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Beyond the Crimson Door

Erik J. Medina
University of Texas at El Paso

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BEYOND THE CRIMSON
DOOR

ERIK MEDINA

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Daniel Chacon, Ph.D., Chair

Paula Cucurella

Ilana Lapid

Stephen Crites, Ph.D
Dean of the Graduate School

BEYOND THE CRIMSON
DOOR

By

ERIK JOSEPH MEDINA

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

An alcoholic father is forced to raise his daughter after the death of his wife. He has been trying to get better with the help of his doctor, but things only seem to get worse when the nightmares he's been having slowly start to merge with his reality. Not knowing what is real and fake, his world is turned upside down when the nightmares begin to threaten his daughter.

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Sleep and Writing: An Analysis of Beyond the Crimson Door

The room is violently white as my eyes slowly adjust to the rays of bright light that assault them. I look into the farthest distance of the room and see a red speckle of color standing out in contrast to the whitespace around it. Even though the image in the distance makes me feel nervous, my first instinct is to head for the dot of red and see what it is that is calling me towards it. At first, I hesitate and take my time, trying to make sense of my location, and get some sort of semblance of familiarity. I then start pacing through the room. Before I can get even a few yards down the room, I am struck by what feels like a large thorn at the bottom of my feet. Looking down at the floor there is a branch that had made its way into the room with several small rose thorns strewn about it. I'm confused how it got there but at the same time, the arching vine seems as though it was meant to be there to spill my blood and cause me a pain that I can actually feel in the dream. Although the sensation is bizarre, I continue forward only to realize the speckle of red in front of me, still several yards away, is a large door. The door sends a fear inside myself that I cannot comprehend. Looking at the door, I see it as a way out of this strange room, so I begin to run. The closer I get towards the door, the more vines fly out of every which way of the room and lacerate my body. With the doorknob only a few feet away from my grasp, my body is in searing pain as my flesh holds on by mere bits and pieces intertwining with the thorns like a barbed wire DNA strand. With the agony coursing its way through my body, I'm taken out of the dream and I awake in a panic.

I have had this dream of the red door ever since I was a little kid. I always wanted to know what it meant and if it was some kind of metaphor for something missing, or unattainable in my life. During my research, I finally found myself understanding Sigmund Freud's logic that "The dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish" (Freud). Even with this knowledge, it is still difficult for me to make sense of what the wish might be. As I chase the answers to this question, there were other questions looming on the horizon. *Did others have this same dream? Why was the door always red? Why did I keep having it?* It wasn't until I met my wife that I made the discovery that I wasn't the only one that had these strange types of dreams. Moreover, I did not know the level of fear which people faced in and out of these dreams. Had I never known about my wife's random episodes, my novel might have never come into fruition.

My wife and I watched the documentary, *The Nightmare*, at the early start of my career of my graduate studies during a long weekend binge of movie watching. The film was about people that struggle with sleep paralysis. According to the website WebMD, sleep paralysis is defined as, "a feeling of being conscious but unable to move. It occurs when a person passes between stages of wakefulness and sleep" (Felson). When my wife mentioned that she was one of the people that suffered from this bizarre phenomenon, I was pessimistic to say the least. The people in the film sounded like the crazy people that claim to have seen a UFO. Out of curiosity, I asked what her experiences had been like, and oddly enough, they sounded close to what the people in the documentary were explaining. My skepticism rose as the similarities in stories were comparable to those retellings of one person seeing a crop circle then all of a sudden, the world is flooded with the same sightings. Admittedly, I brushed these tales off as pure lore.

It was not until I had my own experience with sleep paralysis that I truly realized the fear of it all. People in the documentary described the experience as though they were "having a

stroke” (The Nightmare), or as though there was someone in the room with them. I found myself under this same category of tales that I once did not believe. One night I woke up and found that I could not move. I knew that I was awake unlike other dreams where it was clear to me by the subtle changes of reality, that I was still dreaming. The room was completely dark except for the reflection of the mirror sliding closet doors. The reflection of the mirrors allowed me to see the room with a three-sixty view from my frozen state. When I looked into the reflection, I could see a shadow behind me trying to push me down into the bed. It was hard to breathe under the pressure of the entity, and it was not until I caught my breath that I was able to wake up and shake off the unsettling and heavy feelings of paralysis that had occurred only seconds before. Thanks to the traumatic event that I experienced, the idea for *Beyond the Crimson Door* was planted into my mind.

The book tells the story of an alcoholic, widowed father who is struggling to get by in raising his daughter. He has been trying to get sober by going to counseling sessions and trying to stay away from booze, but with his constant nightmares, he cannot seem to catch a break. Things get worse when he begins to take medication for his insomnia and at the suggestion of his doctor, she puts him under hypnosis to see why he has been having the reoccurring dream about “The Crimson Door.” What lies beyond the red door are bad memories, realities he does not want to face and inexplicable supernatural occurrences that begin to terrorize him and his daughter, and even eventually his doctor.

Originally, I had no idea which direction I wanted to take this novel. Draft after draft, I found myself growing increasingly frustrated with the task of writing this story. After several trials and tribulations, I came to the realization that my focus in my writing and in my thinking was in all the wrong places. Thanks to the help of mentors, professors, family, and my own personal

reflections, I was able to understand the importance of different aspects of my writing that I was lacking. Reading other books also helped me get a better idea of what I wanted to write and how I wanted to write it. Though the challenge of writing a book was overbearing at times, I learned how point of view, story structure, and the editing process were the most crucial components I needed to work with in order to finish my book. These elements, as well as reading the works of other authors, helped me to reach my goal of sharing and crafting the very personal overall theme within my book: the importance of family; while using an unexpected genre such as thriller/science-fiction.

When I first started writing my book, it was my intention to make it a very personal account of my protagonist's life. The reason I wanted to do this was because I saw myself sharing a lot of the same characteristics as my main character. While many of the details of myself are sprinkled throughout in Travis, he is truly a character of fiction that I thought was a great fit for my story. Suitably, the best option was to take on the book in first person. At first everything seemed fine and I was enjoying creating my character and having his personality develop. However, as I continued with my first draft, I was coming to the realization that I was struggling trying to push the story forward in the first person and I did not know why. It was supposed to be an intimate tale, but I was finding myself being pulled away from my character and the people around him. I thought to myself, *If I don't care about my character, then no one will.* I decided to take on the challenge of writing part of the story in third person to see how things would flow. When I started, I was noticing that things were falling into place much easier and I was able to give better "description from the outside rather than being told them directly" (Kress) from my protagonist. I compared the two versions side by side and I was liking what I was seeing in the third person point of view. Even though I was liking this form much better, I was

worried that I would lose the readers' connection with Travis. As I proceeded to write in third person, I realized that it was very similar to first person as it had "much of the intimate ruminations" (Kress) that I thought I was missing out on.

With my new love of the third person point of view, I was finding out that it was also helping me to push the story forward into a direction that I did not originally plan. I was able to take other characters and help tell their own stories and perspectives to mold Travis's character arc. One of my motivations for continuing this method of the third person and using it to show other people in my main character's life came from the novel *IT*, by Stephen King. It is one of my favorite novels that is very realistic but also filled with unprecedented layers of horror which make the story that much more believable in its unbelievable universe. In the novel there are several main characters, however a majority of the story deals with Bill Denbrough. We can see his character as well as the characters around him such as Beverly, Ben, and Mike all transform from the start of the book to the end of it. It is with these character arcs that Ben's development is much more meaningful than if King had merely focused on just telling the story in the first person.

In speaking on Stephen King, the ways in which he wrote *IT* are very similar to the way in which Sherwood Anderson wrote *Winesburg, Ohio*. Anderson was able to take several stories to help develop a setting as well as believable characters with their own unique experiences and problems. It was in reading Anderson's book that I realized there is more than one way to tell a story. All the elements of fiction can be changed in a way that can completely change the way in which a story is formed. This left me wondering if certain books would have been memorable had they been written in a different point of view.

While this transition from first person to third person was difficult at first and I often wanted to stop, it ended up being the best direction for the book to go to. The entire book was already written, and I couldn't believe that I was forcing myself to go back and change everything...again. The task of again re-writing the entire book was well worth the struggle of having to go back and switching perspectives. Thanks to the transition, it helped fix another problem that I was facing: story structure.

