” shouted a young lady.

“Darnell! Darnell! Nooo! Please no!” the mother cried as she cradled her seven-year-old son in her arms as he clung to life.

“Darnell! Darnell!” shouted the young woman as two other family members stood in the back; one dialed 911.

All anyone could do was stand around and hope for the best outcome.

Meanwhile, Timothy who was the victim's older brother was at a party where he and his friends smoked and drank without a care in the world. Liquor bottles rattled under the beat of loudly blasted music.

High on drugs, Timothy held out his hands. "Yo, pass the blunt already." He placed the blunt to his mouth as he took a long inhale. "Since you want to hog it, now Imma finish it."

"Man, do you. I had enough already. I should have laid off the pills today though," said a friend who seemed to be both half asleep and half awake.

A smoke cloud flew in the air as Timothy continued to smoke. "Haha, yo, I know that coward ass Malik got the message already. He soft; he don't want no smoke with me and everyone knows it. He's weak and I'm gonna continue to clown him." As his eyes remained half closed, he took another puff.

Timothy and his friends spent the rest of the night indulging in liquor and smoking. It would not be long before the moment was interrupted by his cellphone ringing.

Groggy, he rubbed his eyes. "Hey, Layla, what's up? I'm kind of...busy right now. You going to have to make it quick."

For the first few seconds of him being on the phone, he seemed to be in a state of stupor as he listened. Then suddenly, he seemed to gain energy as he rose from the sofa. The booze which rested upon his lap crashed and splattered on the floor as he stood.

"Layla, no, stop playing. D-Darnell got what? Layla please, please tell me this is some messed up joke."

As he continued to listen, the adrenaline began to kick in which seemed to have eliminated any high that was present in his system.



“I’m on my way,” he said before hanging up.

Timothy and his friends drove nearly twenty minutes before arriving at the hospital.

On the verge of hyperventilating, the air forcefully exited and entered his nose as he spoke to the receptionist. “D-Darnell, I am here to see Darnell. Please, where is he?”

“It’s ok sir,” said the receptionist as she tried to ease the panic. “May I have your I.D.?”

After taking down his info, she gave him the clear to go and see his brother.

When he reached the entrance of the room, tears immediately began to form in his eyes. Rushing to his bedside, he began to weep. “Mom! What happened! What happened!” The tears trickled down his brother’s face as he wept over him. Seeing him attached to a respirator with tubes took a huge toll on his emotions. At that point, everyone in the room was lamenting over the situation, friends and family alike.

Summoning his strength, Timothy stood as he turned to the doctor who looked on from the door’s entrance. “P-please tell me he will be ok. Please, just tell me.”

It suddenly became difficult for the doctor to maintain eye contact. “Based on the damage sustained to his brain from the injury, the chances of recovery are unlikely. I of course would love to leave the best news possible for you and everyone present; but to be completely truthful, I fear he will not make it through this. His injury is just too grave. After the next day or so, a clearer determination will be made.”

Timothy stumbled to a nearby chair as his face fell into the palm of his hands. Deep within, he knew eventually he would have to say goodbye to his brother.

A few days would pass before the decision had to be made to let him pass on. The sorrow for the mother did not end there. A few weeks later, she would lose Timothy.

Timothy instantly assumed and knew Malik was responsible for the shooting since it took place not long after he made that social media post. He visited the block of Malik where he attempted to shoot at a few of his boys during a drive-by. None of his targets were hit, but unfortunately, he was. Ultimately, he succumbed to his wounds.

A childish post, a dramatic reaction, led to only pain and sorrow.

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Malik continued to plead and weep uncontrollably, but it soon became urgent for him to stay focused. Connor was able to perceive that he was losing himself to the situation.

“Malik, you have to answer fast, please. Look, you will have plenty of time later on to think about that day, but what’s most important now is that we escape from here Malik. Please...” Despite his words, Malik seemed to be lost in his emotions.

“Connor, Connor, you didn’t see what he was saying to me on social media. Talking a bunch of smack, disrespecting my name, and telling everyone I was a punk. I let a lot of the stuff he did slide for a while, but he kept testing and testing me,” he said choking on tears. “If anyone is to blame, it’s him! If he never tried to disrespect my name, this could have been avoided. B-b-but him? The kid? I didn’t mean to do it, I didn’t.”

Connor not only began to feel immense sympathy for Malik, but also for the kid and his parents. For an innocent person to be killed, let alone a kid was beyond unfortunate. A family was put in between the problem of two people's ignorance and in the end, paid for it. Connor wished he could have let Malik grieve and reflect more, but then his five minutes to answer the question began.

“Malik, please, give an answer; you don't have much time. Think about everyone you would be leaving behind, Malik; you still can make up for the wrong that you did,” Connor cried.

“It wasn't meant for him! It wasn't! I never intended to kill anyone! I just wanted to leave him a warning to never disrespect my name and think he could get away with it. I knew it was a stupid decision, but I was angry. He tried to disrespect me as a man, and at that point, I couldn't control my anger. I wasn't going to keep letting it slide. He had to learn one way or another. I just never meant for it to go this far. I-I really didn't...”

As Connor listened, the time continued to dwindle. Suddenly, the hideous reptile-looking beast entered through the ceiling and into the room where Malik stayed. It ran from the ceiling to the floor and back at a rapid pace, sometimes even running right alongside Malik.

“Malik! Please give an answer! A little under two minutes remain! I know you're upset, but you have to stay focused! Sure, you accidentally took the kid's life, but by doing this Malik, what will it resolve? Pull yourself together Malik!”

“Yeah, I see it. I know it's coming for me, for what I did, and I probably deserve what is coming. I never knew the young kid had died. I can't live on knowing I did something like this. As a man, I just

cannot. The kid didn't even get a chance to grow up. A mother could not even see her kid grow into a teenager, a man, all because of me."

"Malik, please! There is not enough time!" Connor shouted once more.

"Let me tell you something else Connor, a mother lost two sons because not long after, his big brother, the guy I was beefing with died in a shootout; retaliating against others on my block for what I did. Why did the kid have to die? Now that I think about it, why did that young man have to die over beef with me? Over pettiness. Now a mother has lost two sons, and a big part of that blame is on me. If I go home and look my little brother in the face, all I will think about is that little kid. That little kid whose life I ended so early. I can't live with myself knowing I did this."

Reeling from his stubbornness, Conner cried out once more. "Malik! Snap out of it! I am going to need you to gather yourself. You must keep hope Malik, and if there was ever any time you should have hope, it is now. Malik, this place feeds off despair and hopelessness."

"Connor, yo man, I'm sorry. You were a great friend to me, and I'm glad I was able to know you, but I can't live on knowing I did this. I-I just can't. You're a good guy, and I know you'll make it out of here. Tell my mom I love her. My brother, tell him to stay the good kid he is. Help show him the path and road I never took."

"Malik! What are you saying? Don't do this! It's not too late to change and make a better life for yourself," Connor shouted. A little under a minute remained and as the timer dwindled, the beast became more enraged. Truly in this place, time waited for no one.

## CHAPTER 8

**M**alik was still choosing between saving his life or losing it with what he saw as dignity.

“Malik! Malik! Don’t give up. It was a mistake! You can always make things better. It is never too late. You can’t change your past, but you can have a better future.”

“Yea, a mistake it was, but it’s one I should pay for. No one forced me to lift that gun and fire it into that family’s home. I caused great pain and suffering to people who never did me no wrong. Stay strong Connor.”

The game then switched to what was happening in the room with Malik. As Connor looked into Malik’s eyes, the sorrow in them was more than words could ever express. Connor was truly able to see he was sincere in what he was saying, and what was sadder was that he had never once seen Malik in such sorrow. To see him break down in such an emotional way was a lot to take on mentally. What was even more upsetting was knowing that he was giving up. It seemed the honor he had within could not let him live on. No matter how much Connor pled and begged for him to push on, it was of no use.

With seconds left to spare Connor pled and begged earnestly for him to reconsider. “Malik! Please, don’t give up! It’s not too late! What about your family Malik? Your mom, your brother, your sister?”

They all need you. Don't do this!" Connor shouted. Connor began to contemplate putting in a random answer, hoping it would be the one and that the game would accept it; but then again, he did not want it on his conscious knowing he could ultimately be a part of Malik's demise, by submitting the wrong answer. Or simply by intervening, on Malik's behalf.

Everything began to move in slow motion. Connor watched as Malik collapsed onto his knees, lamenting for what he had done. Slowly, he began to shake his head from side to side as he squeezed his eyes shut; tears followed.

Meanwhile, the raging beast which was about four feet away from him reared one of its forelimbs, its claws fully exposed. Every muscle in its body flexed as it menacingly looked upon Malik. Suddenly, the beast took a massive leap toward him, preparing to strike him with its massive claws. Connor knew that with just one swipe, it would all be over.

Malik's eyes locked onto it as it made its charge. Only sorrow was on his face and a sense of acceptance. "I-I'm sorry. I am sorry for the child's life I took, the people I hurt... please forgive me," were his last words as he clasped his hands in a prayer position.

"Malik! Nooo!" Connor shouted as he balled his fists. At that point, it seemed to be too late.

Both Malik and the creature all of a sudden began to disintegrate as it appeared to land its massive claws upon his face. They evaporated until Connor could no longer see either of them. Profound sadness took over, knowing that Malik, another one of his dearest friends was gone. Connor had a strong inclination to look at his watch once more. It read 6:58 am.

And then, there he was, the last of them. The feeling was indescribable. Friends that Connor grew up with from childhood in what seemed a single moment were taken from him. Connor was still wishing it was all a dream, but no matter how much he tried to convince himself of such, he knew it was far from it.

What began as a return from a sunny trip to Acapulco, full of fun and pleasant memories with five of his best friends, turned to a thing of dread. Connor sat in complete silence as he tried to comprehend the unimaginable. Five people that he grew up with in a single hour, were taken from him.

*What now?* Was all he Could think.

If he was the last person left, then who would instruct and inform him on what to do? Connor no longer felt any fear. In fact, it was like he felt nothing. The only hope he had been holding on to was the hope that he would make it out with his friends. Now that they were gone, he had nothing to motivate him. A strong inclination came upon him to grab onto his cross necklace once more.

As he continued to sit, he took the time to look at all of their belongings lying about the room. They served as a reminder that they all should have been back home with their families, unwinding after a pleasant summer vacation.

This was a place that sought to expose their deepest secrets, mentally breaking them down before ultimately bringing their end. If he could have wished for his friends to depart in any way, he never in a million years would have wanted it to be in such a humiliating and brutal fashion. All he could hope was that whether he made it out or not, he could get the answer as to why they had to endure what they did.

The tears began to flow knowing he was left alone, as well as knowing all his friends were gone. He looked down at his phone only to see his reflection staring back, an emotionally broken and torn person.

Weary, he stumbled out of the armchair and onto the bed where he then collapsed onto his back. As he stared at the ceiling, all he could do was wait for what was next. After spending a few more moments reflecting, he sat up before starting at the TV, inspecting it to see if it may have given any instructions; but as he looked on, all he saw were three darkened figures which symbolized that his friends were gone. Strangely, he was expecting to see four, but Malik's character as with Ethan's, was completely gone from the screen. He had no idea as to what that may have meant, but there was too much going on for him to try and figure out.

As he continued to stare, he heard a voice, but not just any voice, a dreadful one. When it spoke, he could feel the sound waves reverberating through his body. The evil that it carried in the air when it spoke was evident and felt throughout.

“Arise!” it declared.

“Who are you? Why are you doing this? What do you want?” Connor asked in response. He remained afraid; but he was not going to let his fears stop him from getting the answers that he deserved. He did not expect any sympathy from this presence. All he could do was brace himself for what may come next.

“Do not question me! Now arise!” the voice roared. “You are in my realm, and none question me. I order, and you obey!”

As much as he wanted to, Connor felt that getting into an argument with something that sounded like it came from the deepest



pits of hell was not a good idea. All he could do was listen and obey its instructions for the time being and hope for the best. If evil had a voice, this was it.

“Arise, walk through the doors, and tell me what you see.”

He really was not in the mood to hear the menacing voice roar at him again, so Connor did as it asked—or more so, demanded. As he walked, he could hear the sound of many voices innumerable, both human and of creatures, but ignored them to the best of his ability. He also perceived that the walls of the place seemed to be disintegrating very slowly. Connor had been in quite a few situations where explanations were needed, but he felt there was no understanding of what was taking place under any circumstance.

Connor did as the entity instructed and continued to walk forth. He had no idea how the hall may have looked to the others as they were outside, but from what he could tell, it no longer looked anything like it did in the game. There was now only one door in the hall, and that was the one he had left out of. Upon looking back, it was no more. As the place continued to slowly disintegrate, he perceived barrenness, a wasteland. The voice began rumbling again.

“Connor, now, it is time that you answer for the things you’ve done.”

Before him flashed many images and questions. One after the next they came. Connor for the most part had no problem answering them. The voice asking the questions did not appear to be the same as the one that roared at him; this one was calmer, soothing. All the questions were unnerving, but one stood out the most. “Why do you not forgive Dustin?”

Connor furrowed his brows. *But how can I forgive him! Look at what he did to my sister! All the hurt and suffering he has caused my family, how, how could I ever forgive him? He killed our Sofia! How am I supposed to forgive him!* No sooner as Connor imagined those thoughts, he began to debate within himself as if a light within was shown. *Wait, no, I must forgive Dustin, for if I dwell on what he did to my sister, I may become as him, which is selfish and remorseless. I do not want to go on a path that I will regret later. I can't let him change me. As hard as it may seem, I must forgive him.* He looked down at his hands, examining them as they quivered, his tears falling upon the barren wasteland.

If he had to say anything positive about the situation, it would be that nothing asked of him could be compared, to what the others had done.

As he continued to answer, the building had nearly completely evaporated, revealing the abominable wasteland. Above were very thick clouds that constantly moved amid what seemed an endless dark sky. What Connor learned from the experience was that even the littlest things we say or do, that we think are no big deal, can have lasting consequences. In this place, it was also as if in some way, you were able to feel the emotional pain of those you hurt as the questions were presented.

Question after question came; Connor kept on. At one point, he began to question why he kept answering but was getting nowhere. Some of the questions and scenarios played out before him, while many of them did not. Connor remembered not caring about what he did to the individuals in those scenarios. One of them was when he threw out someone's job application, just for not liking them. With many of them, he did not consider apologizing, but in the predicament

he was in, he was able to sympathize and feel the grief he had brought upon others.

Connor continued answering with what seemed to no avail. As he answered, a state of madness seemed to grow in him to the point where he finally broke down.

A hideous and soulless laughter ensued. “Connor! Have you given up?” As it continued to laugh, both behind him and in front of him, Connor saw innumerable creatures approaching. From a distance, they mostly appeared as silhouettes, but he knew they would be gruesome to look upon once they came close. Some were of great stature and others small. Connor began to accept that he would have the same fate as the others. All he could do was imagine and brace himself for what would happen once the creatures got a hold of him.

*This is it.*

The laughter continued, and as his time was coming to an end, he took the time to consider all that was asked of him. The things he’d done, the people he’d hurt, and at that moment, he felt he had to pay his dues for what he did. He uttered a few words to at least cover some of the hurt he may have caused others. Falling to the floor, he looked in the air. “Lord, I’m sorry, please forgive me.”

Once more, he tried to mentally prepare himself for the beings’ advancement, but to his surprise, the hideous laugh and the creatures began to disappear in the air as they got closer. Not only were the creatures and the laugh vanishing, but the barren wasteland also. Through the frightening clouds began to come a light, a light of great comfort. Words could not describe just how comforting the light was; there was no relief or joy on earth he could compare it to. All Connor knew was that whoever or whatever it was that was shining the light

## The Deciding Hour

upon him, he knew they were ultimately responsible for pulling him out of that horrid place. That was the last thing he remembered seeing.