The story was getting tedious, in the sense that I found myself in a circle of repetition with what my character was doing and what he was saying. I was focusing on aspects of my character's life that were not all that important. I would write thirty pages about what happened one day at work with Travis instead of focusing on something more meaningful to shape his character. It was with the help of the dream space and the sessions with Dr. Latimer that the structure of the story changed, but also helped to open the door to a better plot.

Using the doctor, I was able to develop much deeper connections with my characters with each other and with the reader. I was able to show character development while also giving the reader a break from the main story with separate little side stories, such as the details of Travis's dreams or his recollections of his family.

With this being said, the dream space that I developed was a way to use supernatural elements to take my characters out of their ordinary world where our hero "exists before his present story begins, oblivious of the adventures to come" (Bronzite). This space allowed me to send them into a special world "out of his comfort zone" (Bronzite) where Travis "is confronted with an ever more difficult series of challenges that test him in a variety of ways (Bronzite). I was using the teaching of Joseph Campbell to help shape my hero's journey and send him around the seemingly endless cycle of becoming the hero that he is supposed to be. Using this traditional

style of writing at first made me think that somehow my writing was being hindered, and I was not allowing my full creativity to blossom. However, after realizing that many stories and movies such as Star Wars, or Harry Potter, go through the same sort of heroic cycle, I had a revelation. Although the Hero's Journey is always the same, the narrative does not have to be. Even though there is a guideline for the problems of a character, how they get and handle those problems can be different millions of times over.

The dream space was also a place where fiction and reality were blending together for my character and it was a key part of the structure of the book to help create an area for insanity that was impossible to get out of. When the doctor started to get involved with the dream space that was also another aspect that I could not have done had I stood with first person. It was with this change that I realized I could get small glimpses into the minds of other characters without having to dive so much into their own chapters and take away from the main story.

With the multiple perspectives in the novel, I was able to form a Quentin Tarantino-like story in which the separate stories were a leading role in shaping the plot. Tarantino is one of my favorite filmmakers and before I wanted to be a writer, I wanted to be a filmmaker. It was in the way that he told his stories that made me realize that a great movie cannot be great without a great story (screenplay) to begin the filmmaking process. Looking at the way in which Tarantino does his movies, I wanted to let "real life intrude on genre" (Tarantino :35) and to take "a community of characters, so they can overlap" (Tarantino 1:15) and shape each other's story and more importantly the story of my main character. In taking this idea in the way that Quentin Tarantino made *Pulp Fiction*, I wanted to try and do something similar to this, but in a smaller format. Using the dreams and the sessions with the doctor I was able to take different perspectives and stories and have them end up together for the greater goal of telling my novel.

Not only was Tarantino an influence for this time of change in my story, but also the great Ray Bradbury. In *The Martin Chronicles* and in *The Illustrated Man*, my eyes were opened to the possibility of using different stories to tell the overall theme. Using science fiction, Bradbury was able to take real world topics such as racism, social order and religion and bring them to light. Being a writer and a teacher, I use Bradbury's teachings in my writing as well as the classroom. "He's often one of the first writers who awaken students to the enthralling possibilities of storytelling and the use of fantastical metaphors to describe everyday human life" (Kakutani). He is able to take jarring issues and make them so simple to understand that it leaves the reader remembering them. As a writer, isn't this the main goal of telling stories?

As I have stated, there were many issues I faced in writing *Beyond the Crimson Door*. However, none of the issues were as daunting as the struggle I had in dealing with editing. With the troubles of editing also came the troubles of redundancy in my writing. The two problems go hand in hand with my writing. It is due to this constant issue in my writing that makes my job as an editor that much harder. I tend to write more than I should for parts of my novel that do not really matter. Then, when I am supposed to focus really deep into characteristics and descriptions of events or setting, I tend to stray from those details. Even now, I have no idea why I tend to do this, but it was making it difficult to take paint a picture in my story without having the paint run into each other and form an abstract piece of mediocre writing.

In editing my novel and going through different drafts, I realized that if I wrote something simple instead of trying to make it convoluted, it would come out much better. I would tend to continue this pattern or writing too much throughout each draft and by the time I was done editing, I ended up deleted thousands of words while still adding thousands to the parts where they should have been in the story. It was a struggle to find the medium between writing

too much and writing too little. Eventually, the editing process is what opened my eyes to this problem as well as reading other authors works.

Kurt Vonnegut was one of the writers that showed me less was more. In reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* I was able to realize that he had a very complex story told in a very simplistic way. It was one of the first books I started reading when I went back to school, and it allowed me to easily jump back into reading for fun. Although the story of Billy Pilgrim is way out there and to explain it to someone who never has read it is often difficult, the writing in it is very easy to read and understand. His writing is very “minimalist and dry, utilizing short sentences and avoiding wordy run-ons” (Nicholson).

Taking all of the editing into consideration, I made a fatal slipup in forgetting the editing process in the Spanish writings. Although Spanish is my second language, I was finding it difficult to translate my border Spanish or “Spanglish,” to a grammatically correct form that even native Spanish speakers would understand. Just like the English language there are ways to say something formally and informally but I even managed to forget how to add a question mark at the beginning of a Spanish question. While it seems like a minor error, there were several instances in my novel that I did this mistake, simply because I forgot about the whole thing. This issue goes the same for language in general and my literal translations from English to Spanish weren’t making sense. To this day I still don’t understand how “guy” can be considered a decent translation for “dude” or “guy.” Once I was finally able to overcome this obstacle, I was able to continue forward with the story.

While at times I didn’t see these flaws in my writing I ended up seeing them later when I came back to my novel with fresh eyes. At this point I don’t know how many times I’ve read and re-read my book in order to edit it. With this in mind, editing not only can make a book better,

but it can also doom it. What I mean by this, is that in my own editing I ended up falling back into my same patters that I was trying to fix. It was as though I was taking my mistakes, fixing them but making the same mistakes somewhere else. This back and forth between editing issues was getting difficult to take on. After a near breakdown my wife would tell me to stop looking at it and come back to it later. Despite knowing that it was going to leave me annoyed that I didn't fix it, I took her advice and would wait a couple of weeks to go back and start editing. Sure enough, when I would go back with fresh eyes I would tell myself, "What the hell was I thinking?"

Another parallel between my main character and myself seems to be that I always worry about what other people will think, or say, and it is often debilitating at times. People can judge me as a person all they want, but when they judge me based on my creativity is when I shut down and just want to quit. I don't ever want to be wrong about something or miss something about the facts of sleep paralysis, but at the same time I just want everyone to like what I was writing for entertainment without fact checking and criticism. Rather than focusing on harnessing my craft, I focused on trying to write something for other people rather than writing for myself. There was a part of me that wondered whether I should have started a completely different story because people wouldn't believe in what I had to say. As mentioned before, my first draft of the story was completely written for the sake of getting it done, and since I didn't believe in it, so there was no way my readers would enjoy it. When I finally realized that I wanted to write the book the way I wanted without anyone else's influence, I finally was able to rewrite the entire thing over for about the tenth time the way I wanted.

Another fear of mine is the fear of rejection and the fear of someone telling me I am no good, which I'm sure plenty of other writers feel. The thought of someone reading something so

personal and leaving myself vulnerable to critiques is something that shakes my core. And though I have had people not only compliment me on my writings, but my poetry (that I thought was mediocre at best), my music and my carpentering skills, I still lack confidence. Even when a short story of mine was published in a horror compendium, I still went back after publication and did a complete re-write because I felt it wasn't good enough. With all that being said, with this particular book I cannot begin to count how many times and through how many different scenarios I put my characters' in, before I finally said enough is enough. The biggest saving grace was the fact that this was on a deadline and I wanted to graduate on time. If it was not for that I would still probably working through another draft, drudging through self-doubt.

Once I began finding joy in my stories is when I started to believe in myself. I am by no means saying I am a great writer, nor will I ever live up to the standards that I set for myself, but I do like the way I have grown as a writer. I have noticed a great improvement with my dialogues, and details without being redundant. Another development has been my ability to "jump right in the story." Typically, I like to write from point A-Z, usually beginning with the birth and childhood of my character, but I realize now that sometimes it is unnecessary or that certain details can be revealed later on in the story. With this newfound freedom, my writings began to come more naturally than ever before.

While taking on the task of writing this novel, I continued to write other short stories on the side to build up my skills and practice when I could not think of the direction to take my book. This was a grueling task in which again, I found myself struggling. It was the built-up feelings of school, my personal life and my work life that was making everything difficult. I could not find the time to work on my writings as much as I wanted and maintain my status as a husband and as a father. The stress that was continuing to grow was taking its toll on me as a

writer. Once I realized the only real obstacle keeping me back was myself, everything started to slowly fall into place. I was able to find a groove that I never had, and I was able to start focusing on what was important to me as a writer. I found myself being able to write better in the mornings and focus on my writing at certain times during the day. Without having a schedule for myself, I almost never wrote. This goes back to the rules that I set for myself in order for this book to be able to take shape. Even though I had people in my corner there were plenty of times that I had to be my own motivator and force myself to work through the tears.

In the end, the experience of writing this novel was something that I hated but loved at the same time. I will definitely continue on with my writing, whether in short stories, full lengths, or even just jotting down personal experiences. It is something that I will continue to pursue with admiration for as long as I'm breathing. The writing process and the troubles that come along with it have given me the strength I need to grow as a writer and to write better as I go on my way. Even with the stress that came with writing this book, I would do it all over in a heartbeat and continue to add the stress back into my life. I've come to the realization that the stress is because I care about my work, my characters and most importantly the story. It is the story that people remember, and it is with stories that have helped to shape our thinking and even the future. The dance I had with point of view, story structure, and editing gave me a better sense of not just my story but me personally as a writer. I never really knew what I wanted to do in life and at the end of high school I was just about ready to quit school altogether and give up. With the help from friends, family and my mentors, I have realized my passion and I am forever grateful for finding my dream and continuing to chase it. "Everybody is the hero of their own story," (Martin) and my story nowhere close to being finished.

Beyond the Crimson Door

By: Erik Medina

Patterns

*“I believe in everything until it's disproved.
So I believe in fairies, the myths, dragons.
It all exists, even if it's in your mind.
Who's to say that dreams and nightmares
aren't as real as the here and now?
-John Lennon*

1

It always started with the door. For as far back as he could remember, and as far back as the dreams occurred, the door was the first thing that told him he was no longer in control. The feelings of absolute hopelessness and isolation waved over Travis. He felt ten years old again, alone and scared in his bed, trying to scream for help. There was no one to rescue him and no one to shake him out of the state he had found himself in. It was just Travis and the door as it always had been.

The door appeared as though it was materialized out of thin air. Travis laid on his side in bed, watching as the door slowly molded its way into existence. Not knowing whether it was his eyes that had adjusted to the night, or if somehow the door had an illumination to it, he would watch as it rose from the floor. It reached the ceiling, towering over him. The incredible size of the door made him wonder how something so enormous could fit in the small confines of the room. It was inexplicable to witness something so out of place, yet so meaningfully positioned so it could be seen.

The door always took the place of where the closet was, and it never failed to have the same characteristics. The dark red paint covering its wooden body stood out against the darkness that surrounded it. Even though the paint looked fresh, the door itself looked aged, as if someone had painted over a broken piece of rotting wood. The door had a large, black steel handle that looked cold to the touch and seemed to be the only thing that hadn't been withered away by age.

Travis felt a sensation of both terror and wonder. The terror first constricted him like a straight jacket, wrapping around his body, squeezing the air out his lungs. It was unlike anything else he had ever experienced in his life. The door always gave him a feeling that death was reaching out, trying to pull him in.

When the fear subsided and Travis felt like he could finally breathe, the wonder would set in. He wanted to know what was behind the door. The feeling made him want to get up from the bed and head towards the void that had become his room. As he regained his strength, he was able to lift himself up from his paralyzed state and sit at the edge of the bed. He would watch as the blackness of the room would get even darker and heavier while continuously revealing the door that didn't belong. The door had plagued him with horror and unanswered questions since childhood. It was the boogeyman. It was the monster under his bed. It was every fear he never wanted to face.

No matter where he went, no matter what he did, and no matter how old he got, the door had always managed to find its way back to him. He knew the door didn't exist, and he knew he was dreaming, but the dark red lush of the door spoke to him. It called to be opened. Despite all the mixed feelings Travis had, he continued to wonder whether or not to try and see what was behind the Crimson Door.

Dr. Synthia Latimer's workspace was a cozy little five-hundred square foot studio apartment that she turned into an office. She had been practicing psychiatry for a little over a year. During that time, none of the patients that had come through her door were nearly as interesting or as difficult to deal with than Travis Bingleman. She often would look forward to seeing Travis, but also dreaded their weekly sessions at the same time.

“So, how have things been going lately, Travis?”

Travis had chosen the easy chair rather than the traditional sofa to conduct his session. It gave him a sense of control and made him feel a little bit better about having shown up to their meeting in the first place.

“Same old same. If it's not one thing it's another, you know?”

“Is everything alright at home? Did you have another dream?” Dr. Latimer looked at Travis to gauge his reaction to the question. She could tell that he had something on his mind. Rather than jotting down extensive notes, a small recording device sat between the two of them on a glass coffee table next to an arrangement of white flowers.

“I mean, the dreams don’t change. I keep having them and they’re always the same, it’s just—” Travis paused to debate whether or not he wanted to relay the information he was withholding from her. “I ended up getting fired the other day from work.”

“And that’s from your job working as a forklift operator, correct?” Dr. Latimer crossed her legs and sat attentively, trying to make sure she showed a level of empathy in her eyes.

Travis nodded his head and took a deep breath before he said, “Ten years. Can you believe that? Ten years and they fire me because of one little mistake. I put everything I had into that job Doc, and because of one mistake—”

Dr. Latimer looked at Travis and could see that his eyes were getting red. Travis rubbed them quickly, hoping that he could hide his emotions.

“Why did they fire you, Travis?”

Travis tried cracking his neck to relieve some of the built-up tension. He sighed and said, “I had a minor accident at work and Carl flipped his lid about the whole situation.”

“And Carl is your boss?”

“Yeah, my bad, I probably should have said that first. He runs the place but it’s his daddy’s business.”

“Does that bother you?”

“What? That he’s working for his dad? No, of course not. I just don’t like the way he flaunted around the office thinking he knew a damn thing about any of the work we were doing.” Travis stopped, realizing he had been talking fast. He rolled down his sleeves as the temperature in the room grew colder. “Hell, I knew Carl back when we both went to Putnam High and he hadn’t been a jerk back then.”

“Were you all friends in high school?”

Travis shook his head. “Nah, not for a lack of trying. I hung out with a bad group of guys and I guess that kind of pushed Carl away from ever wanting to associate with me. I never did any of the dumb crap my friends did, but there was this one time that Carl assumed I had been a part of something that had happened to him at our end of the year party.”

“What happened?”

“Well, you see the thing is, Carl has always been kind of a weirdo. He never really talked to anyone and mainly kept to himself. At the end of the year, we had our Senior Sunrise down at the country club. It was supposed to be a gathering of all the seniors. There was going to be a dance, games with prizes, and the food and drink was paid for. It was supposed to be a good time. The night was going surprisingly well for Carl. He had been talking to a girl that he had the hots for and everyone at the party was being overly nice to him and each other. I guess the thought of never seeing most of the people at our school was bringing out the best in everyone.”

“Well, that’s kind of nice.” Dr. Latimer smiled towards Travis.

“Story’s not over. So, it turns out the girl he was talking to was one of my friend’s side chicks. He convinced her to sneak away with Carl into a linen closet to trick him into thinking he was going to get some action. When they got to the closet, the girl took off Carl’s shirt and pants and ran out of the room with them, leaving Carl nearly naked in a closet while the rest of us gathered around the river to watch the sun come up.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s terrible.” Dr. Latimer couldn’t help her comment as she tried to cover her mouth.