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“Connor! Connor! Oh son!” Cried Connor’s mom as she embraced him. As he came to, his hands slowly went about his body. *What is going on?*

He began to hear the beeping sound of hospital equipment as he wearily opened his eyes, where he was able to see his mom’s soothing and nurturing face once more. Everything from her brown hair to her turquoise eyes and her voice brought the most comfort and ease to his soul. She clutched her beautiful cross pendant as she continued to weep. As Connor looked at his mom, he could see the tears tread down the cross pendant; sparkles of light reflected off her tears as the window’s light shined upon her face. He was beyond relieved to know that he was no longer in that place.

Connor took the time to look at the clock on the wall, and it read 7:00 am. Connor would forever have a thing for 7:00, for that was the time he officially escaped that dreadful place.

In one hour, that one deciding hour, Connor along with his friends had to endure the unexplainable, the unimaginable. Even though it was only one hour, it felt as if he had been there for many days. It was as if time had no bearing in such a place.

As he began to inspect the things around him further, Connor realized that he was lying in a hospital bed. No wires, no IV, just, lying there. He began to pat his body once more to make sure he was fully intact; he did manage to feel a Band-Aid across his forehead.

That was it, just a little ole Band-Aid. He certainly was very grateful for that.

Cries of joy were all he continued to hear. “Son! Oh son!” said Connor’s dad as he embraced him. “Oh, thank God! Thank you! I’m so glad you’re awake. You seemed to have been in a very deep sleep.”

The doctor’s order was for Connor’s parents to let him rest, only allowing them to speak to him once he awoke. Connor never thought he would see someone get so excited about him waking up from a nap. But his parent’s reactions were understandable. At that moment, he was still unsure as to why he was there, but he knew he had to have escaped a very serious situation.

Luckily, a doctor heard the cries of joy and ran in. Connor was hoping maybe he could at least explain what happened.

“Good, he’s awake,” said the doctor before approaching Connor’s bedside. “I am going to give him a quick look and make sure his responses and vitals are normal.”

Weary and confused, Connor looked on. “W-what’s going on? Why am I here?” His eyes gazed down at his hospital gown before making their way around his entire body.

Embracing his clipboard, the doctor gave a quick nod of his head. “First, let me introduce myself. I’m Dr. Salvin. You, young man, have survived a serious car accident. Luckily, you were not too badly injured. You only sustained a minor cut to your forehead. You should be very grateful you escaped only with that. Since the accident, you remained in a very deep sleep.”

Connor turned toward his mom and dad, feeling a little left out and confused. “Car accident? What does he mean? B—”

“Let me explain,” said Dr. Salvin. “As you were returning back from your trip, the car in which you were driving veered off into a ditch. The impact was pretty devastating. The exact cause at this moment is unknown. I’m sure in due time, the exact details will come to light.” Slowly, his eyes closed as his shoulders elevated before he sighed sharply. “Connor, three of your friends did not make it.”

A bulldozer to a building, that was how his words were to Connor’s soul. He immediately sat up, breathing rapidly as he attempted to get out of bed. He looked about at everyone to see if it was a sick joke, hoping to hear a laugh or a “got you”, but all he saw were faces of gloom.

“Mom, Dad, tell me this is a joke,” Connor said before trying to get out of bed in search of his friends. “Mom! Dad!”

“Whoa, whoa, son, take it easy. You can’t just jump off like that,” said Connor’s dad, extending an arm before him.

“B-b-but what does he mean three of my friends did not make it? What does he mean!” Connor cried out as the tears poured. He had already known they were gone because he saw it with his own eyes as he was in that other place, but the reality hit so much harder once he was back.

“We did our best to keep them stable, but unfortunately, they succumbed to their injuries,” said the doctor before placing a hand on his shoulder.

As he lay in grief, he stared at the ceiling with teary eyes. *Caleb, Thiago, Dustin an—*. A burst of adrenaline seemed to have taken over as he sat up in his bed. *The doctor said three of them did not make it, and I saw with my very two eyes Caleb, Thiago and Dustin being taken. That means...* Instantly, he knew who were the ones that made it. “Malik!

Ethan! Let me see them! Where are they? Where are they!” Connor cried, beyond relieved that at least, the two of them made it out alive.

With his brows furrowed and his mouth slightly ajar, the doctor looked at his parents. *But how did he know?*

“Ethan, Malik...They made it out of there! Oh, thank God!” Shouted Connor.

Confused, his mom turned to his dad. “There? What could he be referring to?”

“He just awoke from a deep sleep and a tragic accident, maybe he is just a bit confused,” he said before kissing her forehead. “Don’t worry, I am sure it’s nothing. He just needs time to come to.”

Connor knew exactly why Malik and Ethan made it out and the other three did not, and even though Connor was not morbidly injured, he knew that he also would not have made it had he not done what Malik did in those final moments, which was to acknowledge and repent for the wrongdoing he had done in his life, both knowingly and unknowingly. As for Ethan, he was not sure as to how he was able to escape as he did not see him endure the same things as the others.

Hanging his head, he continued to cry for joy. *Thank you, God.*

As happy and relieved as he was that Ethan and Malik made it, he fell back onto the bed and mourned, knowing it was official that Caleb, Thiago, and even Dustin were gone. This realization also made him remember that he was faced with his mom and dad. Holding the revelation as to who took their precious Sofia away. The tears continued to trickle down. *How can I explain it to them? How can I tell them that the man they accepted into their home and accepted as their own took the love of their lives?*

Connor couldn't tell his parents that he went into some other dimension and that before Dustin took his last breath, he revealed he had taken Sofia's life. Surely both his parents and the doctor, would have thought he had some mental disability due to a head injury, but then again, even if his parents would have believed every word he said, Connor felt that such a thing should never be uttered to them. Her killer had already paid for his actions, and Connor believed that was enough. Some way, somehow, he knew time would bring his parents the closure they needed. He was just glad that he, along with his family, could rest peacefully.

The adrenaline wore down as grogginess began to set back in. Calmly, he turned to his mom. "Were you able to speak with Ethan or Malik?"

"Yes hun, I was able to speak with them briefly, along with their families. Malik was bruised up rather badly, but he is ok now. Ethan on the other hand fared a little better. He was passed out for ten minutes or so after arriving at the hospital but was soon wide awake," she said before smiling as tears followed.

"Mom, why are you crying?"

"When Ethan first awoke, his mother told me the first thing he did was open his Bible and began reading it. He prayed that you all would make it through and not once did he stop. Even now, I am sure he is praying for you all. It just tears me up inside knowing he had to find out that three of his friends did not make it."

Teary eyed, Connor stared down at his gown as he laid in bed. *Ethan, by him praying, I am sure his faith kept our bodies going as our spirits departed for a second chance at redemption. His prayers did not fail just because the others passed; rather, I believe his*



*prayers kept us alive until we could find it within to repent. They died at their own fault. If only they found a will within to repent of their past evils, they would still be here... Their pride ultimately brought their untimely deaths.*

Proverbs 16:18 “Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall.”

The doctor flipped the pages on his clipboard. “Connor, we know you’re eager to go see your friends Malik and Ethan. We’ll let you do that soon enough. We just have to wait until you’re cleared. I’ll have a nurse walk you around the room a bit just to ensure you’re able to stand on your own. From what I see, you look good to go, but it’s always safest to take extra precautionary measures.”

Connor sat as he tried to fully process and accept the reality. “Thank you.”

As Connor waited, he felt a tug on his heart before turning to his parents. “Mom, Dad, I really appreciate you both and I just wanted to say, I love you both. Thanks for everything.” Experiencing such an event would make anyone forever appreciate life in general, more so, for those around them. Even the worse mess-ups in life would seem like nothing in comparison. He looked down at the cross necklace on his chest, a pleasant reminder of how at many points during the chaos, it brought him much comfort. He also took the time to embrace his pendant, a symbol stating that wherever he went, Sofia would always be there with him.

A woman came into the room and introduced herself as Nurse Haley. Connor’s eyes lit as she approached. *Wow, she is beautiful*, he thought. She was a beautiful brunette with the most angelic smile and bright eyes, all of which captured the attention of Connor.

Amused, Connor's dad took notice. Leaning forward, he gently placed a hand on his arm. "Easy there son," he said as he chuckled.

She reached out as she helped to get Connor out of bed. "Hi, Connor, do you feel pain anywhere?"

He groaned just a bit due to his legs partially falling asleep. "No, I'm good," he responded.

"Here, take my hand," she said as she extended her arms.

Before reaching out to grab her hands, he took a moment to look at his cross once more. Gripping it tightly, he nodded slowly in appreciation. *Thank you.*

Holding onto her hand, he slowly hoisted himself out of bed. His mom and dad walked beside him as the nurse held on. The entire time she held his hand, he could not help but stare into her eyes as he admired her beauty and caring nature.

"Any pain?" she asked.

"No, I feel fine," he answered.

Nurse Haley stopped as she continued to hold his hands before giving a warm smile. "Great, you're cleared then. You can go visit your friend now if you like," said the nurse.

"Yes, sure. Thank you."

"It is a bit of a walk, but Ethan's room is a bit closer. Do you want to see him first?"

"Ok."

"Connor, your dad and I will come with you. Come, let's go."

"Thanks, Mom."

## CHAPTER 9

Connor could not reach the room soon enough as it felt like an eternity since he last saw Ethan. Turning the corner, Connor was able to see that Ethan was surrounded by friends and family, and unsurprisingly, he was reading his Bible. He was so into reading his Bible that he did not even notice when Connor first walked in.

Stopping at the side of Ethan's bed, Connor couldn't help but laugh. "Hey, Ethan."

Ethan continued to look down at his Bible before finally looking up. After doing a double take, he sat up intently. "Connor! Connor! You're awake! Man, it's so nice to see you."

The corners of Connor's eyes creased as he smiled. "Ethan, nice to see you too. I'm just so glad you were not badly hurt," he said before turning to nurse Haley and his parents, signaling that he would be ok from here.

"If you need anything, we will be right over there," said Nurse Haley.

As if almost in a trance, Connor watched as the beautiful Haley walked away. Even after some time, his attention remained focused

on her. Continuing to smile gently, he looked on as he remained mesmerized.

Grinning, Ethan looked around awkwardly to see if any others were seeing his awestruck friend. “Connor!” he whispered, yet his attention remained. “Connor!” He called once more before he finally snapped out of it.

“Oh, sorry, I was just thinking about something.”

Ethan broke out in such laughter that he began to have a coughing fit. “Yea, I am sure you were \*cough\* thinking about ‘something.’”

“Ethan! Are you ok?” asked his mother from a distance as she took notice of the coughing.

“Yes, yes, I am fine,” he said, continuing to laugh as he planted the side of his fist to his mouth before returning his attention back to Connor. “Connor, you were just thinking about something? Haha, cut it out, I saw you.”

“Ok, it’s, it’s nothing,” he said as his face remained blushed. “Man, it feels so good to laugh. I really need it, especially at this moment. This is only the beginning of our recovery; we still have a long way to go.”

“Yeah, I definitely agree with you,” Ethan said before giving off a serious disposition. “By the way, I had the strangest dream. I was in a hotel of some sort with you guys, and you all were being... weird. It was so real. It was li—”

Connor reached out and placed a hand on Ethan’s shoulder. “Ethan, I was there.”

The centers of Ethan's eyebrows furrowed as he adjusted his position. "Connor, are you ok? What do you mean you were there?"

"Your dream— well, if we can call it that. I was there, and so were the others."

Such statements only made Ethan more confused and worried. "Connor, tell me what you mean."

"You were speaking to a receptionist in the dream, right?"

Ethan's face shifted from worry to profound curiosity. "W-wh, how? How did you know that?"

"I was there Ethan. How I and the others got there? I do not know."

Ethan looked around in deep thought. "It was not *my* dream; it was *our* dream. Now that I think about it, it wasn't a dream, but an out-of-body experience. I do not know why we were to experience it, but it wasn't a long one, at least for me that is. The last thing I remember saying is that I wanted to go back downstairs to the receptionist area to retrieve my belongings."

"Yeah, I remember that. Were you able to go?"

"I was able to go down. Once I reached the area, what struck me immediately was that it was very sunny and the storm seemed to have stopped. I looked to see where the light was coming from, and as I looked up to the main entry area, there were two windows situated on the top of the door. The sun was beaming through them; it was very sunny. A type of sunlight I never experienced before, very beautiful it was."

“What about the receptionist? Did he say anything to you?”

“Yes, he was there, almost as if waiting for me. Once I exited the elevator, he was standing near the receptionist’s desk as he held my belongings in hand. When I came to retrieve it, I remember him saying, ‘it seems the storm has ended’. This was great news to me as I thought that meant we could leave. We said a few words back and forth, but the last words I remember saying to him was, ‘I’m going to place my belongings in the car and come back for my friends so we can get going.’ He nodded but gave no words. He walked with me to the entrance, where he helped me open the doors and it was so strange; it was almost as if a storm had never happened; complete sun and birds chirping was all I could see and hear. I took a moment to enjoy the relief before walking to the van to drop my things in. As I was walking back, I noticed the receptionist standing at the entrance with a gentle smile. It was a welcoming smile, but then at the same time, it was the kind of smile that said, ‘this has to be done.’ The best way I could describe it is as a smile with a hint of sorrow mingled in. You get what I’m saying?” he asked as he squinted.

“I understand what you are saying. Very strange, what happened next?” Asked Connor.

“He was smiling gently, and as I began to walk back to the door to tell you and the others that it was safe to leave, I heard him utter something. Even though we were some distance away from each other, I saw his mouth moving, but it felt as if he was standing right by me when I heard him speak. I heard him clear as day say, ‘pray for your friends,’ and after saying those words, he gently closed the doors. A bright light came over me, and then, I awoke.”

Looking on, Connor shook his head in astonishment. “Wow, for so long, we thought the worst may have happened to you. I just thank God you made it through. The others and I were not able to experience the pleasant end you had.”

Just then, Ethan began to weep bitterly, so much so that his parents along with Connor’s, came to tend to him. Before they could come close, Ethan sat up. “Guys, guys, no, I’m fine. Thank you.”

Connor turned to them also, reassuring them that it was ok. A hand was placed on Ethan’s shoulder as Connor returned his attention. “Ethan, what’s the matter?”

“When I awoke, that was when my nightmare truly began. Thiago’s room was about seven doors down from my mine,” he said before wiping away his tears. “Very faintly, I could hear the sound of a flatline, and then that was when I knew he was gone. I could hear when his mother gave a cry that went to the depth of my soul. I can remember her just repeating, ‘please bring my Thiago back; please bring him back.’ I was able to hear other families and friends weeping for him, but none could compare to the cry of his mother. Before he passed, she even came to see me at one point, and her seeing me alive seemed to have given her hope that Thiago would make it. Unfortunately, that was not so. My mom went to see how Dustin and his family were holding up and when she returned, that is when I got the unfortunate news that he also did not make it.”

Connor struggled to find the words to bring him some form of comfort. “I am really sorry you had to endure that.”

Ethan could only shake his head from side to side as trails of tears gently streamed down his face. “Even worse, Caleb’s room was

right next to mine. I was able to speak with his mom and dad when I awoke, providing them with as much comfort and encouragement as I could offer. At times, it seemed Caleb was going to make it. I was unable to discern anything spoken between his mom and the doctor; but judging by the look on her face as she was speaking, things really looked up. Then at one point, I just heard her crying as the nurses came rushing in. It seemed they were trying to stabilize him for some time then eventually, the sound I desperately wanted to avoid hearing came again. As he flatlined, I heard the doctors continuing their attempts to revive him for another five minutes or so. All I could do was hope he would revive once more, but I soon accepted the fact that he was gone. Eventually, they saw there was nothing they could do to bring him back,” said Ethan before wiping away his tears. “I saw as his mom, dad, two sisters, and brother leave the room in profound sorrow. Eight-year-old Kyle, he was distraught. I am just glad his dad was there to be that strong pillar for them; he really helped to keep them together during such a tragic moment. Dustin’s room was a little farther off, so I was not able to hear anything concerning him. This is just the beginning and I know the road to healing will be long. I am just glad I was able to provide some words of assurance for them.”

Ethan looked up at Connor, only to see that he was crying profusely. Not just sobbing or weeping, his eyes spoke his grief.

“I can’t stress how sorry I am you had to endure that, Ethan. I can only imagine.”

“No, no. As I said, I was able to give comfort to their parents, and that is enough to make me smile. As I was here for them today, I will be there for them in the healing process. We both know how kind



their parents have always been to us. We were able to escape such a tragic accident and one way we can show our thanks is by being there for others.” With eyes of dejection, he looked upon Connor. “I am not sure what happened with Malik as I did not see any of his loved ones. More than likely, they are a bit further down the hall. Did he make it?”

“Yes, thankfully, he did.”

Ethan nearly leaped out of his bed as he closed his eyes. “Oh, thank God. I am just glad a few of us were able to make it.” He sat up and he looked into his eyes. “Connor, I wanted to ask you, what happened in the vision with you and the others?”

Inhaling deeply, Connor wiped the tears from his face. “It, it was...” he said before weeping in profound sorrow.

“Connor,” his mom said as she stood to tend to him.

“Mom, no, it’s ok.”

Sitting up in his bed, Ethan reached his hand out to Connor. “No, go and take a moment and relax. You still have to go see Malik; you’ve said enough for now Connor. We can talk about it later.”

“Thanks, Ethan, see you later.”

Nurse Haley stood beside him as she rubbed his shoulder to show her condolences. “Whenever you are ready, we can go see your friend Malik.”

“Yes, I’m ready.”

As Connor walked with his parents and nurse Haley to see Malik, he could only imagine the immense sorrow and sadness that

filled the others. The amount of grief their families and friends had to endure was hard to imagine. Knowing that at least Ethan and Malik made it through, Connor was truly grateful.

As Connor entered the room, he found Malik's family and friends surrounding him. Though battered and bruised, he seemed to be in high spirits. Connor was expecting him to be worse off; his state was a welcoming sight.

"Hey! Look who it is!" he said from his bed, groaning as he struggled to get his words out.

After giving a quick acknowledgment to his family and friends, Connor approached his bedside where he placed a hand on his shoulder.

"It's good to see you're doing well Malik." Connor pressed his lips firmly together, fighting back the tears in preparation of asking the question. "The others, did you h—"

"Yeah, I heard Connor. I heard." Malik partially gnashed his teeth as his eyes gazed at the ceiling. A tear fell upon his hospital gown, leaving a wet mark. "I can't believe it. Just like that, they're gone."

"Yeah, I'm just glad you made it out of that place too. I was hoping I was not the only one but seeing that you and Ethan made it out...I am so grateful," said Connor.

Trying not to give too many details in front of the others in the room, Malik sort of spoke in codes, using hand gestures and short words. "Wait, so it was not a dream?" Malik then knew he did not just have some nightmare but that what they all experienced was a reality.

A reality beyond their normal scope of understanding. He could tell Connor did not want to speak too much about it at the moment either, especially with everyone surrounding them, knowing that no one would understand, nor believe them.

Closing his eyes, Malik somberly shook his head. “I’m glad you made it out too,” he said before smiling. “Did you get a chance to speak with Ethan?”

“I actually just came back from speaking with him. He is doing fine actually.”

As he raised his hand to stretch, Malik grimaced. “Thank goodness. I thought he was the first to go. After what we saw with Thiago and the others, I thought there was no way he made it out. The way he was acting there, I honestly thought something had possessed him because he was acting so... strange. It’s like he was not the same person during that ordeal.”

“Yeah, thankfully he did make it out. From what I heard, he did not go through what we went through. His entire encounter at the hotel was pleasant. The way I look at everything now, I am sure his behavior had a reasonable explanation. Everything will become clear.”

That place, whatever it was, it used a game as a means to reveal their deepest secrets to one another. Some, of course, were not as bad as others, but nonetheless, all were negative in nature. These were not just any ole secrets. They were the secrets they had held in, things they did to others and refused to repent of. They came to realize that there are laws governing the universe and that a simple “I am sorry” will lead to amending. Some might say, “what about things you forgot

you did to people? How can you pinpoint everything you did?” You can’t. That is why we must repent in Jesus’ name with both with our mouths and with our souls, that we are sorry for all the wrong that was done. Both knowingly and unknowingly.

Seconds before Malik was about to suffer the same fate as the others, he fell to his knees and apologized for his actions, not knowing that was the reason for his escape and a second chance at life. He was a mere second from facing the same fate as the others. Had he not found it within to humble himself for all the wrong he had done, he too would have remained in that place. Ethan did not make it out solely because he was a devout Bible reader and believer in Christ for before Christ can work through us, we must be willing to live a selfless life. Ethan sought to incorporate the words of John into his life, which are, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Question after question was asked so that each of them could dig deep within and actually own up and repent for their actions. Unfortunately, self-pride is what caused some of Connor’s friends to suffer an early departure. Had they gotten the chance to return, they would have continued in their old ways because they never found a place in their hearts to have compassion for those they had hurt.

It seemed their souls somehow left their bodies and were transported to another dimension. Malik, Thiago, Connor, Dustin and Caleb souls were elsewhere, while their physical bodies clung to life. Their second chance at life had come from within, requiring them to acknowledge and own up to their mistakes, but sadly, some were unable to do just that. The title of the game, “Deciding Hour”, now

made sense to them. One last chance to do the right thing and get a second chance at life, to do things differently.

Malik survived with a punctured lung and fractured ribs, but luckily, the doctor said that with rest and healing, he would make a full recovery.

Connor knew Malik and his family wanted to spend some quality time alone, but before he left him, Connor wanted to let him know just how grateful he was that he was alive.

Smiling, Connor reached his fist out before touching it against Malik's. "Thank you for pulling through."

Nodding as he smiled, Malik inquisitively stared at him. "You don't look to be hurt or injured. Why were you in that place? As you can see, I have some pretty bad injuries and so did Caleb, Dustin, and Thiago. You on the other hand, are completely fine."

Connor couldn't give an exact answer, but he felt that something utilized the situation with his friends to teach him a lesson also— that each and everything we do to others has some form of lasting impact and that we all should be conscious of that fact. Connor tried to explain it as best as he could to Malik, and it seemed that at least he understood part of what he was saying. The best thing about it was that in due time, everyone would come to understand it fully.

As to the exact cause of the accident, it turned out that the brakes somehow became defective which made them unable to stop the car at a pivotal moment. An unfortunate end to what was supposed to be a fun getaway between friends.

Malik and Connor learned that with everything you do, always be vigilant and aware. Be vigilant of your surroundings, including those around you. When you are only aware of yourself, you risk becoming selfish which can lead to the shameless acts that we commit upon others, which eventually only leads to regret. Treat others as you would want to be treated. That is the golden rule, for that is the remedy to many sorrows.

## CHAPTER 10

The reconciliation with one another was a big part of the healing process. For them to see at least some of their friends make it out... nothing could be more satisfying.

Before Connor left the room, Malik reached out his hand once more where he gave Connor a firm handshake. “See you when I get out of here Connor.”

During the unwelcome experience, time played a major part. After each person departed, whether it had been forever or back into their body, the time signified the moment in which it happened. For those who were unfortunate enough not to make it out, the exact time they were taken out in that realm signified their official departure time from their earthly bodies. On the other hand, as with Malik and Connor, the time signified their return and the receiving of their second chance. Though it felt as if they had been there for many days, it had only been an hour.

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A little over a week went by, and Malik was finally able to leave the hospital and return to his family. As for Ethan, he was discharged just a day after the accident. After being discharged the following day, Connor was able to reconcile with Malik. Connor knew Malik’s

family would have wanted to spend some time with him as he just got out and therefore, he waited a bit before asking him to hang out and talk, and they sure had a lot to discuss.

They decided to hang out at the local park since it was a place of relaxation and reflection. Malik for the most part seemed to be coming along well.

As Connor looked on, he couldn't help but laugh. "I see that even through all of this, you still make sure your flat top is kept nice and neat."

"Haha, yeah Connor. You know I have to," he said before playfully patting his head. "Just glad to be alive man..."

"Yea, me too. That was a very serious accident. Caleb, Dustin, Thiago... I'm sorry we had to lose them. But I am thankful that you and Ethan were able to escape. Though Ethan, he never experienced the same things we did in that place. He was involved in the accident; that in of itself was scary though."

"Yeah, I am definitely grateful we made it through also. That lizard thing was seconds from knocking my whole head off. I'm glad I did not end up like the others. Terrible to see people who you grew up with and knew for so long taken away like that, and again, I'm sorry about your sister. I would have never thought in a million years that Dustin would do something like that to her, or to anyone for that matter. From the outside looking in, I would have never guessed they were having issues. But from what I got out of it, the issues seemed to be one-sided and that was with Dustin."

The mentioning of Sofia created a momentary dampening of Connor's spirit, but he knew the topic would come up sooner or later.



“Yea, I am still in disbelief at what he did. Like, why man? I was his best friend, and she loved him with all her heart. He hurt us both, my family. Nothing can change what happened that day and Dustin had to face the repercussions of his actions. As I said to you over the phone, I have forgiven Dustin; it was the right thing for me to do. I couldn’t allow him to change me into a monster.”

“How can you forgive someone after doing something like that? I am not sure if I would have been able to,” Malik said.

“It was hard, but I had to. Justice would have come one way or another. Even though I did not put the answer in, he still had a chance to make it. All he had to do was repent for his error and own up to it and he would have made it, but his pride and unwillingness to own up to the evil he had done cost him his life. He never once saw how much pain he put Sofia and those who loved her through. He was only concerned about his own well-being. The lack of compassion is what truly did him in. But had I not forgiven him, I would have become a person that I did not want to become. A person whose heart would have become cold to the world, less caring. So even before I left, I had to forgive him so that I avoided that road. A road of darkness and bitterness.”

“Wow, I see. What he did was not much different than what I did, even though mine was not intentional. I know how you, your mom, and your dad felt when you all lost Sofia. I’m sure Timothy’s family felt the same. What’s worse was that they didn’t even know what hit them. It just happened suddenly. One second, a mother is with her young son. The next, he’s gone. Taken away due to selfish and childish motives.”

Connor thought their get-together at the park would be more positive, but he guessed even this was a part of the growing process.

Connor paused and stared at Malik as he noticed a sudden change. “Malik, what’s wrong?”

Shaking his head, Malik fought to find the words. “Connor, I’m going to turn myself in.”

Connor instantly felt the air escape from within him. “Malik, no, you can’t. After what you went through, you can’t do this. I believe that was enough for you. Malik, you cannot do this.”

“Yeah, I did go through a lot, but that poor kid’s family went through more than I did. Every day I’m sure the kid’s mother dream of being with her son, only to wake up and realize he’s gone.”

As much as Connor wanted to continue to fight with him to change his mind, he had to let him go with what was best for him. If he felt that the best way for him to have absolute peace was by turning himself in, then he had no right to get in between that.

“Did you at least tell your family? What about Ethan? Did you tell him?” Asked Connor.

“No, not yet. I may wait a bit. I just got out of a bad accident and I don’t want to bring any more grief upon them than they’re already enduring. I’ll most certainly be getting jail time because of it, but, as I said, at least I’ll have some peace of mind. As for Ethan, I will let him know once we visit him at the diner when we go grab a bite after this.”

Connor had peace of mind in knowing that one day, he would eventually get out, but for such an offense, it may be many years

before that is so. Connor definitely had to mentally prepare himself for such a reality, especially after losing the others.

“Connor, stay up, stay positive. Don’t worry, good will come out of all of this. We made it out of that place alive for a reason, and all we can do is learn from what happened. It surely was a terrible place, but we were put there to change our lives for the better. We have a second chance at life. Let us rejoice for that reason alone. As I said, I may tell my family in a few days, a few weeks, or maybe in a few months; but we have the present moment to enjoy, so let’s not waste it dwelling on what may happen.”

“Yeah, you’re right Malik,” Connor said, considering all his words.

Malik had matured a lot since the incident as he became wiser. Despite this change, he was still the same ole Malik that Connor always knew.

Malik tossed his basketball up and down in the air before spinning it on his finger. “How about a game or two? I’m still healing, so I guess we can go easy for now. Hey, and best of all, now is your chance to win, seeing that I’m not one hundred percent.”

“Of course. Though this time, Imma definitely win,” Connor said full of enthusiasm. A good fun game of basketball was a great idea at the moment. The weather was nice and sunny, and when they arrived at the basketball court, only two other people were there which meant they pretty much had the court to themselves. In Connor’s opinion, Caleb was always the best at basketball, mainly in terms of his long-range shots. For some reason, no matter where he shot the

ball from, it would go through the hoop. In terms of overall skill, Malik was the best.

It was about an hour in and Connor was exhausted, and Malik was not making it any easier for him. He believed that since Malik was recovering from a serious accident that he would have been somewhat of a challenge for Malik. Yet somehow, some way, he still outperformed Connor.

“Haha, come on Connor, I’m the one whose all beat up. You gon’ let me win? What you got? What you got?” said Malik as he dribbled the ball in front of Connor before doing a spin move, leading to the score.

At that point, the big bad wolf could have hired Connor as he was huffing and puffing intensely. “Malik, how do you do it? I thought this was going to be an easy win for me. Go easy on me, will you?” he said as he paused to catch his breath. “Let me score a few free points so the game can be at least somewhat close again.”

“Haha, nope, just bring your A-game next time,” said Malik, scoring the game-winning shot.

Even though Connor lost, it was a fun and enjoyable game. They both had worked up an appetite, and some food was next on their to-do list. They decided to go visit their usual spot for a bite.

As they began to head out, Malik tapped Connor on the arm.

“Wait,” Malik said as he walked back to the court. “This one’s for those we lost.” The ball was shot from the three-point line where the net splashed as the ball went through.

With eyes fixed on the rim and a smile of gratitude, Malik nodded. “Alright, let’s go.”

The two enjoyed the twenty-minute or so walk before finally arriving. The three of them spoke from time to time on the phone, but it brought much joy for them to be able to spend time together once more since the accident.

“Ethan! Man, it’s great to see you again,” said Malik, giving him a brotherly hug as he patted him on the back.

“See you got the basketball there; I hope you went easy on Connor this time,” Ethan said before laughing.

“Just a little bit.”

“Oh sure,” said Connor as he laughed before focusing on Ethan. “Nice to see you bud.”

The three sat down where they were tended to by the waitress.

“Hi, so are you guys ready to order?” Asked the waitress.

“Yes, I am ready. I will take the burger and fries and a medium soda,” said Connor.

“What kind would you like?”

“A Coke would do.”

“You can put me down for that also.”

“Me too, thank you,” added Ethan.

“Ok thank you. Your orders will be right up.”

It was early afternoon on a weekday, so it did not have many customers. The wall painting and seating gave them an 80s vibe,

which they thought was cool. The atmosphere was relaxing, and the moment gave them time to catch up on missed time.

“Man, it’s so great knowing we can spend time together like we used to. It’s sad knowing the others are gone, but at least we still have each other and for that, we should be very grateful.”

Dejection took over as Malik gently tossed the ball from hand to hand. “Yeah...Imma truly miss them, but as with you, I am grateful that we still have each other. There is nothing we can do to change what happened, but we have the moment to make the future better.”

Ethan turned to Malik, nudging him to brighten the mood. “Hey, I think Connor was spellbound by the nurse at the hospital,”

“Haha, cut it out Ethan; you are exaggerating. I mean, she was beautiful though,” added Connor.

“Malik, when I tell you he could not keep his eyes off her, I mean, he was locked in. She’s a beautiful woman; you should give it a shot. Speak to her,” said Ethan.