“When the country club workers found him, they had to wrap him up in a garbage bag so he wouldn’t be exposed. On his way out, he saw me standing there with the girl and my friends, so I could only assume he thought I had been a part of it all. I tried to tell him on more than one

occasion that I had nothing to do with the way he got terrorized back in school, but it didn't faze him." Travis looked out of one of the windows to see the clouds covering the sky.

"So, you think that story, along with the accident is why he fired you?"

"I don't think. I know it." Travis wiped his mouth. "I never once got into any kind of trouble or accidents at work before. It was his excuse to get rid of me and that was all the ammo he needed."

"Can you tell me about the accident?" Dr. Latimer slid the recorder closer towards Travis. Travis looked down at the device and wondered why she chose to move it at that particular point in their conversation.

"Uh yeah, sure." Travis refocused his attention on her. "So, I was working an eleven-hour shift and I was getting tired. I had my headphones in and was listening to some music that my dad and I used to listen to when I was a kid. Next thing I know, I'm running a fully loaded pallet into a shelving unit and a bunch of boxes fell on top of my forklift. I guess I must have fallen asleep at the wheel while I was listening to my music because I had no idea what was going on."

"And everyone was okay? You didn't hurt yourself?" Dr. Latimer looked at Travis to see if she could find any noticeable injuries.

"Nah, nothing like that. A bunch of boxes were damaged; and inside of them were a bunch of computer parts. Most of them looked salvageable but it didn't matter to Carl. He was pissed." Travis looked as if though he didn't know where else to take his story. "I don't know, I've just been having a hard time sleeping, I guess. Missing out on sleep finally caught up to me."

"Do you find it hard to sleep with your nightmares?" Dr. Latimer waited for a response, as Travis took a moment to reply.

“I mean, obviously those don’t help but even when I don’t dream, I tend to toss and turn all night. When I do manage to fall asleep, the sun is already out, and my alarm clock is screaming.”

Dr. Latimer didn’t know what question to probe next and Travis had grown transfixed by her beauty. He had been to those meetings several times and he had always found Synthia attractive. Even the way her name was spelt made him feel a level of magnetism towards her. In that moment, it was something about the way her hair was reflecting the soft sunlight that broke through the clouds which made him speechless. Other than his daughter and the housekeeper Rosa, there had been no other women in his life, not since his wife.

“Now, let me ask you—does your drinking have anything to do with the accident?”

The question hit him at a million miles per hour. Travis felt a sting burning inside himself. It was a pain of embarrassment and frustration that continued to render him wordless. “Travis? I need you to be honest with me.”

“I’m sorry, what was the question?” Travis asked, composing his thoughts before committing to a definite answer.

“Did your drinking have anything to do with the accident?” Dr. Latimer fixed her glasses as they had started to make their way off her nose. Travis looked at her and felt a sense of security in the way she was looking at him. The question wasn’t a means to scold him or a means of disapproval, it was simply a question of concern.

“I might have been a little hungover when I went to work. You don’t understand it’s cause—” Travis started to slip over his words as he wanted to tell her everything that had happened to him in the last week. He wanted to tell her about all of his downfalls he had over the years in their allotted time, but he knew it was too much to comprehend. Moreover, he knew that

no matter what excuse he had for last week, it wasn't enough to justify over ten years' worth of alcoholism. "Just... things get hard, you know? Sometimes when I can't sleep, I tend to drink until the alcohol puts me out."

"Travis, listen, I'm not here to judge. My job is to help you through this whole process. You can feel free to tell me anything. If you truly want to get better, you need open up. I can't help you if you don't tell me what is going on... or lie." Dr. Latimer leaned forward in her chair and looked at Travis directly in his eyes to get his attention.

"I understand. It's just that I don't know if I'm ready for all that. The last time we talked about my drinking, it did more bad than good. Anytime we bring up things that are upsetting I get upset and—" Travis had to take a deep breath to keep himself from stuttering. "It's hard taking care of Riley by myself. Yeah, Rosa's there and she helps a lot, but I never thought I'd be a thirty-year-old, single dad, or a widower." Travis couldn't help himself anymore as his eyes started to water. "The booze is the only thing that takes my mind off it. It's the only thing that makes me forget about her."

"You don't have to forget about your wife, Travis." Dr. Latimer reached behind her seat and grabbed Travis a tissue. She handed it to him and said, "Sometimes remembering is better for the grieving process. You already took a huge step in getting your life back on track by coming and talking to someone. Now, all we have to do is figure this out and we will—together." She reached for his hand and he placed his in hers. He could feel her warmth on his cold calloused hands and felt a bit of relief. He couldn't remember the last time he had any kind of physical contact with another woman. The two of them smiled at each other. It was in that final gesture that their session came to an end.

3

Walking out to the parking lot after his session always gave Travis a sense of relief. He had wanted to be a better father for his daughter but other than the comfort he had with the Doc, he still didn't like going. It took him a long time to admit to himself that he needed help but that was a first step in a long trivial process. All things considered he knew he had to do it if he wanted to change for the better.

The sun was coming down, sending a multitude of colors through the sky. His session normally would last till about six, but lately he had been getting out later and later. Travis could see his truck facing him in the parking lot, waiting for him to jump in. His truck was one of the few material items he had that made him truly happy. It was a matte black, Dodge Ram with

wheels that looked like they could crumble asphalt. He had it since high school. A few years ago, he had managed to save up enough money to put in a small lift kit which made the truck look more rugged than ever.

The roar of the V8 engine, along with the black leather bucket seats and sound system inside, made him feel as though he was the captain of his very own ship. He had never driven a boat, but he assumed the feeling was the same; to be free at the wheel with nothing but the endless horizon ahead. To have the feeling of the crisp ocean breeze brushing against your face as your thoughts and worries faded away sounded like a dream to him.

After his sessions with the Doc, he would tend to take his time and enjoy the thirty-minute drive home that he managed to turn into a forty-five-minute ride. Sometimes, depending on how his session went, he would go to the bar and have a couple drinks before heading home. He was pretty good about not drinking in front of his daughter, but there were times that he just couldn't wait to take a sip of the mind erasing nectar.

His bar of choice wasn't more than a few minutes away from the Doc's office. It was a rundown, hole-in-the-wall, Irish pub that was known for their cheap drinks, good music and frequent fights. As he pulled up to the bar he waited inside his truck. The vibration of the engine massaged the tips of his fingers while he gripped the steering wheel. He knew that he was inadvertently testing himself to see if he would actually go inside. The thoughts of disappointing Riley and letting himself down punched him in the gut, making him nauseous for a moment. The only way to get rid of the feelings was to drown them away. He shut off the engine and walked inside.

In the bar he decided to go with the usual: one bourbon, one shot, and one beer. It was enough to get him to the point where he could forget his thoughts yet good enough for him to

still be able to drive. Often, he would get hit on by one of the girls that went in the bar looking for love, but he always turned them down. Travis knew he was a handsome man, but a woman was the last thing that he needed in his life. He was barely stable enough to take care of himself and Riley. That stability was hanging on by a thread and he knew it. With that thought, the Doc came back into his mind. He couldn't help but feel a sense of admiration for her. He didn't know whether the feelings were because he was paying her to listen to him, or if she was actually listening to him for the sake of being there for him. Sometimes he wondered what could possibly happen if the Doc somehow strolled into the bar one night. Would he turn her down like he did so many women before? Would she even be interested? Before he could convince himself to have another drink and let his mind continue to wander, he paid his tab and left the bar. He hoped the thoughts of the Doc would stay there waiting for him at the bar until the next time.

Driving down the highway with the sounds of John Fogerty blasting from the Alpines, he could feel the air coming in through the rolled down window of the truck. The subtle, cool wind blowing against his arm made the warm days feel much nicer when the sun went down. With every twist of the road ahead, he could feel the slight dips in the temperature outside as he neared the mountains. It always felt strange to Travis to see the subtle outline of the mountains painted against the black night; they almost never looked real. They looked like sleeping giants that had laid down for a nap. The moon was the only light that let him know they were there.

There was never anyone on the road with him as the bright lights from the truck shone on the shadows of the hillside against the vast area of emptiness around him. By the time he made it to the top of the mountain, he pulled over the side of the road to look at the city below. Seeing how far away from the city lights he was made him feel small. Travis looked down at the hillside to see if he could see the one parking light still shining at the Doc's office way off in the

distance. Staring at the thousands of lights and houses, he started to wonder if there was anyone else like him; fathers going through the same things he was.