Connor blushed as his eyes looked to the side. “Actually, I was able to get her number.”

Animated, Malik stood as he palmed the ball. “He shoots! And he scores! Haha Connor I am happy for you. You should keep in touch with her.”

“Yeah, she was the most beautiful woman I’ve seen, both inside and out. Once I awoke from that place, she was there to help me along the way, and to be honest, God could not have sent a more beautiful person. Aside from my parents, she was surely a welcomed sight to behold once I escaped that place.”

“Did you two get a chance to go out yet?”

“No, not yet. We are taking it slow right now. I am really enjoying the casual talks with her.”

“You move on your own time; only you know what’s best,” answered Malik.

A moment of silence ensued as the restaurant music played. The three could not wait to begin eating and it would not be long before the waitress returned.

“Here you go, gentlemen,” she said as she placed their orders down.

Malik nudged Ethan in the bicep. “Hey, you gonna shoot your shot?” Malik asked before smiling as he looked at the waitress.

Picking up a fry, Ethan downed it quickly. “As beautiful as she is, I am not really looking for a relationship right now. After all that’s happened, I am trying to resituate myself. I know my day will come. I just want it to feel special, unrushed.”

Gripping the hamburger, Connor chomped down. “That basketball game sure worked up an appetite. Boy is this sandwich good.”

“Yeah, sure is,” added Ethan as he clamped down.

The three of them were enjoying the food and company; the moment could not be any better.

Malik downed the last of his drink. “That was refreshing,” he said before turning to Ethan. “I know you discussed it a little bit on the phone, but can you tell me again what was going on in that...I guess we can say vision? It seemed you were experiencing everything

opposite of what we were experiencing. If you don't feel like discussing it right now, I am fine with that."

"No, no worries. Now is the perfect time. We have this day to commune with each other and as we all know, tomorrow is promised to none of us," Ethan said before taking a deep inhale. "Yeah, I was having a full-blown conversation with that guy, just as I am having with you guys here. I honestly thought you all were just being jerks, rude. But he just kept saying, 'don't mind what they're doing; you will understand in due time' and now, I finally understand what he meant. I wasn't meant to experience what you guys felt and experienced, but I see how all of our experiences were for a greater purpose."

"Yeah, it is no surprise you did not experience what we did; you read the Bible every day," added Connor.

"You are definitely right; reading the Bible and my belief in Jesus is ultimately what saved me. But do not look at me as a perfect person, because I am not. God is not out to save those who are perfect, but those who are imperfect. I remember the guy saying, 'continue to have a good heart, forgive those who hurt you and do as to others as you would have done unto you.' His message was very pleasant. How about you guys? What was he like before your eyes? The way you all were acting; it must have been very different."

Almost in unison, Malik and Connor raised their brows and gave a quick shake of their head as one in a cold shiver.

Malik aimed his finger toward Connor. "Do you want to explain? Or—"

"Sure, I will explain."



Connor sighed deeply, a sigh after an enjoyable meal in conjunction with preparing himself to explain the encounter. “The moment we came across him, his disposition was unpleasant and almost outright frightening. There was nothing that spoke kindness about him; not once did he look to address our presence. The only time he spoke was when he said our room number, that was it. His presence was just very unsettling.”

Ethan shifted in his seat as he became more attentive. “Wow, through my eyes, he appeared to address you all with a warm greeting; that is why I thought you all were being rude.”

“Yeah, that explains why it appeared as if you were losing it; we were not experiencing the same thing. By the way, I apologize for us coming at you the way we did. It’s just that—”

“No, no, guys, your actions were totally understandable. How else were you all supposed to respond? If I was in your shoes, I would have reacted the same way. Don’t worry about it. Go on.”

“Yeah, it was just odd. This was going on for some time; it was just a very odd moment at the time,” he said before turning to Malik. “Do you want to jump in?” asked Connor.

“Sure. Like Connor said, we experienced something totally different than you. We thought you were losing it, or maybe you were sick. We took the elevator up and that was the last time we saw you.”

Ethan looked on in astonishment as he listened to their account. “Wow, so...what happened after I left?” He seemed to struggle to ask the question as he feared to hear their account. Based on their facial expressions, he knew he would have to prepare himself.

Pressing his lip, Malik exhaled deeply through his nose. “I guess I will start it off this time. Once we made it to the room, things seemed good for a while. We had heat, a bed, and everything a typical hotel room would have. But this room was exceptionally large, almost two times the size of a normal hotel room. We came across this game, turned it on, and then, that is when it all began.”

For the next hour or so, the three of them sat and talked about that moment which changed their lives forever. During this time, the three expressed shock, grief, profound sorrow, and even joy. The account was difficult to get through, but they knew they had to tell it eventually, and now could not have been a better time.

Ethan rested his back against the chair as he shook his head. “You all went through so much and the way the others were taken...why couldn’t they find it within to repent of their evils? Their pride is what did them in. Why? Why?.. And Connor,” he said before summoning all his strength to contain his sorrow. “Connor, I am so sorry for what you had to witness concerning Sofia; this had to be the worst moment of this whole experience. All that Sofia went through, it was because of him. Dustin, I never in a million years would imagine he would do something even close to this. And Thiago, I just wish he looked within himself to see the wrong in what he did; he refused to take accountability and only thought of himself. Same as with Dustin,” he said as he shook his head. “As with Caleb, this shows we cannot escape our actions. Either we repent of them and change our lives, or one day, we will have to answer for them.”

Connor wept but contained himself. A gentle smile rested across his face. “Ethan, it’s ok now. I know Sofia is at rest, and I find solace in knowing that there is closure. As hard as it was for me to forgive

Dustin, I knew I had to do so for my own sake. If not, I would have slowly become more and more removed from myself, becoming another person. I can't let anyone change who I am, just to become as equally cruel and hateful as that person. I have to stay strong, not only for myself but for mom and dad."

"Connor, I could not have said those words better myself. That is why the Savior who died for us stresses forgiveness. For unforgiveness will eventually make a person draw further from themselves and ultimately, God. I am proud to see how much you have grown Connor."

"Thanks Ethan. I appreciate the words of encouragement."

Ethan shifted his attention. "And Malik, you made a mistake in your past, a bad one it was. But God brought you out of that place so that you can change your life. Do not lose hope for if there was no hope for you, you would not be sitting here with us today. I am glad you found it within yourself to repent for your actions."

"Thanks, Ethan. I appreciate it. Had I waited one more second to reach within and repent of my past, I would not be with you guys today. That is how close that thing was to ending me. Sorry is not enough to mend the things I have done. Sorry won't bring back that kid's life, nor will it bring healing to his mother." Malik looked to Connor as the two seemed to speak with their eyes. Connor nodded in agreement.

"Ethan, I have something to tell you."

Taking in Malik's change in disposition, Ethan looked on in worry. "What is it?"

"Ethan, I am turning myself in."

“What! What do you mean turning yourself in?”

“I took an innocent kid’s life, a kid who did me no wrong. A mother is in continual sadness due to my actions. I can’t continue on in life knowing that there is a family mourning because of me. I just can’t. There is no second-guessing it, this is something I must do. I must take accountability for my actions, even if it means my freedom.”

As much as Ethan did not want to see his best friend locked away, he knew he also had done something incomprehensible, and honesty would be part of the healing process. “It will be hard to process your decision, but as you stated, it may be the only way to bring closure.”

“Thanks Ethan. Just continue to pray for us as you’ve always done. I will really need your intercession to make it through these times.”

“Sure thing Malik.”

The three of them sat down and spent a considerable amount of time in the diner as they enjoyed themselves.

Resting and relaxing, they took the rest of the time to reflect some more on the good times. Their spirits were really lifted, and they actually wished the moment would never end. They felt as children in the sense that they did not let the cares of life get to them. Though mentally speaking, it definitely seemed that all of them matured greatly after the incident.

“Well, I guess it’s time I get going,” said Ethan before he looked down at his watch. “Wow, time sure did fly. We’ve been here for four hours. What are you guys up to for the rest of the day?”

“I’m going to go visit my mother today. I try to make it a habit to see her as often as possible now,” said Connor.

“Cool. I will just take it easy and relax at home for a bit,” Malik said as he turned to Connor.

“Hey, you gon’ be online today? We got to play some Call of Service. You have to win at something today, and with me on your squad, we definitely winning every match,” Malik said before laughing.

“Definitely, I heard they are adding a new DLC to it. New weapons and maps. It’s going to be really good,” Connor responded.

“Cool, I’ll see you online. Ethan, you have to get a gaming system too. It’s fun to play once in a while. “

“Naw, I’m not a big fan of gaming,” Ethan added.

“Cool, cool. Well, I will see you guys later. This get-together has been great. We definitely have to do this more often.”

“Yea, definitely,” said Ethan.

“See you guys later.”

“Alright, later.”

It was nearing the end of the afternoon before they decided to head back home, and Connor could not wait for the next time they would spend quality time together.

As he walked to his mother’s home, he continued to appreciate everything around him—the birds chirping, people laughing, and even the people bickering. Life is not only about appreciating the good times, but also the bad, for each aspect plays its part in shaping

who we are. How can one truly appreciate the good? If they have not experienced the bad?

Connor finally arrived at his mother's, and his mom was very happy to see him. It had been a couple of days since the accident, so he was sure she was still grateful for the fact that he was around and unharmed.

She beckoned him to come closer, holding her arms open as she smiled. "Connor, give me a hug. How did your outing with Malik go?"

"Really great, really great. We just walked and talked for a bit, then played a few rounds of basketball. You know, just fun things."

"That's great to hear son," she said before going back into the kitchen to finish prepping dinner.

Connor closed his eyes and lifted his head before inhaling sharply. *Smells great.*

Connor's dad was at work, and he could not wait to see him when he got back. His dad was a big part of his driving force, his inspiration.

Upon going upstairs, Connor decided to walk into his sister's room. He paused as he took a moment to look around, seeing all her belongings which brought back good memories. Something was letting Connor know it was okay and to enjoy the moments he had spent with her, which created lasting memories. She was just finishing up her bachelor's degree and was planning on moving in with Dustin before she went missing. She was smart, beautiful, intelligent and most of all, loving. She had her whole life ahead of her.

Connor had a reason to smile, knowing she was with the angels, having the kind of joy and fun she could have never have had on this earth. The best news of all was that Connor never had to reveal to his parents that Dustin took Sofia's life.

A few weeks later, Connor called in an anonymous tip to the police to check the lake where Dustin threw the body. Not long after, Sofia's body was recovered and although severely decayed, they could determine that she was strangled.

The cops had to reopen their investigation due to the new evidence which meant revisiting their suspect list. Since Dustin was dead, they could not interview him again, but they were able to obtain a search warrant for his house. There, underneath some loose floorboards, they found a rope and checked it for DNA fibers. Surely enough, they found Sofia's DNA on it.

Dustin was not an intelligent killer after all. He was just a good actor. When the cops first suspected him, he played the role of innocent so well that they let him go, but he was not smart enough to get rid of the rope which ultimately, caused his actions to be discovered.

Connor's parents were hurt beyond words could describe, and Connor for a while, wished they would not have known about it at all. Yet, all that mattered was that justice for him and his family was brought forth. In the end, his parents finally healed with prayer, counseling and family to lean on.

It was time for Connor to leave his mother's and head home to his mancave, which was like the typical gaming room. Sitting on the edge of his sofa, he grabbed a few gaming magazines and quickly

looked through them. The peace and quiet were of much comfort. It had that Saturday morning kids' cartoons kind of feeling. For nearly an hour, Connor just sat there and reflected, but he knew he and Malik had some gaming to do.

They went on to play for three hours straight, a time spent reminiscing and enjoying their moments together.



## CHAPTER 11

A few days went by, then weeks, fast-forwarding to the time when Malik felt it was best to let not only his family know of what he did, but the authorities as well. Even though he felt inside that this had to be done, Connor was still able to perceive a sense of apprehension. The people Connor felt the most pain for were Malik's family. He could only imagine how it must have felt when he came to them suddenly with such a revelation. For that reason alone, Connor wished he had not done it. In due time, Connor knew they too would understand his reasoning and realize not everything that happens makes sense in the beginning.

The most important thing to Malik during his testimony was to apologize to the victim's family for both the loss of their young son and the one who was once his rival. Malik went on to be sentenced to twenty years in prison. Connor was an utter emotional wreck for months. To know he escaped from such horror, only to be sent to prison, was a tough thing to accept.

As Connor battled with his emotions, he made sure to visit Malik's family to help in any way he could with the emotional ordeal. Of Malik's entire family, his little brother liked him the most. He was basically a mini version of Malik. When Connor looked into his face and eyes, he began to understand better why Malik felt he had to do

what he did. Knowing how he would have felt had it been his own brother who suffered the same fate. Connor could not blame him for stepping forward and admitting to the act.

The park which they all used to go to had become a place of refuge, but at the same time, it brought much grief. A place in which Connor used to frequently share laughs and good times with four of his best friends, he now shared alone in moments of sorrow.

“Why?” was all he could ask. He knew the answer, but he still had to ask himself from time to time. Sometimes, he wished they had never taken that trip but then again, he realized that things happen for a reason. One way or another, fate would have gotten to them.

One day as he asked himself this, a beautiful, speckled bird landed before him with a branch in its mouth. *Strange*, he thought. He was expecting it to land before him and then just fly off, but instead, it sat there as it stared at him.

Connor decided to reach out his hand and to his great surprise, it hopped onto his hand and placed the branch into his palm. “*No way*,” he thought. It was almost as if it was waiting for Connor to react. Connor expected it to do the exact opposite, which was to fly off, but what it did instead truly caught him off guard.

Connor believed in angels, and on that day, he believed that was one of them telling him that everything would be okay. After placing the branch in his hand, the bird proceeded to stare for a few more seconds before eventually flying off. Connor made sure he took that branch with him and kept it from that day on.

Months would soon turn to years and Connor eventually got used to the fact that Malik would be gone from his life for the

foreseeable future. But all was not woe. Four years into Malik's prison sentence, Connor received great news from Malik's family, and it came as a major surprise. Malik was informed that his prison sentence would be reduced from twenty years to only seven, which meant he would only have had to spend three more years. Three more years surely was a lot, but that is a walk in the park compared to sixteen more.

He received the reduced sentence due to good conduct throughout his entire stay so far. Connor, on the other hand, believed favor was on his side. Rarely to never would someone be given that opportunity and so fast. He also knew that the faithful prayers of him and his good friend Ethan played a major part.

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Life moved quickly and in no time, Malik was out after serving a seven-year sentence without parole.

On the first day after his release, Malik spent time with family and friends which was understandable. Time to make amends, catch up on the new fads, and overall, readjust to normal everyday life. It would be a while later that he sought to catch up with Ethan and Connor.

As Connor approached him, he had to laugh. "Wow, what happened to the flat top?"

To see Malik without a flattop was like seeing ice in the desert.

"Seeing you without your flattop is so odd. I know letting it go was a tough thing to do, but I really like the new look on you," added Ethan.

“Yeah, keeping up a flat top in prison was pretty hard. I felt it was time for a new change anyway, and for sanitary reasons, it was best I just cut it off altogether. How have you guys been?”

“Things have been good. Just trying to live day to day, and every day is a healing process,” Connor replied.

“Yeah, things have been great. I just opened up a church a year ago. It’s still small, but it’s getting there. Even if it doesn’t grow to a megachurch, if I can just reach a few souls, that is good enough for me,” said Ethan.

With great glee, Malik walked up to Ethan before giving him a brotherly hug. “Whoa, man! That’s amazing. I always knew you would be a pastor; you always had it in you. Man, I definitely have to come visit your church soon. I am very proud of you Ethan; you are a big inspiration to me.”

“Thanks Malik and likewise, you and Connor have been a major inspiration to me. To see how much you both have grown since that day, it truly amazed and inspired me. Every chance I get, I tell people about you guys.”