As the air grew colder, he rolled his window up. He took a look at the radio and realized just how late it had actually was. In a panic he shifted the truck into reverse, straightened out the wheel and pushed the pedal to the floor sending a gust of exhaust into the blackened sky. He was later than usual and knowing what was waiting for him when he arrived home made him speed the rest of the way.

4

As all the thoughts of the day left his head, he finally pulled up to the house. He could see from the driveway that the front porch light was still on. In the middle of the night, the porchlight lit the house in such a way that made it look much older and more corroded than what it really was. The paint was cracking, the foliage was dying, and just about every other weekend something was breaking, but it was still a decent house.

There underneath the porchlight, in the shadows of night, rocking back and forth on an old steel rocking chair with a cigarette in her hand was Rosa, the nanny. Her face was one of complete and utter disappointment as Travis shifted the truck into park. With every puff from the cigarette he could see the small embers from the end of the stick lighting up her face. Travis sat there in the truck for a second debating whether or not to even bother getting down at all; after being gone all day, he really didn't want to deal with another demoralizing lecture.

When he finally managed to work up the courage to get out of the truck, he unbuckled his seatbelt and slowly opened the door hoping that the further delay of his arrival made her want to go inside. He shut the door and made his way to the front of the house where she waited. The chair creaked louder the closer he got. The short walk from the truck to the porch felt like an eternity as she sat there puffing away at her cigarette, never once looking at him in the face. A small breeze hit both of them in the face, making her flinch for a moment as ashes brushed onto her cheeks.

“Hey, Rosa,” Travis said, timidly raising his hand in a frightened wave. The silence and the crackling of the cigarette was all the verification he needed to know that she was pissed. She got up from her seat, dropped the cigarette on the floor, crushed it under her foot, glared at Travis in the eyes as then proceeded to walk inside. Travis looked down at the floor and watched the crushed-up filter from the cigarette roll around searching for a way off the patio.

The security door shut behind Rosa, and Travis took a moment before following her inside. He wanted one more breath of fresh air before having to deal with the tongue-lashing he knew he was about to receive. He looked to the sky in hopes of getting one last look at the stars but there were none. Even at night, the pollution from the lights in the city drowned out any possible beauty that was hidden above.

Rosa's silence was often worse than when she would just yell at him, and even though he knew what he did to upset her, he still chose to play the fool. He opened the door and walked in. As he followed her inside, he was still completely terrified to share any kind of space with her. Even in his own house, she was able to make him feel as though he had walked into her lair needing to bow down to the lioness. She was probably barely in her fifties, but she acted much older when she needed to. The sass that she had developed with her personality was only intensified by her Hispanic background. Rosa was short in stature, but she had a big attitude that matched her equally big and opinionated mouth.

"Everything alright, Rosa? I know I'm late, my session ended up—" before he could finish, she lifted up her finger to her lips. Her perfectly painted red nails shined in the light of the living room. Looking at them made him think she'd claw his eyes out at any moment if he made another sound.

"Shush! *Si, Si*, I know, life is crazy. *Pues así es la vida!* That's how life is, and you know what, you drive me crazy, Mr. Travis! I'm tired of your *pinche* excuses!" The words flew from her mouth with speed and tenacity as Travis watched her. While her words were terrifying, he couldn't help but laugh inside any time she said, 'Mr. Travis.' The 'Mister' had a few extra 'e's' in it that made it sound more like a spray of water in the face of a misbehaved cat. "Do you know how long I've waited for you? Do you know how long Riley waited for you?" She looked at him as he listened. He towered over her by at least a foot. From his height he could see the top of her scalp was beginning to lose the black dye that she'd use to hide any gray hairs that had invaded her roots. Her eye brows were almost naturally angry as she stared at him, measuring him up to see if he'd say anything.

Travis stood there in silence, looking at her trying to come up with some kind of an answer that would suffice for his tardiness. As he thought, he couldn't help but get lost in the numerous moles constellated on her face. Before he could think of anything, she continued, "Three hours! *Tres horas señor Travis! Tu pobrecita niña esta aquí llorando y—*" Her words faded in translation, but Travis was the master in understanding 'pissed' in all kinds of languages. It was the same argument they had every other night. Quite honestly, he thought she'd be used to it, but nevertheless the words flowed continuously like water.

As he stood there in thought about how he yet again wasn't able to tuck in his daughter, he could hear her words coming back. "*Chingao*, your parents never did this to me, Mr. Travis. If it wasn't for the love I had for your parents and that little girl—"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry, Rosa." Travis spoke, cutting her off in hopes that her yelling would cease, and she'd be able to tell that he was actually sincere in his apology.

There was a moment of silence while she shook her head and then she said, "I'm not the one you should be apologizing to."

Travis started walking towards Riley's room before she stopped him once more to say, "*Pues ahora para que?* She's sleeping already, Mr. Travis, don't wake her. She waited as long as she could *pero* she got tired." Rosa started walking towards the living room and proceeded to pick up some of Riley's toys off of the floor. With every crouch and bend she would strain and pull at her back to make Travis feel even worse about himself. When he'd offer to help her, she would slap his hand away. There was simply no winning with her.

From the living room, Travis could smell a fresh pot of coffee boiling in the coffee maker. Walking past Rosa, he went to the kitchen to get a cup. The waves of scent rushed in front of him and guided his path. No matter how pissed Rosa got, she somehow always managed

to find it in her heart to have a fresh pot ready to go for him when he got home. He didn't know what she did to make the coffee smell and taste as good as it did, but it made him feel a little relieved to know that she always had that small peace offering ready.

He went to the shelf and reached for a cup. Travis pulled out the one that had the words 'Best Dad' written in red paint on the side of it. Riley had made him that cup during the brief period she went to daycare. The paint was almost completely scratched off from how often he had used it, but it still served its purpose. It was his favorite cup despite the lie plastered on the side.

He poured himself the scalding hot coffee and asked Rosa if she wanted one. She replied, "*Para que?* I already have a bad habit, I don't need another one!" She wrapped up her cleaning and went to the closet in the hallway to grab her purse.

"How was she today?" Travis wanted to try and spark up a conversation with her to see if she would talk. He cautiously took a sip from the coffee, hoping it wouldn't singe his tongue.

"An angel as always, Mr. Travis. You should know, she's your daughter," she said as she pulled her purse over her shoulder. She turned from the kitchen and started to make her way to the front of the house to leave. He followed her to let her out. Just as she was about to walk out, she turned around and said, "It's none of my business what you do with your life, Mr. Travis, but I do think that you need to spend more time with your daughter. You can trust that when you're off finding work or at your appointment, she is in good hands, but these old hands don't match up to the loving hands of her father. She needs you more than you could ever imagine. You're her only parent and if your father were still here, he'd—" Rosa stopped before finishing her sentence and then proceeded with, "*Eres un buen hombre. Pero*, it's time that you stop being just a good man and start being a great father."

With that last comment she left and closed the door behind her, leaving him to think about what she had said. He stood there partially shocked, but at the same time realizing that everything she spilled out on the table made total sense. He would have liked to think that before he'd gotten fired, work had been creating the ever-growing distance between Riley and him, but he knew in his heart, that wasn't the case.

As he stood there alone in the living room, he took in his surroundings. Everything was the same as it always was when Rosa left. The floors were clean, the toys all put away, even the decorative pillows were in their respectful places on the sofas. His house had no longer been a home despite the image that he tried to create for himself. The living room hadn't been lived in for a while. The television mounted on the wall hadn't been watched by Riley and Travis together in the longest of times. There had been a musty scent from the hundreds of books in the bookshelves encasing the T.V. None of the books hadn't been read by Travis for as long as he could remember. Looking at the coffee table, there were no noticeable signs of anyone having placed anything upon it. The black leather sofas that he bought to spend more lounge time with Riley hadn't the slightest crease on them.

He worked his way from the depressing living space and started towards the dining room that connected towards the kitchen. Just another area that showed how little time he had actually spent with his daughter. He wondered how many times her and Rosa had sat at that table when it should have been just them, or even the three of them together.