“Wow Ethan, that means a lot,” said Connor before turning to Malik, and placing a hand on his shoulder. “And yeah, you definitely have to come check out his church; it’s very beautiful. Oh, and guess what?”

With a smirk, Malik looked back and forth between the two. “Wwwhat?...” he said slowly as he expected a surprise.

Connor stared at Ethan who smiled as he awaited a response.

“Well, I was going to eventually tell you, today of course. Well, I am newly married.”

Malik stomped back and forth as he became animated. “What! Man, first let me catch up on the good news of you building a church. Ethan? Married? Wow, this is so amazing. When did this happen?”

“Last year.”

“So you built a church and got married in the same year?”

“Well, I was already in the process of building it for the past three years. I told my wife that until I built this church, we could not get married. I used that as a motivation to continue and push harder to get it accomplished and now, here we are. The day I first opened the church is the day we got married and walked the isles,” he said before turning to Connor. “I had our good friend here to be the best man. It was amazing. I took tons of pictures and video footage; we can definitely sit down later and watch it together.”

“Oh yeah definitely. Wow, you are truly blessed. The only sad thing about it is that I wasn’t there to see it. I really would have liked to see one of my best friends walk down the aisle. But I am beyond happy for you,” he said before returning his attention to Connor. “All this talk got me thinking Connor, what is happening with you and Haley?”

Slowly, Connor’s smile began to ease, as a bit of sadness overtook him. “Things are going great actually. We got engaged and planned on getting married, but her mother has dementia, so we’ve spent the last few years taking care of her upstate. We tried to talk her mother into coming down here to stay with us, but she adamantly refused. With me almost finishing up my college courses, I couldn’t

afford to go with her. The good news is that her mother seems to be getting better now.”

“Great to hear that she is getting better. But don’t worry, as long as you keep the faith and pray, everything will come together. Let Ethan here be an inspiration for you, a man of great faith.”

Ethan smiled at the recognition. “Yes, life certainly moved fast, and I could not wish it happened any other way. Though the most joyous moment to celebrate today is your early release. For your sentence to be reduced to only seven years is truly a blessing. Those seven years of you being gone were certainly hard for us to endure, a very difficult time. Just glad to see that you are back.”

“I am glad to see we could meet on such good terms, and this is just the beginning of our blessings,” said Connor before focusing his attention on Malik. “You gon’ take it easy for a bit?”

“No, I’m going to try to do my best to look for a job. Being a convicted felon won’t make it easy. During my entire stay, there was something I always looked forward to doing, whether I get paid for it or not. I want to be a motivational speaker and speak to the youth about gang violence. I know I was in my twenties when I did the shooting, but my actions ultimately started when I was a teenager. All I did was grow into the gang lifestyle. All this bickering between groups is pointless and more than likely never calls for violence. I honestly was ready to serve the full twenty-year sentence. I know it was a tough sentence, but as a man, I felt that was the best thing I could do to make up for my wrongdoings. When I heard it was reduced to seven, I of course was grateful. Still wonder how I was

released so fast...but all I can do is thank God. I'm thirty now, still young. I'll figure things out."

"When you leave your life in God's hands, all will work out," Ethan added.

"Hey Malik, Call of Service 5 just came out. You know what that means," said Connor playfully.

"Haha, hey, you bet. I can only imagine how good the graphics look now; crazy I bet. I'll try and pick it up maybe sometime this week; that's only if there are still copies left. I am sure they are probably sold out by now; I would be lucky to find one. Plus, the last gaming console I bought cost a good couple hundred dollars. So, I know the new one is much more expensive now. I think I'll actually need to wait a bit before I get it."

It was at this moment that Connor felt it was best to surprise him. "Don't worry Malik, I got you the new Call of Service and the new gaming system. You can use that money to help build yourself back up again. Welcome back my friend."

"Wow, Connor, I cannot thank you enough."

"No problem. So, I guess I'll see you guys around."

"Sure thing, and next week, I want you to come along with Connor to attend a service."

"I'm already there, don't have to tell me twice," added Malik.

"See you guys later then."

"Later."

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Fast forward eight years, and things turned out much greater than they ever thought. Remember Nurse Haley? Those visits soon turned into dates, and the dates eventually turned into an inseparable relationship.

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The big wedding day for Connor was more than exceptional. Connor never really thought about what he wanted his wedding day to be like before he met Haley. But as he saw how excited Haley got as the big day drew nearer, he himself got more and more into the planning aspect of it. Hoping to further impress Haley with his attentiveness. One thing he knew for sure was that he would be getting married at his good friend Ethan's church.

The church decorations seemed to have been pulled directly from a fairytale. Ethan's church became a major success, and so he was able to upgrade into a much larger and more beautiful space.

For the wedding, the walls were lined with the most beautiful of flowers and the fragrance that accompanied them was as spectacular as their appearance. Beautiful white lights hung from the high ceilings which sparkled like the night luminaries. Elaborate glassware atop white draped tables were the finishing touches.

Staring into the mirror, besuited and confident, Connor adjusted his tuxedo which appeared to be handpicked from an elite men's magazine. It was a suit of master craftsmanship. As Connor stood in the mirror and relished the special moment, by his side stood the best man, who was none other than Malik. Connor was so grateful that their friendship had lasted the test of time.



“Connor, I am really proud of you, to see how far you have come. Man, time sure does fly. I never imagined the day you or I would be walking down the aisle in marriage,” said Malik as he looked into the mirror. “I remember just two years ago when I walked down those same aisles and now, I am happy to see you do the same.”

Fastening his bowtie, Connor looked into the mirror where he flashed a smile. “I know, it’s been a long time coming, but when life throws you curveballs, what can you do?” he said before gently tapping Malik against his front shoulder as his other hand remained on his bow tie. “Seeing you and your beautiful family is what inspired me.” Relaxing his arms at his side, Connor exhaled sharply. “I know this will be the best decision of my life, never once did I question it. From the moment that I met Haley; I knew that she was the one for me. Specially handpicked by the Creator.” Looking down, he couldn’t contain his smile as he fastened his sleeve. “Her beauty of course is what instantly attracted me to her, but what sold me was her personality. I am just so blessed to have her.”

Connor thought back to the day, the day when he solidified his dream.

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The last time Haley had seen him, he was in a hospital gown, bruised and disoriented. This time after several outfit changes and two showers, Connor was ready to see her again.

He had chosen a pair of his best jeans and a blue button-down collared shirt. The smell of antiseptic was strong as he entered the hospital. He asked the receptionist if Nurse Haley was around—he panicked slightly when he realized that she might not even be working

that day. Luckily, she was. The receptionist paged her to come to the lobby. Connor paced back and forth, rehearsing what he was going to say.

“Um, hi...” a sweet voice came from behind him. “Connor, right?”

“Uh...yeah. Um, hi,” Connor stammered, relieved that she remembered him.

“How can I help? Are you feeling, okay?” she immediately went into nurse mode.

“Oh, uh, yeah. Actually...I...um...,” Connor couldn’t seem to get the words out. They stared awkwardly at each other for a couple seconds.

“You know, ‘cat go your tongue’ is not a treatable illness, right?” she said with a smile.

Connor couldn’t help but chuckle, which broke the ice slightly. He still struggled to get the words “will you go out with me” to come forth from his mouth.

Fortunately, Haley was good at reading people, and she beat him to it. “Although, alternative medicine suggests that going for a coffee could be a viable treatment.” She looked at him expectantly.

Connor thought he hallucinated for a moment but quickly snapped out of it. “I love coffee.”

“There is a great place nearby and I am due for a break. What kind of nurse would I be if I didn’t help a patient in need?”

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That was the beginning of forever for them. Connor smiled jubilantly to himself. Malik had to break his concentration to bring him back to the moment.

Malik raised his brows before sighing. “Well, it is about that time. You ready?”

Connor turned and smiled with certainty. “I’m ready.”

The main seating area was filled with friends and family alike as all of them exhibited smiles and tears of joy. If one was to look into the crowd in search of the “I don’t feel right about this decision” face, not even a suggestion would enter into their mind that someone was against it. All in attendance had watched Haley and Connor over the years and knew they were perfect for each other. Connor’s parents felt like they were gaining a new daughter—not one that could replace Sofia, but one that could help fill the hole she left in their hearts. They had so much love to give, and they truly appreciated Haley’s support when it was discovered that Dustin was the reason their Sofia was gone.

Today was a special day for them to witness. Large elaborate curtains swayed gently as they draped over the large crystal windows. It was as if the rays of heaven itself were shining down and into the procession. Situated in front of them was the beautiful altar, adorned with the most beautiful of flowers. Those in attendance could have marveled solely over the decorations alone, but soon it was time for the wedding to begin and for the true stars to make their appearance.

Everyone stood as they prepared to welcome in the mother of the bride, Mrs. Shaw. Mrs. Shaw walked down the aisle as one of the groomsmen escorted her down. Her face was full of joy and glee as

she awaited seeing her daughter walk down the aisle and join in marriage. She took her time as she walked; admiring the scenery and all in attendance, knowing it was all done in honor of her daughter and son-in-law. Soon she would make it down to the end of the aisle, but before taking her seat, she decided to walk over to Mrs. Beckett, who was the mother of Connor. Tears pooled in her eyes as she extended her hands before her.

Gently grabbing her hands, Mrs. Beckett stood as her husband assisted her to her feet during the emotional moment. Tears brimmed her eyes, but not tears of sadness, but rather, tears of joy.

Mrs. Shaw gave her a comforting embrace before making her way to the side of her family and friends.

“It’s ok,” whispered Mrs. Beckett into the ear of Mrs. Shaw, reassuring her that her heart was at peace.

Mrs. Beckett and Mrs. Shaw became good friends, not only because their children were marrying. But also, because Mrs. Shaw was one of the pillars Mrs. Beckett could lean on during her time of mourning concerning her daughter. Though Mrs. Shaw in times past suffered from dementia, she would never forget the moments she had with Connor’s mother; how she was always there for her. While Mrs. Shaw felt untold joy knowing her daughter would be walked down the aisle, it also brought her untold sadness knowing Mrs. Beckett would never get the chance to see the same for her daughter. But to Mrs. Shaw’s delight, Mrs. Beckett was of a sound mind and forever grateful that she could see her son walk down the aisle, holding hands with such a beautiful woman of appearance and character. Haley was like a daughter to her, so Mrs. Beckett couldn’t be happier.

Everyone sat for a while longer before it was time for the groom, Connor Beckett to walk down the aisle and take his place at the altar.

Standing near the door, Connor paced anxiously. Not because he was nervous or fearful, but due to the excitement and ambiance of it all. Then, it was time.

“You ready?” asked one of the organizers.

Joy engulfed him as he eagerly responded. “I’m ready.”

Connor walked down the aisle, smiling and waving as he made his way to the altar and he couldn’t be any happier to see his good friend Ethan waiting down there for him. Even though most grooms are already at the altar when the wedding starts, Connor had insisted on making a small entrance. He wanted to walk the same path his soon-to-be wife would, a symbolic gesture for their joined future path. He wanted only the voices, applause, and cheers of family and friends to be the music for his ears.

“Proud of you little cousin!” voiced one from the audience.

“Connor! Whoop! Whoop!” shouted one of his former high school classmates playfully.

“Congratulations Connor!”

Connor stared into the crowd as he witnessed his mom and dad smiling proudly. His mom’s finger remained under her eyes in an attempt to wipe away the ever-coming tears. As Connor looked on and appreciated his friends and family being there for him, he could not help but think of his sister Sofia. His lips trembled as he gently bit down, struggling to blink back the tears before they came down. Suddenly, a smile broke through the midst of his sorrows. *Why hold*

*them back?* The tears soon freely flowed as he turned the moment of sorrow into joy, knowing that his sister was at peace and knowing that she would have wanted him to enjoy the moment. Connor averted his teary eyes to the elaborate ceilings. “I love you,” he said gently in reverence to Sofia.

“May I have a word?” Connor overcome with the sudden urge to make a speech turned to Ethan.

“Please do Connor. This is your day. Congratulations, my friend,” he answered.

“Thank you,” he said before looking into the crowd and waving at Ethan’s son and daughter.

“Friends, family. I would like to thank you all for taking time out of your precious lives to attend this special day. I would like to first thank God for making this moment possible. If not for Him, I would not be standing here today with you all. Next, I would like to thank my mom and dad for always being the constant support I needed in tough times. And of course, I would like to thank one of my best friends in the world, Ethan here for opening his church up to me on this special occasion. Words do not truly express how grateful I am for you Ethan. Thanks for everything. As I reflect and think back, I can’t recall a time when I could not depend on all mentioned for a lift, a spiritual boost. Life has presented many ups and downs for me, as many of you may know. I, along with my best friends, Malik and Ethan survived a horrific accident a while back. We were blessed to have walked away alive, but three of our close friends unfortunately, succumbed from the accident.” He paused as he had a lingering

sadness in his eyes. Tracks of tears came forth down his face as he stood off in the distance.

“Tissue?” offered Ethan as he approached him.

“No, I am ok. Thank you.” Connor recomposed himself. “I cry not because of that day, for I have come to accept it. I cry knowing how far I have come since then. With all the people I have come to know and for all the support that was shown to me. I just thank God for it all. I would like to speak words from the Bible, forgive me if I am off by a few words. When we look to Ecclesiastes, chapter 4:9, it states, ‘Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.’ All of us know that Jesus will always be there to help us when we are alone and down. So, what does the Bible mean by this? In times of trouble, it is always good to have a friend to lift you from unnecessary hardship and that is what the friends I have known all my life have done for me. Through their moral support, I was able to make it through a difficult time in my life. We as people on this earth must learn to do good to others. In the end, it will only make you a better person. Being given a second chance at life, I realized how important this concept was. In our moments of selfishness, we can hurt those around us. But we not only hurt them by doing so, but we also hurt ourselves in the process. Furthermore, I just want to share my gratitude of thanks regarding the years I was able to spend with my sister Sofia. I know her spirit is in heaven, but the presence that she left here on this earth stays with me and those who were blessed to know her. Life is precious, and so we must always be grateful and content.” He stopped before sighing, teary eyed but with a beaming

smile. “Before we get to the woman we’ve all been waiting for, I would like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Shaw for giving me their daughter’s hand in marriage. Thank you all, and God bless.”

“Beautiful!” shouted one from the audience.

Ethan turned to Connor as he expressed jubilation. “Wonderful speech Connor.”

“Thanks, friend.”

Soon a round of applause and cheers ensued. Connor took the moment to realize that he was loved and cared for by many. The applause began to settle down, and soon, he realized it was that time.

Connor stood anxiously at the doors as he adjusted his tie. *I am ready to see Haley. I can only imagine how beautiful she looks. This moment almost seems surreal...Haley is about to take my hand in marriage. I am forever grateful; I could hope for nothing more.*

It was soon time for the best man, Malik, to make his appearance. The doors opened and unlike Connor who decided to come down the aisle without much of a spectacle—besides his heartfelt speech that was not usually done at the beginning of weddings—Malik decided to give everyone a good show.

Connor playfully covered his face as he smiled. *Oh Malik...*

Ethan could not help but smile as well.

Malik pointed at Connor as he bobbed his head to a song that was playing. “The man of the hour! Of the day!” shouted Malik as he came to the altar. He shook Connor’s hand as he embraced him with the other, patting him on the back. “I am proud of you; this is your day. Enjoy it.”



The groomsmen would follow Malik, making their way down the aisle. All of them were elaborately dressed and were happy to support their friend.

Unsurprisingly, the bridesmaids were just as wonderfully dressed in beautiful attire that sported the flowers which also adorned the venue.

Taking their place in the front, they awaited the bride. The music shifted to “Here Comes the Bride,” and it was finally time. The room became so silent that Connor was sure the crowd could hear his heart beating quickly in anticipation.