Before entering the dining room, he took a look down the narrow hallway that lead towards the bedrooms. It was dark and quiet very much like every other section of the house. He wanted to run down the hall and burst into Riley's room to surprise her with a late-night movie, but the thought vanished as quickly as it came. The idea was ridiculous, and he knew that he was

kidding himself trying to pretend to be that kind of a father. He entered the kitchen and sat at the breakfast bar, which in reality had simply become a bar for one lonely customer.

Whenever his mind was free to think about anything other than looking for a new job, he would drown the thoughts with whiskey. Aside from rides in the truck, booze was another method of release for him. The escape hadn't been much for pleasure, but rather a self-prescribed medication that he'd given himself over the years.

Travis finished his coffee and poured himself a warm cup of eight-dollar whiskey. Surprisingly, that particular bottle he had managed to make last longer than any others that he had previously owned. He didn't know whether it was the terrible taste, or if his subconscious was finally telling him to chill out, but either way he gulped down a generously sized double and poured himself another before making his way towards the back of the kitchen that lead to the T.V. room. Rosa called it the den, but he was never able to make sense of the difference between a den and a living room, so he called it the T.V. room. Problem solved.

Usually at night there wasn't anything good on regular scripted television, so he would try to find a movie to watch. He scrolled through the channels, taking sip after sip from his cup hoping to find something decent. His fading buzz from his outing at the bar was quickly coming back to help him regain his false state of euphoria. All there was to watch on T.V. were infomercials, late night talk shows, more infomercials, and random news from another part of the country. As he sat there on the old beige sectional in the corner of the room, he finally managed to come across an older film.

Travis had loved older movies, as he thought they had a more honest approach to filmmaking than the ones he'd seen recently. The attention to detail and the types of stories from a simpler time made him more relaxed than any of the movies Riley had told him she wanted to

watch. The movie on the T.V. wasn't what kept his attention. The actress, who was probably no older than eighteen, looked increasingly familiar with every second of examining the heroine. Everything from her face to her body, even her subtle mannerisms reminded him of someone. Travis felt as though he had opened an old family photo album and recalled stories that he had heard his mother telling him of people that he had never met. Travis sat and watched, fully intrigued by the mysticism that he was creating around this woman for no apparent reason. He took sip after sip from his cup until it finally hit him. It was her.

It wasn't really her, but the girl on screen had an uncanny resemblance to Riley's late mother. When the camera came to a close up of the actress, that's when Travis finally made the realization. The actress was short in size and her black hair was cut like a schoolboy's. Her body, however, was well shaped and contoured in all the right places. Her character seemed to be out of place as though she wasn't from that time period. With every passing moment of looking at the woman, her face and whatever minute differences she had in comparison to Riley's mother had vanished. Travis was looking at what he thought was Riley's mother and his mind wouldn't let him see anything else. He nearly dropped his cup once the memory of her started to come back. The thoughts penetrated his mind like a movie flying off the reel being fast forwarded and rewound all at the same time. Instantly, he became a mess, and the tears started to fall from his eyes, hitting the bottom of his empty cup. There was nothing he could do to stop the parade of thoughts; the booze wasn't working and the memory of her came back without him waiting it to. It had been months since he had a thought about her to that extent. The movie played and wouldn't stop.

Travis lifted himself up from the couch with weak legs. He stumbled his way out of the back door and stood outside letting the air hit his face. The backyard was dark, and the light of

the moon bounced off whatever it could touch. He could see Riley's playhouse that he had gifted her when he didn't show up for her birthday party because he had passed out in the truck after work. In the corner of the backyard was the grill that he bought with the intention of cooking more for the two of them instead of relying on Rosa to feed her. And then there was the small bicycle with the training wheels still attached that he got for Riley when she told him she wanted to learn how to ride a bike. Its' paint was chipping away like the paint from his cup and he wondered if she had managed to teach herself. Tears froze against his cheeks as the cold breeze of the night slammed against his face. He stood there with the cup in his hand and tried to repress the memories as he had done so many times before.

His legs couldn't take it anymore, so he sat against the wall of the house. The sheer exhaustion of battling the emotions he had tried so hard to hold back was enough to get him to feel his eyes grow heavy. He put his head down into his knees and before he knew what was happening, he fell asleep. When his eyes still opened, he was in a dream.

Travis was in a large white room. As he looked around, he tried to make sight of some sort of wall, ceiling, or floor but he couldn't tell where anything was. He felt weightless and felt that at any moment he would fall through the white abyss below his feet. It wasn't until he reached to touch the emptiness below him that he realized there was indeed a floor.

The room seemed never-ending as he looked in every direction for a way out. He paced around hoping that he wouldn't run into a wall and smash his nose. The eerie silence that encompassed the room was unbearable. Every step that Travis took echoed into the dead space around him.

Travis stopped pacing around once he realized there was something lurking in the distance of the room. Seeing the object gave him a sense of clarity, and somehow it allowed him

to see the white space much clearer. Walls appeared on both sides of him creating a narrow hallway that led to the object down the hall. He darted for the object hoping that it led to some kind of a way out.

The closer he got, the less he was able to understand what it was. It looked no bigger than the point of a needle. Travis stopped walking to examine what the mysterious dot was that was now before him and noticed a sound to be coming from the direction of the object. It was very muffled, but the echo was loud enough to reach him down the hallway. The sound seemed to be someone's voice. He tried to make out what the voice was saying. A layer of fear assaulted the air as he continued down the hall.

He started to run down the hallway in hopes of getting to the voice and the object as fast as he could. In the back of his mind, Travis felt that at any moment he'd wake up and wouldn't find out what the dot or voice was.

As he continued his run in the dream, Travis fell suddenly onto the ground. He looked around in confusion before noticing a sort of root that had sprouted from the floor. The root slithered and arched back into the floor, coming out the other side, before weaving itself into the ground once more. Travis reached down and tried to pull up the root but recoiled once he felt the sharp pain of a thorn pierce into his hand. Blood pooled within his grasp as drops splashed against the floor. He laid on his stomach to closely examine the root to try and understand how it had gotten there. It didn't make sense to him. In the middle of his thoughts, he quickly got up when he heard the voice once more coming from down the hallway. He could barely hear the faint sound of the echo that shouted, "Dad!"

It was Riley! He ran down the hall once more, forgetting about the pain in his hand. The voice was as clear as day. The faster he ran, the sooner he was able to figure out what the object

at the end of the hall had been. It wasn't a dot and it wasn't some kind of object—it was The Crimson Door.

It stood several feet away from him taunting him to turn back around. If it hadn't been for the continuous cries of Riley's voice, Travis would have stopped running a long time ago. Behind the door Riley was screaming and it was the only thing that pushed him forward. His fatherly instinct was taking over any common sense that he had.

Once he could see the handle of the door, another vine shot from one of the walls cutting up his right arm. Before he could even touch his fresh wound another three vines shot out cutting up his legs and chest. His pace started to slow as he worried about anymore possible vines getting in his way. With every step that he inched towards the door, more and more vines continued to reveal their thorns and tear at his skin.

Travis groaned in agony as the screaming behind the door was getting louder. He fought through the pain getting closer to the door. By the time he was only a few feet away, he was surrounded by vines. Each vine blackened the room and he couldn't breathe without a thorn slashing its way through his body.

Despite all the pain, he pushed through the vines as layers of flesh peeled off his body leaving strips of meat dangling from the thorns. Nearing the door, he reached out only inches from the handle. He could feel every bit of his body engulfed in searing pain. Reaching out for the handle he passed out from the sudden blood loss while listening to his daughter continuing to beg for a savior.

In the midst of all the pain, Travis woke up in a panic. He lifted himself up from the floor shaking off the vines that he thought still encapsulated him. His breathing didn't slow down as he continued to look around his backyard for any sign that told him he might have still been

dreaming. When he realized the whole ordeal had actually been just been another nightmare, he remembered the screams.

Travis left his cup outside and ran through the house. A terrible feeling inside him grew as he neared his daughter's door. He half expected to see The Crimson Door where his daughters' room would have been, but it wasn't there, just Riley's white door stood there in front of him with its several flower stickers plastered all over the surface. He took a breath and opened the door. Walking slowly towards his daughter he tried to be as quiet as possible so he wouldn't wake her. The small nightlight in the corner of the room was enough to shine a small ray on her bed where she laid snoring quietly.