The doors opened and out stepped the beautiful bride in a beautiful silk ballgown. Connor’s breath caught. *Beautiful...I am going to spend the rest of my life with this gorgeous woman. Wow.*

Haley’s eyes met Connor’s as she made her way down the aisle. When she finally reached him, they continued to lock eyes as their souls touched. For a second, it was just the two of them, in their own little world.

“Shall we proceed?” Ethan asked with glee.

“You bet! Let’s do this,” Connor said as he cried tears of joy.

Moving his hand in an up-and-down fashion, Ethan signaled to the crowd. “Take a seat, we are now ready to begin. Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man, my good, good friend and his wonderful lady in Holy matrimony. As it states in Matthew 19:6 ‘Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.’ As you all look around, let it be known that the company attending us today is a testimony to just how much these two have impacted the lives of all who have had

the pleasure of knowing them. Speaking as a longtime friend of Connor, I am a personal testament to his great and unique character. Both he and I, along with another good friend whom I had the honor of marrying just two years ago have overcome many and great obstacles,” said Ethan. He paused, smiling as a tear tumbled down his face. “By the grace of God, I am able to stand here today and join these two beautiful souls together to become one in Christ. To be honest, I could stand here all day telling you all about the good nature of my good friend Connor here, but I know you all have places to go, and cake to eat; so, let’s proceed.”

Throughout Ethan’s heartfelt talk, Connor could not help but smile. In times past, he would never have thought he would see this day. The day that one of his best friends would join him with the love of his life in marriage. Words could not truly express the glee he felt within.

Connor turned to Ethan as he nodded, signaling with all certainty that he was ready to accept Haley forever to be the love of his life, his wife.

Exhilarated, Ethan could not be more ready. Turning his head, he first looked to Haley, then to Connor. “Connor, do you take this woman to be your wife, to live together in holy matrimony, to love her, to honor her, and to keep her in sickness and in health, forsaking others, for as long as you both shall live?”

Smiling, Connor nodded. “I do.”

Likewise, Ethan turned to Haley. “Haley, do you take this man to be your husband, to live together in holy matrimony, to love him,

to honor him, and to keep him in sickness and in health, forsaking others, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.”

The profound joy of all in attendance only grew continually as they took part in such a beautiful occasion.

Connor took the moment to lock eyes with the love of his love as he anticipated the exchanging of vows.

Ethan looked at Connor once more. “Repeat after me.”

Connor presented Haley with his vows and it would soon be her turn, and she could not be more joyful.

Ethan turned to Haley once more. “Repeat after me. I Haley.”

“I Haley...”

Haley would exchange her heartfelt vows, solidifying the unification between the two. Bonding them forever in Holy matrimony. Ethan signaled for the ring bearer, none other than his good friend Malik to bring forth the rings. Malik who was beyond honored proudly handed the rings to the groom. The beauty and artistry of Haley’s ring appeared to be fashioned by the angels of heaven. A beautiful diamond situated between smaller accompanying diamonds exemplified its splendor. The beautiful gold on which it was situated added to the finishing touches. Connor’s gold-plated ring was as equally alluring.

“Wear these rings as a reminder of the vows you have just taken,” said Ethan before turning to Connor. “Connor, would you repeat after me? With this ring, I seal my promise to be your faithful and loving husband as God is my witness.”

As Connor repeated after Ethan, he felt a fire, an unspeakable joy radiating throughout his soul. He cherished each word, each syllable, until he completed them all.

With the saying of these vows, Connor gently held Haley by her delicate fingertips as he slid on the ring. In his mind, no ring was more fitting for any woman, other than Haley.

Likewise, a ring was handed to Haley before she exchanged her vows.

With great glee, Ethan looked between the two. “With the power invested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

The sound of music and applause ensued as the two embraced, solidifying their union. Connor, Haley, and company would spend the rest of the festive night engaging in laughter and dancing. They all danced well into the night and there was not found one person among the crowd, who wanted to call it quits. Excitement was the driving force and energy that moved everyone. When the day finally concluded, all could have said it would be a day that would always be remembered in the hearts of those in attendance.

## CHAPTER 12

**T**ime would soon pass, and it would only be a year later that Ethan would find himself in a precarious situation. Leaning forward, Ethan reared his head from side to side. “Come on, come on, please not now,” said Ethan as he sat in traffic. Ethan was on his way to be a part of a special event, a very special one at that. Connor asked if Ethan could be there to pray for his firstborn, whom his wife was soon to give birth to. Ethan retrieved his phone before dialing his good friend Connor.

“Connor? Hey, I am on my way now,” he said as he paused, awaiting a response, nodding as he listened.

“No, no Connor, I am not using my cell phone while driving. Well, I am using it, but I am using it hands-free. Don’t worry about me Connor, I am ok. How is Haley?” Ethan listened on as he moved about through traffic. *Thank goodness traffic is finally moving.* The urgency was there, but not enough to make him drive recklessly or beyond the speed limit, especially considering what took place in the past.

Suddenly, his eyebrows raised swiftly. “Labor! She’s going into labor? I’m on my way!”

Questions may be arising as to Ethan's urgency. Connor wanted to welcome his firstborn into the world where not only would she be greeted with laughter and tears of joy, but with prayer and blessings, and he saw no person better fit for this other than his best friend Ethan. Ethan soon found ease as he swiftly arrived at the hospital.

Leaving his priestly attire at home, he dressed casually, yet respectably. Slacks and a button-up were enough for him. Even though he chose not to wear his priestly attire, he made sure to bring his Bible with him. A Bible which never left his side since he was a child. Huffing and puffing as he caught his breath, he approached the front desk receptionist. "Excuse me, can you inform me where I can find the labor ward?"

"Yeah, sure. You will walk down to the very end of that hall," she said as she pointed. "Then you will make an immediate right and take the elevator to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. Make a left and there you will find it."

"Thank you," said Ethan before proceeding. Taking great strides in each step, he soon found himself at the elevator. Taking it to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, he was greeted once more by a receptionist.

"Good afternoon, I am looking for the labor ward."

"This is the section where it is located. Are you looking to find someone?"

"Yes, Beckett, Haley and Connor Beckett. My friend told me she was in labor."

Clicking could be heard as she searched the hospital's computer. "You can head down to room 5E."

"Thank you."

Hearing the sounds of the babies who had just come into the world reminded him of the first time he had children, which only brought moments of gladness into his heart.

*5E, 5E, here it is!* Entering the room, Ethan could see Haley smiling as she cried, expressing great jubilation. Likewise, Connor expressed the same joy. "Ethan! So glad to see you. She's arrived."

Ethan couldn't help but chuckle. "Judging by the wailing, I can see that she's a very healthy baby. How long ago did she give birth?"

"About five minutes ago. Man is she beautiful," said Connor before approaching his wife's bedside. Reaching out, he retrieved the baby from her arms as he showed it to Ethan.

Ethan took a moment to address Connor's loved ones—his parents and friends—as they took part in the special moment.

"Haha, yes, she is a beautiful and energetic one. Did you decide on a name for her?" asked Ethan as Connor held the beautiful baby before him.

Connor nodded with assurance. "I already had it figured out long ago and never thought twice about it. Her name is Sofia."

Ethan smiled, knowing there was no need to ask the reasoning for such a name, for he knew it was in remembrance of his dear sister, Sofia.

“A beautiful name for a beautiful girl,” he said before smiling at Haley. “And she really has your eyes.”

Beaming, she flashed a toothy smile. “Oh, thank you.”

Retrieving his Bible, Ethan began to flick through the pages. “The earlier, the better,” he said. “Everyone, please join me in prayer.” He paused as he looked at baby Sofia. “And you may join us as well,” he said as he looked towards the wailing baby. “Dear heavenly Father...”

Ethan would leave a heartfelt prayer that radiated through the room and through each and every individual.

At the end of his heartfelt prayer, on one accord, everyone said, “Amen.”

They enjoyed the baby’s company before she was moved to the nursery. Of course, they all could not wait to see her again. All was peaceful and quiet as they communed and laughed with one another. Haley’s family and friends, including Connor and Ethan decided to meet up in a nearby waiting room to continue in laughter and celebration. They did not want to awaken or disturb Haley, who sought a sweet slumber after giving birth to her newborn daughter.

Water dripped upon the floor as Connor took a sip from his cup. “Yeah, I am sure Malik will be excited to see the new baby,” said Ethan smiling. “Man, to think and know just how far we have come. Isn’t it amazing?”

“Yea, feel the same way just as you. I would have never imagined my life turning out like this; it is just amazing. I can just feel



God working through me and in my life. I can most certainly see him working through you and Malik as well.”

The two of them continued talking well into the evening and by then, much of the company had already left. Looking down at his watch, Ethan’s eyes widened. “Woah, time sure flies when you’re having fun and as much as I want to stay here longer, I have to get back home to my family.”

“Thanks for coming through Ethan, and thanks for your powerful prayer earlier. I am sure it is already working in her, and our life. Get home safe.”

Haley would spend the night getting rest as she was due to be discharged the next evening.

Walking down the hall, Ethan began to look around with a sense of urgency. “I knew I shouldn’t have drunk all that water. Bathroom, where is the bathroom,” he said to himself. As he walked and looked about, he ran into a staff member. “Hi, would you happen to know where the bathroom is?”

Turning his mouth, the nurse squinted. “I am sorta new here, so I don’t know the exact location, but I believe if you walk straight down there, you should run into it.”

“Thank you,” answered Ethan as he proceeded to move with great strides. Walking down the hall for what felt like minutes, he realized to his disappointment that the bathroom was not there. *Really?* He wasted no time looking for help once more, and fortunately for him, he would come across it soon enough. “Hi, excuse

me,” he said to a woman as she walked, looking down at her clipboard.

“Yes, may I help you?”

“I am looking for the bathroom and someone told me they believed it was this way, but it seems it is not here. Would you mind telling me where I can find one?”

Holding her clipboard to her chest, she looked forward as she tapped her pen against it. “HmMMM, you can walk a little further down and make an immediate left, and I believe you will find it there.”

*Oh, just great, “believe” I will find? I could really not use a maybe right about now.* Forcefully, he smiled. “Thank you.” He began walking another minute or so before reaching a corridor. Not just any corridor, it was one of those long glass corridors that one usually walks to reach a whole new section of a hospital. *Great, just great. Just what I need at the moment.* As he stared down what seemed to be a daunting hall, he could only hope the need for him to use the restroom would subside. *Here we go.* Taking extra-long strides once more, he sought to get to the end of the corridor as quickly as possible. He slowed his pace as the large corridor windows caught his attention. Despite the urgency, he took a moment to look through the window, admiring the lights as they shined in the night. He could have spent a couple of more minutes admiring the scenery, but he knew nature was still calling. About three minutes of the corridor was left to be cleared and he knew he had not much time to spare. His brisk walk soon turned into a jog and before he knew it, he was at the end of the hall.

Startled, he jumped back as a figure seemingly appeared from out of nowhere.

“Excuse me,” said Ethan as he avoided a collision.

“The bathroom is right beyond those double doors, across from room 8L.” The strange man was not dressed in work attire to suggest he worked at the hospital. The man appeared peaceful, yet there was a sense of emphasis in his words.

“T-thank you,” he said in a stutter before continuing. Oddly, the urgency and need to use the restroom seemed to have diminished.

“8L, remember 8L,” the stranger said once more.

*Odd, how did he know what I was looking for?* “Thank you, sir,” he said. Ethan proceeded once more and was only a few feet away from the double doors. Nearing the double doors, he decided to look back only to notice that the individual was gone. The only exit that could have explained his quick departure was the double doors before Ethan, but he was 100% sure no one had walked through the doors.

Squinting, Ethan gave his head a scratch. *That was odd*, “Well, I better get going before the urge picks up again.” Pushing through the double doors, he looked up to see a sign that read, “Emergency.” Which indicated that he was in the emergency section of the hospital. Another thing that stuck out to him was the cry of a patient. Cries of not only pain but profound fear. The cries were intense enough to cause Ethan to scrunch his face. “Let me just use the restroom so I can get out of here,” he said to himself as he hastened his walk. As he walked further, the cries increased. Attempting to ignore the sounds and sight as he neared closer, he kept his head turned to the left. His

eyes widened. “Finally,” he said as he saw the symbol for the men’s restroom. He was inches from approaching the door before the words of the peculiar man came to his mind.

*Remember 8L.*

Chills ran through his body as he considered the thought. *Please do not tell me the room beside me is 8L.* It seemed like an eternity before his head finally made its way to the right. That is when he saw, “8L.” In astonishment, he looked on. “W-what is this supposed to mean?” he asked himself. As he looked on, he could see nurses talking to the man as if fighting with him, but that is also when he noticed the man was in grave condition. What appeared to be a pipe of some sort impaled his side. How did he not pass out from the pain? Ethan could only wonder.

“Please! Please! Don’t put me to sleep! I don’t want to go back there! I-if I go back there, I won’t make it back, please!” the man cried.

Sympathy urged Ethan forward until he was at the door’s entrance.

“Hey! Hey! Sir, you can’t be in here!” shouted a nurse.

“Please no! Don’t put me to sleep!” continued the man.

All was hectic and chaotic.

“Escort him out of the room! The door was supposed to be closed!” said the head doctor before turning back to the patient. “Sir, we must do emergency surgery to get this removed. You must be put under sedation.”

“No! No! Please don’t,” shouted the man. The fact that he summoned the will power to talk through such excruciating pain to plead not to be put under sedation only told a portion of his fear.

The more the man cried out, the more Ethan began to think about what had happened to him and the others after their accident.

“Sir, please leave the room, or we will call security!” shouted a nurse as he gently nudged.

With great remorse, Ethan looked upon the man before looking the nurse in the eyes. “Please, just let me speak to him.”

“Get him out of here I said! Drag him out if you must!” continued the doctor.

It was at this moment that Ethan spoke with great and powerful authority. “Do not be afraid! Repent of all the wrong you have done! Repent! That is the way!”

“Please! No! Hellllp!” continued the man as he watched Ethan being pushed out of the emergency room.

Ethan looked on in great sorrow as he saw the doors close before him, knowing there was no more he could do for the man.

“Sir, you must exit the building. We know you are trying to help, but you cannot just barge into a room, especially a room where emergency surgery is being conducted. Getting in the doctor’s way could be potentially dangerous for the individual. Sir, you are not in trouble at this point but please, I am asking that you leave. *Right now.*”

Ethan would eventually leave the hospital and once home, he sat in joy; thinking about how he was able to be there, celebrating as his

## The Deciding Hour

best friend welcomed a new life into the world. At the same time, he sat in moments of sorrow as he thought of the man who cried desperately for help. Not for relief of pain, but in hopes of not returning to a place far and beyond our own.

## CHAPTER 13

The following morning, all Ethan could think about was visiting the hospital once more to talk and celebrate with his good friend Connor. This day would be even more special as Malik was coming along to congratulate and celebrate with them. It was the weekend, and aside from spending it with his family, he saw no better way of spending it than with his best friends. Awakened to the smell of a home-cooked breakfast couldn't have been better. After a quick refresher in the bathroom, he wasted no time heading downstairs.

“Wow honey, this looks amazing,” he said as she placed the scrambled eggs, turkey bacon, and French toast before him. Taking a bite, he then turned to his son and daughter. “How's the food?”

“It tastes good Dad,” answered his daughter.

“Good,” added his son as he chowed down.

Having served her husband and children, his wife sat down and enjoyed the meal with her family. “Are you still going to meet up with Connor?” she asked as she cut into the bacon.

“Yeah, I am going to get ready to head out after I'm done with breakfast. I know I was there to celebrate with him and his family yesterday, but having a newborn child can be both joyful and nerve-

wracking at the same time. I just want him to know that he always has support if he needs it. Malik is supposed to be coming also, so that should be great.”

A warm glowing smile suddenly encompassed her face. “Haley is such a sweet woman and oh, I just can’t wait to meet the little one. They are such the perfect couple; I am so happy for them.”

“They were meant for each other, definitely.”

Ethan spent some more time eating at the table before finally going off to shower and prepare to head off to the hospital, to see his best friends. The shower was a pleasant experience amid the winter chill. Once finished, he changed into his pristinely ironed clothes. He always sought to look his best on all occasions. Not to outshine anyone as his attire was very modest. Rather, he always sought to be presentable when out and about. Smiling and gently nodding, he began to whistle his favorite tune. In the midst of this moment, his countenance suddenly seemed to change. As his fingers rested on his shoelaces, he remained in deep thought. *That guy...I hope he's alright. He was seeing something that no one else could see. It reminds me a lot of the experience that happened with the others and me. I can only pray he is well. He didn't have to tell me, but I just knew he was in a place that struck profound fear in his heart. All I can do is pray for him; all I can do is pray.*

It was a little after 11:00 am when he left home. The air was comfortable, brisk, and cool as he drove. Through the window dash he stared as he smiled. “Oh, what a beautiful day it is.” This time around, the drive there was more relaxing and smoother. Even if there was traffic, there was no longer any urgency; he enjoyed the repose.



It would not be long before he would arrive. Exiting his vehicle with his Bible in hand, he took a moment to appreciate the weather once more. He stared into the clear blue sunny sky as he took a deep breath. Having come to the hospital the day prior, he was more familiar with the layout as he made his way to the labor ward section.

“Hi, I am here to see Haley and Connor Beckett.”

The nurse took a moment to write his name on a tag.

“Here you go sir.”

“Thank you.”

Despite it being early in the morning, all was quiet and calm within the hospital. He made his way to room 5A where Haley was to be discharged and as expected, all were smiles and joy.

“Malik!” said Ethan enthusiastically.

“Ethan, my man! Nice to see you!” he responded before turning back to Connor. “Look at Connor over there, holding little Sofia. I can remember like it was yesterday, all of us young with no cares in the world. But man, how things have really changed for us,” he said before turning to Connor and Haley’s parents as he waved. “Nice to see you all, hope all is well.”

“Thank you dear; all is well,” answered Mrs. Beckett.

Mrs. Shaw smiled brightly. “All is well.”

Connor nodded as he chuckled. “I have all the care in the world now; all the care I will show to my daughter will be limitless. I can see it now, all three of our kids playing and growing up together.”

“Having children has brought so much joy into my life and I don’t regret it one bit. It really helped me to grow as a person. My dad wasn’t always present, but I can’t say that he did not try. It was just one of things where the family dynamic was not perfect. But now that I am grown and have gone through many experiences, I realize that a family that prays together, stays together,” said Malik as he smiled. “I will raise my children in the right direction, and I can only hope that they will not depart from it, when they are older.”

Ethan took a moment to appreciate just how much they have grown in the Lord. He smiled gently as he remained in deep thought. *Since being given a second chance at life, I have never once seen them waiver, only grow stronger in their conviction. It hurts me that the others did not make it, but to know at least two of them lived another day to make their life better, I could not have hoped for a better outcome.* Ethan took a moment to turn to little Sofia and saw just how peacefully she was sleeping. He approached to get a closer look at the beautiful baby. “Man, just yesterday she was wailing, declaring to the world that she was here. Now she is resting like an angel,” he said as he chuckled.

“Haha, yes, she sure was. You got the quiet Sofia today Malik,” said Connor as he held her.

“Speaking of quiet, how is everything Haley?” asked Ethan.

Gently sitting up, she smiled with remnants of tears in her eyes. “I am just taking it all in. To have a beautiful baby daughter means the world to me. I am just ready to go home and be a mother. Every moment with her, I will cherish.” she said as she looked at everyone in the room. “I appreciate all the support and good tidings.”

All in the room continued to speak for a while longer as Sofia remained asleep, her chunky cheeks resting against Haley's chest.

Ethan looked to Connor. "I think we should gather everyone together for a prayer.

"Sure."

Everyone stood around Haley's bed as she held little Sofia, who remained in pleasant rest.

Ethan led the prayer. "Dear Heavenly Father, I ask on behalf of You and Your only begotten Son that you be with us this day. That You bless us and guide us in all of our steps. This new soul that is here with us today will need not only Your guidance, but the guidance of those who are blessed to be around and know her. Bestow upon us the right and proper judgments, let our thoughts and guidance be guided by Your unmeasured wisdom. May You be with us and our families, allowing our children to grow to be better and wiser than us," and in one accord, all said, "Amen."

"Wait, I would like to leave a word," declared Haley as she laid in bed, holding baby Sofia as she continued to sleep in her arms. "I mean, what can I say?" she asked as she smiled with tears. "Words can't express just how grateful I am to have you all here with me. To have a beautiful baby daughter, to be surrounded by friends and family. What more can a person wish for? You all could have spent your weekend anywhere, but you all chose to spend it with me. I see none of you as friends, but all as family. Thanks again."

The company that came to support Connor and Haley were many and it only showed just how much they have touched those around them.

Suddenly, baby Sofia awoke full of life and energy.

“Haha! I guess she wanted to make sure she had the last word,” said Malik as everyone laughed and giggle at the spectacle. As quickly as she awoke, she was just as fast back asleep in her mother’s arms.

“She spoke her heart out and back to sleep she goes,” said a family member as all laughed at the spectacle once more.

“Haha, from the heart that was,” said Connor before taking on a more serious disposition. “Seriously guys, I really want you all to know just how grateful I am for each and every one of you. Words truly cannot quantify how I feel.”

“Hey man, we love you too.”

In the end, everyone continued to talk for a while longer as they communed.

“Hey Connor, I’m going to get going so I can head home and spend the rest of the afternoon and day with my family. Today was amazing and hopefully, we can come together again like this soon,” said Ethan.

“Thanks for stopping by again Ethan. I really appreciate it and thank you for leading us all in prayer. Don’t worry, I am sure we all will come together soon, even if I have to have something that will gather us all together again, I will make sure it happens. Have a safe trip,” responded Connor.

“Hey, Malik! I’ll see you later!”

“See you later Ethan!” Malik shouted in return.

“Bye everyone!” said Ethan before leaving the room.

Having just left, he was already reminiscing about the good time he had when suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. He looked on in disappointment as he saw a security guard. *I know where this is going.* He noticed a security guard who was talking with a receptionist stop, and stare his way. Not just any security guard, but the one who informed him he had to leave after the incident that took place in the emergency room just yesterday.

“Look, I am just leaving and I mean no tr—” said Ethan before he was interrupted.

“I am glad I ran into you,” said the security guard who seemed exhausted. “The guy who you spoke to yesterday, he won’t stop rambling about you. Every minute he is asking the doctors and nurses if they have seen you. Most of them have no idea who you are, and then as you know after what happened before, some rather you not show up at all. But the patient insisted on speaking with you and if that’s what it takes for him to shut up, then if you may, please, just see what his inquiry is about.”

Ethan looked on puzzled, having no idea what the man may have wanted from him. Despite the wonder, he was just glad to know the man made it through. Ethan nodded, “Alright, I guess I can come see him.”

*Thank goodness! Now hopefully he shuts up.* “Thank you, follow me.”

The security guard walked with him as he escorted him down the long corridor which he had walked just the day before. Ethan knew the man had to still be in bad shape, but he at least knew he

made it to see another day. Ethan and the security guard finally made it to the room.

“Hey, here he is, but make it quick,” said the security guard to the patient as he watched from the door.

Ethan stood at the entrance, anxious and nervous as a room full of people stood at him.

The man sat up attentively in his bed. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you for helping me yesterday,” the man said as he wept uncontrollably.

Ethan stood perplexed. *But how did I help him?* Then it came to him, the words he had left with the man yesterday.

Meanwhile, everyone in the room looked around with great perplexity.

“Who is this guy?” whispered someone.

“I have no idea,” answered another.

“That, that place, it was terrible, horrible. If you did not leave me with those words, I know for certain I would not have come back. I was wandering, wandering through this, this...this barren place. There were many trees, but no life was in them and the further along I walked, the darker it became. A terrible darkness it was, a darkness you and I will never see in this life. But yet in the distance, I could discern screaming and a great, great menacing gate,” he said before shaking his head. “Oh man it was terrible; I could just hear lots of screaming, constant wailing. Even though I could perceive many voices as I went along, all I felt was loneliness...fear. I was by myself, but it seemed I was being led by something, but I am not sure by what.

It was leading me, and my past was brought before me.” He stopped as he choked on tears. “I was a man who lived selfishly all my life; it was always about me, always,” he said before wiping his tears. Still bruised, he summoned the strength to speak on. “The pain from the accident is not what hurts me the most; it is the way I treated people. Once I was able to reach within and seek forgiveness for myself, for the things I’ve done, then I was able to ask God to have mercy on me. I-I just don’t know how to thank you, but I hope my expression of gratitude will be enough,” he said before staring upon Ethan full of emotion. The man did not care what the others thought in that moment, even if they believed him or not. He was just grateful to be alive and given a second chance.

“Alright, let’s wrap it up. You saw him, now that’s that,” said the security guard at the entrance.

“I know you have to go, and you probably won’t understand what I saw, what I experienced. But again, thank you. I wish I could do more to show just how grateful I am. But all I can leave you with, are my words of gratitude.”

Ethan stopped as he began to reach down into his pocket. “Your words are more than enough. Here, take this,” he said as he handed him a card. “When you get better, give me a call.”

“Sure thing. Thank you friend.”

Ethan stood as he became overwhelmed with tears, lost for words because he truly understood what the man experienced. For he and his friends experienced, the same thing.

Blowing through his nostrils in frustration, the security guard marched towards Ethan. *Let me end this before it gets any weirder.*

He gently placed a hand on Ethan's shoulder. "Alright, that's it, you have to leave the room now."

"Thank you," were his last words as Ethan left.

Once out of the hospital, Ethan sat in his car emotional as the situation called for tears. Not tears of sadness, but rejoicing. Ethan began to remember the strange man that appeared from what seemed nowhere, seemingly directing him to the patient's room. With teary eyes, he looked to the right and out of the passenger window as he looked into the blue sky. *Surely, he was an angel.* Turning the key ignition, Ethan smiled knowing the man had made it through a difficult ordeal. Knowing that he could live to see another day because of a single act of kindness and mercy.



## CHAPTER 14

Close to two months had passed and the winter season was nearing its end. A blanket rested across Ethan and his two children as they sat and watched Saturday morning cartoons together.

Pointing to the screen, his daughter began to chuckle. “Look Daddy, the mouse hit the cat over the head.”

His hands went in a circular motion as he caressed her shoulder. “Yeah, funny, isn’t it?” he asked before turning to his son.

“Haha, yeah Daddy,” his son said as he remained glued to the television.

Suddenly, Ethan reached down into his pants pocket. “Stay right here guys. Daddy will be right back, ok?”

“Ok,” they answered in unison.

“Hello?” he answered, holding the phone to his ear as he entered the dining room.

“Hi, is this Ethan speaking?”

Ethan raised an eyebrow in an act of caution before answering, “Y-yes, this is Ethan. Whom am I speaking to?”

“This is Ernest.”

“Ok, and where do I know you from?” he asked as he remained on the side of caution.

“Ernest, I am the guy that was in the hospital that day. You left me your church card, and I am just calling to say thank you for the help and kindness you showed me that day.”

Surprised, Ethan instantly switched his attitude from erring on the side of caution, to that of complete joy. He smiled enthusiastically as he gained a boost. “Oh yes! Yes, I remember.” Shaking his head, he took a moment to pause as he was becoming emotional. “Wow, so good to hear from you. Judging by the energy in your voice, it seems you have come along well.”

“Indeed I have. It was a long journey, but with love and family, I was able to make it,” he said before wiping a tear. “A family I did not once appreciate. I used to treat my son and wife without any regard, ignoring their concerns. Not only them, but everyone who happened to be in my life, I treated with no regard. Due to the Lord sending you my way, I was able to realize the harm I was doing not only doing to them, but to myself also. Most of all, I was able to receive a second chance and make everything right.” Up to his ears his shoulders rose as he inhaled. “When you first gave me your card, I did not know it was a card for your church, but when I came to and got time to actually view it, that is when I knew. Ethan, if possible, would it be ok if I attended a service?”

“Ernest as far as I am concerned, you are already a member. I will be having service tomorrow starting at 10 am; you are free to come and bring your family along as well.”

“Thank you, thank you. We all will definitely be there tomorrow, and I look forward to it.”

“No problem brother, glad to see you have given your life together. See you soon.”

Upon hanging up, Ethan took the time to look down at his phone as he smiled. *What a great testimony.* Averting his attention back to the living room, he watched as his children were still occupied with their Saturday morning cartoons, laughing and giggling at the antics. Ethan not only relished in the moment of seeing his children full of joy, but also in knowing that he was able to save a soul. To save a life from going on the wrong path of life and even from death itself.

“What’s on your mind?” asked his wife as she held a laundry basket of clothes.

“Woah, you snuck up on me there, haha, startled me a bit. I just got a call, which was even more startling.”

“Oh really? From whom?”

“Remember that guy I was telling you about in the hospital?”

Holding the basket under one arm, she looked up as she pondered. “Yes, I remember now. What about him?”

“Well, he wants to attend one of my church services.”

With eyes widened and mouth ajar, she gasped. “Oh really? That is great to hear.”

“Haha, yeah, I know. I actually forgot that I gave him a church card, but I am glad that I did. He even said he would bring his family along as well.”

“When does he plan on attending?”

“Tomorrow actually.”

“Oh, that is marvelous,” she stated as she walked a short distance to place the clothes basket down. “It’s always good to see new people become members of the church, become family.”

“Yeah, and from what he told me, he really turned his life around. I can’t wait to get to know him more as a person. I don’t really care about where he was before, I am just glad to know where he is now, and where he plans on heading.”

“Wow, sweetie, this is such great news. I remember that night you came home, you were so distraught from the encounter. But now look, it turned out for the better. I am so grateful things turned out the way they did.”

“Yea, it turned out better than I hoped actually. I hoped and prayed he made a full speedy recovery. I never imagined he would call me with such a statement.”

“Yep,” she said before sighing. “Well, I am going to get back to these clothes now. Those two get their clothes dirty so fast,” she said before staring into the living room, observing as the kids enjoyed their time in front of the TV.

“Ok sweetie,” he said before kissing her on the cheek.

Turning around, he playfully marched back into the living room. “Who’s ready to watch some more cartoons?” he asked as he sat down on the sofa between his two children where the three of them would spend more time bonding.

Ernest would eventually become a member of the church where he would become an usher. His wife and son also made sure to attend each church session. Ernest would become a familiar face in the congregation, and all who attended looked forward to seeing his warm smile and gentle heart. A man who once lacked compassion and love soon became a man who touched the lives of all he met.

Meanwhile, Malik was just finishing up some house maintenance. Putting on his black down coat, he prepared to venture out. "I should be back no later than 8 pm. The pipes should be ok now; I poured some antifreeze in them to free things up a bit. Just wait a while before you use the kitchen sink," he said to his wife.

"Great, I hope this helps because this cold weather really took a toll on them. It is not as cold as yesterday, so that should help things out a bit," his wife answered.

"If anything arises, just give me a call. See you and the kids soon," he said before kissing her on the forehead.

Opening the door presented a blast of chilly air. His well-insulated coat did a good job of abating most of the elements. As he neared closer to his forest green Jeep SUV, he wasted no time jumping in and turning on the heat. "I am so glad I made sure to fix the heating system," he said to himself as the heat slowly gave relief.

Malik, Connor, and Ethan agreed to meet up at their old neighborhood park. It had been many years since they had been there and so all agreed it would be a nice get-together to catch up on old times. Malik left his car about a block and a half away from the park. Exiting his vehicle, he was once again greeted with the cold winter air. He blew into his hands before retrieving his gloves. "Boy is it

cold.” Taking his time to walk, he used the moment to reminisce on his childhood. *I wonder if Mrs. Heckleoff still lives there*, he thought as he looked towards the blue and white home.