Travis gently turned Riley over and exhaled a sigh of relief when he realized she was alright. He looked down at her and smiled seeing her cute little face. She looked just like him, but he always thought that she resembled more of her mother. Her black hair covered her eyes as Travis couldn't help but bend over to kiss her button nose. Riley groaned groggily turning back over into her pillow. Before he could turn around, he had mixed feelings inside of himself about the whole dream. Obviously, he didn't want anything to have happened to his daughter, but he didn't like the fact that she had to have been put into a frightening situation for him to start caring as much.

Travis crept out of the room with a heavy guilt. He quietly closed the door and went back into the kitchen. He remembered that he had left his cup in the backyard, but it didn't matter. Taking a bottle from the countertop, he chugged the remainder of the cheap whiskey. He slammed the empty bottle on the counter, sending a small crack gliding across its base. He went back to his room and threw himself on his bed, hoping for a dreamless night.

The lack of a job wasn't taking a financial toll on Travis as much as he thought it would. With his family's inheritance he was able to pay the bills comfortably and keep a roof over Riley's head. If he wanted to, he could have lived off the money and he and Riley would have had a good life. It would have given him more time to be in her life.

Travis wanted to find a job despite knowing all this. When he wasn't with Dr. Latimer, he was off driving around town in search of any place that would possibly hire him. There was an invisible force that made Travis want to stay away from home as long as he could. As much as he tried to convince himself otherwise, he knew that when he got home, he would have to face his burdens and try to be a good dad. Throughout the week, he kept busy while Riley was off at school and when he had free time, he'd continue his old habits and drink before she came home.

One weekend when Travis had a little too much to drink, he woke up passed out in the living room. Rosa had been poking, kicking, and prodding him, to try and wake him up before Riley noticed. It was one thing to be drunk by himself, but it was another for him to put Riley through that kind of scenario.

"¡Levántate cabron!" Rosa's loud shouts were muffled only by the throbbing pain that was drumming away in his head. He got up from the floor with drool dripping from the side of his mouth. In his daze he took a look at his watch: 8:45. He was late for an early interview with another shipping warehouse on the other end of town.

He ran throughout the house and stumbled towards his room to try and get ready for the day. A cold shower, check. Brush teeth, check. Cleaner clothes than the ones he had on the night

before, check. As he was rushing and continuing to get ready for work, Riley had woken up and was slowly making her way towards her dad. As always, she was excited to see him.

While trying to put on his boots inside of his room, Riley happily made her way towards him giving him a hug. “Good morning, Dad!” Her little voice pierced every inch of his brain making him cringe as he tied his shoes.

She yawned in his face and Travis caught a whiff of her pungent morning breath which was enough to get him to pry her off as he said, “Why don’t you go see if Rosa can fix you something to eat? I have to hurry and get to this interview.”

She complied and let him go. She went to the kitchen where she was greeted happily by Rosa. The joyous shouting echoing through the halls made his stomach churn and his head ache even more. With each movement he could feel the alcohol swirling inside himself, begging to come out. He ran to the toilet and released whatever whiskey he had coating his stomach. The feeling of having to throw up with a hangover was always the worst. The pressure and sensation of something coming up from way deep in his stomach made him gag the more he thought about it.

He got up from the toilet and rinsed his mouth out in the sink. Brushing his teeth once more to try and get the stench of vomit from his mouth, Rosa came into the bathroom and said, “Your daughter wants to have breakfast with you before you leave, Mr. Travis. Do I fix you a plate of *huevos* and bacon?” She knew her request was trivial, but she did it anyway. He didn’t answer and continued to grind away at his teeth.

Rosa left the restroom upset once again at the man that somehow always managed to make his happy little girl disappointed. She recalled the way Travis’s father used to spend every second he could with him, and the way his mother loved to read the books from the bookshelf to

him. Nearing the kitchen her anger was fleeting as sadness made its way into her cooking. She wished for things to be like they used to be, but it wasn't up to her to make that decision. All she could do was try and keep Riley as happy as she could while never once showing Travis that it pained her to see the way he was turning out. She had to remain patient to help him get stronger, but even then, she didn't know if it was enough.

Storming through the kitchen, Travis went to get a bottled water from the fridge. He guzzled it down and grabbed another for the road. Just as soon as he was about to leave, Riley called out from the breakfast table, "Dad!"

Turning around in a hurry he shouted, "What?!"

His harsh tone was not what she expected as her smile vanished and she started to pick away at her food, no longer looking at him in the eyes. She was a beautiful little girl, even when her shining, big hazel eyes were hiding behind a wall of sadness. Her perfect complexion complemented her equally perfect attitude as she sat there in her cartoon pajamas, eating all her food like the good kid she was. All she ever wanted, and what she needed most, was a little attention from Dad.

"What is it Riley? I have to go to," Travis said in a much calmer, almost apologetic tone.

"I just was just going to say that you didn't give me a hug goodbye. Are we going to watch T.V. later when you get back?"

Travis turned to Rosa who was ready to put her two cents in, but before she could get a word out, he gave Riley a kiss on her forehead and squeezed her tightly in a hug before rushing to the front door.

"I'll see you a little later, alright? I'll try to be home early so we can watch our show. Don't give Rosa a hard time."

Their show wasn't really 'their' show. It was a show Travis had been addicted to that came on twice a week on basic cable. While it was just another crime investigation show, to Riley it had become the two times a week where she would have her dad all to herself. She had made it her duty to catch him during the show and sit quietly on the couch to watch it with him. Since the first time they had watched the show together, Riley had dubbed it 'their show.'

Travis locked the door behind him wondering how the rest of the day would go for Riley. He wondered what she was going to do and if she was going to have a fun time doing it.

Even though he was in a rush, he took a second before opening his truck to think about the impending doom that was waiting for him when he arrived late to the interview. He took one last drink from the fresh bottle of water and opened up his truck. He tucked the rest of the water into a cupholder. Travis started the truck and raced for the highway, hoping the person conducting the interview had an open and forgiving mind.

But he didn't, and Travis didn't get the job. The only thing he got was a new bottle of whiskey to replace the empty one that he had polished away the night before.

Travis had his legs crossed in the easy chair watching as Dr. Latimer replaced the batteries in the recording device. The lack of dialogue was making him uneasy as he didn't like how quiet the room had gotten.

“How was your week, Doc?” Travis asked as he looked at her struggling to take the older batteries out. He lifted up his hand and said, “Let me help you with that.”

Dr. Latimer walked around from the back of her desk and gently handed the device to Travis. “My week has been so-so. I had this boring conference I had to go to and then I went out with some friends to this terrible seafood place. The food was terrible, and the drinks were—”

Travis looked up to her as he extended his hand to give her the old batteries he managed to pry out of the recorder. She took them out of his hand and gave him the new ones.

Her faced suddenly looked worried about her statement involving the drinks and her negative attitude towards the week. She quickly apologized to Travis, “Sorry, I shouldn't be telling you about that. That was very unprofessional of me.” She rubbed her temples, upset with herself.

Travis looked up at her confused as he swapped out the batteries and placed the recorder on the table. “You shouldn't tell me about what?”

“Well, good psychiatrists shouldn’t tell you about the terrible drinks they had while you’re in recovery.” Dr. Latimer sat down across from him shaking her head in her own disapproval.

Travis offered her a reassuring smile, “Doc, don’t sweat it. I don’t mind. I like hearing about the things you do.”

The two of them sat in silence for a moment while Dr. Latimer turned on the recorder. The red blinking light signaled that their session was about to start. Both of them knew that the time for pleasantries was over, and Travis wished he’d taken longer replacing the batteries.

“So, um, Travis, speaking about each other’s weeks. How was yours?” Dr. Latimer’s voice changed from casual to professional in an instant.

“It was so-so.” Travis looked at her to see if she caught onto his slight mimicry.

She grinned and asked, “What did you do this week?”

Travis didn’t have to think about the question. His week had been full. “Well, we rescued a dog.”