Continuing his walk, visions of him, Ethan, Connor, and the others came to mind. He felt a sense of sorrow knowing that the others were no longer here. The barren trees blew and swayed as he looked about. With hands in his pocket, he tucked his chin into his chest to stave off some of the cold winter air. *If only they made it; if only they found it within to find repentance for their actions, to show compassion. Where would they be today? I am very grateful at least Connor and Ethan made it. For that, I will be forever grateful.* He would walk a bit further before finally reaching the park where he then smiled. *Wow, it seems as if nothing has changed.* He looked around to see if the others had yet to arrive. *Guess they are still on their way.* He decided to take a seat on the familiar and unchanged bench they used to sit on as teenagers. Once seated, a rush of nostalgia came over him, times of fun and laughter. Averting his eyes, he smiled as he stood at the basketball hoop, a moment coming to his recollection. *What a moment that was...*

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The story goes back seventeen years to when Malik was just a teenager. “What do you mean I fouled you? Come on man, that is nonsense,” he said as he remained bent over, huffing and puffing as he caught his breath.

Malik was having a three-on-three game with his best friends. Malik, Dustin, and Caleb were on teams against Connor, Ethan, and Thiago in a game of twenty-one.

“What you mean he fouled you? He jumped up to grab the ball. Yo, you really playing like a little girl right now,” exclaimed Thiago.

“He can’t go under me like this,” said Malik as he demonstrated. “Check the ball.”

In frustration, Thiago pressed the ball into Malik’s chest. “You know what, here; it’s ya’ll ball.”

Ethan began to look around as if someone was accused of a crime they did not commit. “B-but why? If we give it to them, we are definitely losing the game. Why give them the call when they don’t deserve it?”

“I think it’s too late for that,” said Dustin as he laughed. “You guys were losing before the game even started.”

Blowing through his teeth, Thiago shook his head in disappointment. “Whatever man, let’s just get this game over with so I can go home. This really is some BS ya’ll pulling.”

The game commenced and Malik’s team had the ball. Malik began to wave his hands toward the basket. “Cut! Cut!” he shouted to Dustin as he cut to the basket and took a layup.

“Oh, come on! How did you miss that!” shouted Caleb to his teammate.

“Bro, can you shut up? You scored only one point of our eighteen and that was because Malik threw an accidental no-look pass off your head and the ball happened to land in the hoop.”

“Focus! Focus!” shouted Malik as the two continued to bicker.

Thiago rebounded the ball, but it seemed he lost all interest in the game. “Here, you take it,” said Thiago as he checked Ethan the ball.

Of all people to give the ball to, Ethan should have been the last person. He was one to never play ball and was only talked into playing the three-on-three game with them. He had no idea how to dribble out a ball. All he could do was look between Connor and Thiago as if signaling for help.

Thiago’s hands went in the air as he looked away. “I don’t care man. Do whatever you want.”

“Haha, giving up?” asked Caleb as he mocked them.

Connor on the other hand stood as far away from Ethan as possible as he did not want the ball handed back to him. Something had to be done, or they had no choice but to forfeit the game.

Malik, Dustin, and Caleb did not bother doing defense on Ethan as they knew he was not that good of a player. With Connor and Thiago not looking to take charge, Ethan knew it was on him.

*Oh heck.* He threw the ball to the hoop, \*swoosh!\*

“What! Man, and I wanted to 21-0 them. Alright, we have to do defense; that is all they are scoring,” said Malik as he upped his defense.

Thiago raised his eyebrows as he looked on. *Woah, I was not expecting that.*

“Haha! Good shot Ethan,” said Connor smiling as he looked on.

*I-I made that!* Ethan kept looking back and forth between his hand and the basket.



“Alright, check the ball; ya’ll scored a point, big deal,” said Malik.

Thiago still didn’t have much interest in the game anymore, but that shot definitely did liven things up a bit.

Malik checked the ball to Thiago. “That is going to be ya’ll first and only shot. Let’s go.”

The opposing team felt the shot was nothing but luck, so therefore they still did not respect Ethan much as a player.

Ethan cut to the midpoint of the court. He took another shot. \*swoosh!\*

“What!” exclaimed Dustin.

All Ethan could do was stare at the rim, amazed once more that he scored another bucket for his team.

“Game on,” said Thiago, grinning as he stared into Malik’s eyes, dribbling the ball slowly.

Both opposing teams gave it their all until the score was head-to-head at 20-19 and if Malik’s team scored another point, they would win the game.

The closeness of the game seemed to have brought out the competitive nature in Ethan as he locked eyes with Dustin.

With his eyes, Thiago gestured for Ethan to run to the top right parameter.

The ball was in Ethan’s hands; he shoots, he scores!

“Ethan let’s go! Point game, 21 straight,” said Thiago enthusiastically. He walked over to Ethan, giving him the cool typical

teenage handshake. “Good stuff man,” he said before giving a high-five. “Let’s go! Let’s go! Check it up.”

The ball was checked. Thiago dribbled it out a few steps before handing the ball to Ethan. “Imma let you finish it; go ahead, you can do it,” said Thiago as he had great faith in Ethan.

Ethan was not a good dribbler and did not want to throw the game, so he decided to pass the ball to Thiago.

Thiago had the ball; explosively he drove to the basket, creating an opening for Ethan who stood at the top of the parameter. “Shoot!” shouted Thiago as he passed the ball to Ethan.

Ethan shot the ball, and it was as if the ball was floating in slow motion toward the hoop. Every eye remained on the ball as they watched it near the rim. What should have been no more than a quick few seconds, felt like forever. The ball finally made contact, with the rim that is.

“Get the rebound!” shouted Malik.

“Damn!” shouted Thiago in frustration.

Malik shot the ball where he created another jaw-dropping moment.

All stared at the ball with mouths ajar as it made its way to the hoop. The ball made contact with the rim as it bounced one time upon it. Two times it bounced, three times before finally rolling around it. It rolled and rolled, slowly losing its momentum. It appeared to be tilting off the rim when finally, it fell through the net.

“LET’S GOOOOOOO!” shouted Malik as he celebrated.

Dustin, Malik, and Caleb ran toward each other as they exchanged fist bumps, chest bumps, and high-fives.

Ethan stood disappointed. *We were so close.* The loss really took a toll on him as he stood shaking his head. “If only I made that shot,” he said to himself. He looked back as he felt a hand placed on his shoulder.

“Hey Ethan, good game man; I never knew you had it in you. You did well; don’t worry about the loss. In my opinion, we are all winners today,” said Thiago as he smiled at him.

“Thanks Thiago,” responded Ethan.

Using his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face, Malik then approached Ethan. “Man, that was a good game. We nearly lost that game; you were crushing it out there.”

“Yeah, great game, Ethan,” added Dustin.

“Good game,” added Caleb.

“Hey, I don’t know if the others are coming but after that game, I say we call it quits today. Good job everyone,” said Malik.

“Yeah, let’s get going,” they all agreed.

This day was such a shock to all, not only because this was one of their best basketball games, but because they all discovered a side of Ethan they never knew existed.

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Malik laughed to himself. *What a day that was.* Looking up, he was able to see Connor and Ethan approaching. As happy as he was to see them, it hurt him knowing the others could not be there as well.

It took no time for his sorrowful disposition to change for he was grateful, to have the two of them still.

“Hey! Look who it is!” shouted Connor as he approached. “Sorry we kept you waiting. Traffic got a bit backed up,” he said as he rubbed his hands together. “It’s a bit chilly today.”

“Yeah, I decided to meet Connor at his home and he gave me a ride,” he said before surveying the playground. “Wow, this is bringing back so many memories...so little has changed,” said Ethan.

Confused, Connor eyed Malik as curiosity took over. “What’s the joke?” Connor asked as he saw Malik begin to laugh to himself.

“Right before you guys came, I was just thinking about you both and the others. Ethan, Connor, do you guys remember that basketball game way back when we were around sixteen or seventeen?”

Looking up, Connor twisted his mouth. “Hmmm...no, jog my memory.”

“It was the game when it was you two and Thiago against me, Dustin, and Caleb. We were up by eighteen and Ethan helped the team to come back almost by himself where my team eventually ended up winning by one.”

Ethan’s eyes lit up. “Right! Right! I remember it now. Man, how could I forget? Wow, what a game that was,” he said before looking toward Connor. “Do you remember?”

“Sure do,” Connor said as he smiled. “I’m just glad you stepped up because I had no hope of us winning after that deficit. That was surely a memorable game, one of the best we had.” Coughing ensued

as Connor broke out in laughter. “Hey, do you guys remember that kid who always took a bite of candy every time he made a shot?”

“Hahaha oh yeah, that was Josiah I believe. I wonder what he is up to now?” asked Malik before standing. “It’s a bit cold, let’s move around a bit.”

The three of them strolled around the park; it was not a huge park but a decent-sized local park, so it would not be too long before they covered all or most of it.

Connor looked towards a bench before pointing. “Guys, do you remember Mrs. Halloway?”

“Oh right! She was the one who always used to feed pigeons and her poodle would just start randomly rolling in the bread right before the flocks of birds came. She used to always sit in that same spot.”

“Haha, right! Then you couldn’t even see her dog anymore because the birds would just swarm it.”

“Oh man, those were good times,” answered Connor.

The three continued to explore the park where they continued to laugh and reminisce.

Malik stopped as he looked up and around. “This spot had some good memories too. I know there was something very hilarious about it, but it’s not coming to mind.”

“Oh, it sure was, this was the spot where the girls would usually play hopscotch or jump rope,” Connor said before gripping his stomach in laughter. “You remember sometimes Caleb would randomly disappear from our group and we would find him staring at the girls from a distance behind a tree?” he asked as he chuckled.

“Hahah, right! And when we caught him standing there looking, he would get mad cause we teased him about it. He had a crush on Damaris I believe,” added Ethan.

“Yeah, and every time he would come up with an absurd excuse as to why he was standing there looking. Everywhere she was, he would be off at a distance staring.”

Malik’s shoulders came to a rest as his laughter settled. “As funny as that was, I can’t knock him for that. We were little kids then, about nine or ten so everything was a curiosity to us, especially girls.”

The three continued until they neared one of the park’s other entrances/exits.

“This was where some of the soccer and handball players played,” said Connor.

“Yeah, a lot of memorable moments took place here also. It was always lively and everyone was pleasant; I can’t really remember any unpleasant moments to be honest. I am just glad we were able to capture the memories and be surrounded by love and kindness,” said Malik.

“Me too, we all were very blessed and fortunate to have the childhood that we did.”

“I agree,” said Ethan as a moment of silence ensued as they concluded the nostalgia. “Well, I am hungry; I say let’s get going,” said Ethan as they exited the park.

“I agree,” answered Connor where he rubbed his belly. *I can eat an entire cow right about now.*

Malik adjusted his scarf. “Yeah, let’s get going.”

The walk to the diner would take around fifteen minutes which left more time for them to laugh, talk, and catch up on old times.

Arriving at the diner, Malik lifted his nose to the air as he inhaled deeply. “Oh, it smells good in here.”

“Wow, when was the last time we were here? Feels like it’s been forever,” said Connor.

“I agree.”

There were a few other diners there when they arrived, but luckily, they had no trouble finding a table. Removing their winter coats, the three sat and settled down.

“Whew, that was a long but pleasant walk,” said Malik as he blew through his lips and began to take a look around. “Things don’t look exactly the same, but it still has that welcoming feeling it had when we were younger.”

“Yeah, some things changed here and there, but overall, the place has not removed its original appeal. I am hungry; I say let’s see what’s on the menu.”

As they flipped through the menu, they were presented with lots of good choices, so it would not be a quick decision.

“It seems they still have many of the old meals, and lots of new ones, which is great,” said Ethan.

Malik’s eyes lit as he pointed at the menu. “Wow, they even still have the Triple Dipper cheeseburger. For old times’ sake, Imma go with this,” he said before looking up to address the approaching waitress.

“Hi gentlemen and welcome; hope you all are having a lovely day. Are you guys ready to order?” asked the kind waitress.

“I’ll wait for the others to finish deciding on what they want so we can order together,” responded Malik.

“Oh no, I’m ready. I will go with the crispy chicken sandwich and large fries.”

“Anything to drink?”

“Yes, a Sprite would do.”

“And for you, sir?” she asked, looking towards Malik.

“I will have the Triple Dipper cheeseburger, with large fries and a Coke.”

“Thank you, sir, and what will you be having?” she asked as she turned to Ethan.

“I will have the Smooth Surf fish sandwich with small fries. Water will do. Thank you.”

“Thank you, your orders will be coming up shortly.”

As they waited, they decided to continue to catch up on old times.

“You guys remember when we and the others used to meet up here after school?” asked Malik.

“How can I forget? I also remember how crowded it could be, but yeah, those were really good times,” added Ethan.

“Yeah, those were good times.”



“Those were in fact good times, but look at where we are now, times of great blessings. I say there is no time like now, and I know things will only get better,” said Malik.

“We are certainly blessed, and I too look forward to the future and what it holds as well. Life has so much in store for us,” added Ethan.

“I agree.”

With enthusiasm, Malik looked forward. “Oh great, here comes the food,” he said as he began to rub his hands together.

“Here you go, here you go, and here you go,” said the waitress as she placed down the orders. “If there is anything else you guys need, I will be right over there.”

“Thank you,” said Malik.

Connors’s eyes zigzagged across the table as he eyed the food. “Wow, everything looks and smells great. I can’t wait to dig in.”

Rolling his sleeves, Ethan flashed a toothy smile. “Let’s not waste any more time,” he said before reaching out his hand to take hold. “But wait, let us give a prayer of thanks.”

They all nodded in agreement.

“Lord, I would like to thank You for allowing us to gather this day in friendship. I thank You for allowing us to wake up this morning with the energy and strength which makes this all possible. May You not only continue to bless us, but everything associated with us. Let the blessings bestowed upon us branch out to those near and dear to us. The food we have before us, I ask that You bless it and allow it to

provide the nourishment and sustenance to heal and keep our bodies strong. Amen.”

And all said, “Amen.”

Taking hold of his burger, Malik then held it in the air. “Here is to friendship and happiness.”

Smiling, Ethan too lifted his sandwich. “To friendship.”

“To friendship,” added Connor.

They sat and enjoyed their meal, adding the moment to future memories and pleasant moments.

And this is how the story ends. A group of young men who once were too prideful to confront their past sins through a difficult ordeal were able to humble themselves and see a second chance through repentance. Becoming strong in their faith in Christ Jesus, they were able to see the true meaning of life and the joy that comes with it.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

**T**he inspiration behind the writing of this novel stems from the accounts I've heard, concerning near-death experiences. What is a near-death experience? A near-death experience is an experience that can take place at, or before the moment of a tragic incident. Such experiences can also be referred to as out-of-body experiences. If we look at the Bible, we can see an example of this as the Apostle Paul gives an account. In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, it reads:

“I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth; such an one caught up to the third heaven.

And I knew such a man, whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;

How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”

As we can see, the Apostle Paul mentions an aspect of this spiritual experience. The Apostle Paul's experience was not necessarily a near-death experience, but God allowed him to experience a view of the spiritual, one could not normally experience.

Speaking in the context of this novel, such experiences usually take place when a person is heading down a wrong path in life. Instead

of the individual passing away, Jesus can use that moment to bring their souls to what the Bible calls hades and it is there, that the individual realizes the mistake they would have made. What should have been an eternity, through the mercy of Jesus Christ is only a moment. But not all near-death experiences are doom and gloom, as there are many who also have had heavenly experiences.

Lastly, a near-death experience is just one way in which Jesus can change the life of a person. Many on earth can give their own unique account as to how God changed their lives, and each account is special and life-changing in its own way.