“Oh, wow! What kind of dog? Where did you rescue it from?”

Travis braced himself for the story as he repositioned himself in his chair. “Well, the other night Rosa had already left for the evening and I’d just finished putting Riley to bed. I gave her the stuffed pig that she always slept with, Piggy Smalls, and said goodnight.”

“Piggy Smalls?” Dr. Latimer looked at Travis awkwardly.

“Her name for the pig. Not mine. I had bought her this book a few years ago and the pig came with it. For some reason she thought the name fit.” Travis and Dr. Latimer chuckled before he continued his story. “So, I lay her down and go to the living room to fix myself a cup of—” Travis paused to change his narrative, clearing his throat before continuing, “—a cup of coffee.

Just as I was about to watch some T.V., I heard a noise coming from the front yard. I put down my coffee and headed for the front door to see what the noise was. I couldn't make out what it was, but I knew for sure it was coming somewhere from outside in the streets. I couldn't see anything at first, except for the neighbor's cars and the trashcans parked by the curbs. I was about to just forget about the sound altogether when I heard it again. So, I opened the door, went outside and that's when I saw the dog. It was just lying in the middle of the street howling in pain."

"Oh, no. Poor thing." Dr. Latimer couldn't help but break character as she felt sorry for the animal.

"Yeah, so I ran towards it to see what had happened. She wasn't moving, just hollering constantly. Usually I don't like dogs. I got bit by a Doberman one time at a friend's birthday party when I was younger and since then I always had a slight fear of them. But, even with that in mind, I couldn't help but try to help her. I bent down beside her to see what had happened, but I couldn't find anything wrong with her. Other than the cries from the dog, there was nothing that showed me she was injured. I figured she might have gotten into a fight with another dog or hit by a car, but she was spotless. She was a cute little thing. She was all white, but her face had a black mask that made her look like some kind of superhero. I just couldn't figure out what was wrong with the poor girl."

"That's strange." Dr. Latimer looked off into the distance as though she was trying to picture the scenario in her head.

"So, once I realized the dog wouldn't bite me, I picked her up and carried her to the porch to get her out of the street, away from danger you know? I laid her down on the floor and started to pet her trying to figure out what was wrong. All she could do was whimper and it broke my

heart. I got up from the floor and went inside to get her a bowl of water. When I turned around from the sink, she was standing right in front of me eagerly watching.” Travis couldn’t help but smile at his story.

“She went inside your house?” Dr. Latimer pushed herself back into her seat.

“Yeah, I guess she must have gotten up when I went inside and followed me without me noticing her. So, anyway, I get her the water, she laps it up and then keeps looking at me with her mask of a face. I went into the fridge and pulled out a couple of slices of bologna. Her tail started to wag as I gave her piece after piece. I guess she was just hungry. There wasn’t anything wrong with her, she was just crying for something to eat, damn dog. She probably had gotten out of a neighbor’s house and couldn’t find food for a while.” Travis shook his head and laughed. “Dog played me for a fool.”

“And you fell for it,” Dr. Latimer joked while brushing back her hair from her face. Though she did her best not to show emotion, she couldn’t help it during this particular story. It was a new side of Travis she was hearing about, and it was a story that took her mind off the terrible week she just had.

“I tried to send her on her way after her snack, but she wouldn’t budge. She cried whenever I tried to pick her back up and take her outside. When I tried to push her, she would go limp, so it was impossible to move her. There was no collar on her either, so I couldn’t call her owners to come pick her up. She kept crying and I was afraid she’d wake up Riley, so I put her in the backyard hoping to deal with her in the morning, but she didn’t like that either. Her howling was waking up the neighbor’s dogs so now they were hollering too, so I admitted defeat and just let her inside. She managed to find her way to my room and jumped on the bed, going right to sleep before I could tell her to get off! Can you believe this dog? Anyway, the next

morning I wake up and Riley is cracking up in the living room. When I go to check on her, she's rolling around with the dog on the floor!"

"So, your daughter played you too, I see." Dr. Latimer giggled.

"Yup, yeah she did. So, now I'm stuck with this monster of a dog. Riley called her Panda because of her face. I told her that she could keep the dog until someone came looking for her. It's been a week and so far, no one's showed up. She had to have been someone's though. That dog was too smart for her own good. Riley must have already taught her at least twenty tricks."

"Panda's a cute name."

"Trust me, if you saw the size of her you wouldn't think she's so cute. She's like, this big!" Travis stood up from his seat and opened his arms as wide as he could to show the size of the dog.

After the story, Dr. Latimer's face was slowly beginning to change. Often times, she would allow her clients to tell little anecdotes about their life before moving on to much more pressing issues. She found it easier to talk to her patients, and for them to open up, when they first talked about something they willingly wanted to share with her. As much as she tried to hide it, those were the favorite moments of her job. They were nice breaks from hearing about deaths, illnesses, and other heavy issues.

"So, other than taking in Panda, what else happened since our last session?" Dr. Latimer crossed her legs as she waited for an answer.

"I mean, nothing really." Travis sat back down.

"You haven't had any dreams, or any slips with your drinking?"

Travis sat there fully aware that he should be honest with his doctor, but he didn't want to tell her everything. Rather than talking about drinking or the nightmare with the door, he tried to lean the conversation in a different direction.

"I had one dream." Travis looked at Dr. Latimer before continuing. "It was a dream about my parents. We were driving in my dad's old sixty-four Impala Super Sport. The windows were cranked all the way down and I laid in the back seat watching as the old man and my mom drove down the highway. We were listening to Chubby Checker or Chuck Berry, I can't remember. I just remember seeing the looks on their faces. They both looked so happy and so in love. Then my mother turned to me in the back seat and patted me on the back." Travis seemed to have gone back into his dream as he told his story as vividly as he could remember.

"Do you miss your parents?" Dr. Latimer asked as she tried to get back Travis's attention.

"Of course, I do. They were the perfect image of what good parents should be. I think that's what makes things so hard sometimes." Travis didn't realize that last part had come out and he felt a sudden knot in his stomach.

"What makes things so hard?" she questioned, watching his mannerisms, hoping to have some sort of breakthrough.

"Just trying to be a good parent. I mean, I had great parents and you would think that some of the stuff they did for me would have rubbed off, but I don't think it did. I look at myself and then I compare myself to my parents." Travis inhaled deeply and coughed before admitting, "I'm a terrible parent."

"Do you think that's why you tend to drink? Do you think trying to live up to your parents is hurting you?" Dr. Latimer uncrossed her legs and sat up at full attention.

Travis didn't say anything. He sat in his chair thinking about the question but knew he wouldn't answer. He crossed his arms defensively hoping the doctor would take notice and change the subject.

When he remained quiet, Dr. Latimer spoke once more, "It must have been hard for you; losing both your parents, and then your wife a few months after." Dr. Latimer knew she was poking at sensitive subjects, but she wanted to get some sort of insight with Travis. It was the only way she could help him. She softened her tone, assuring Travis that he was in a safe and trusted place with her. "You said it was a car accident, right?"

"What, my parents?" Travis asked, looking down at the armrest of the chair, picking at its material. "Yeah, it was." His eyes began to water, his throat tightening at the memory, but he quickly brushed the tears away and shifted his emotions, as the built-up anger he had begun to grow inside. All he wanted to do was walk out of the room and leave her by herself.

"Do you remember when you first started drinking? I mean, drinking heavily?" Dr. Latimer was weaving a web of stories hoping to merge something inside of Travis's mind. She wanted him to find the reasoning behind his drinking, but she couldn't tell him herself, Travis had to admit it on his own.

"I mean, I don't know. Who can really tell? You start off having a drink on the weekends with your friends, then your friends no longer want to be around you, so you start drinking on the weekends by yourself. Before you know it, the weekends can't come quick enough and you need a drink during the week. Then, after a while, those drinks don't become enough... so you fill the nights with a little something to get you to sleep. After that, why not just keep it up during the day? Keep the buzz going, you know?" Travis was starting to go in and out of his thoughts, getting more frustrated with each sentence that fired from his mouth.

Dr. Latimer could tell that she upset Travis, but she wasn't the least upset with herself. It was her job to try and get people to understand their issues.

"I think I should leave," Travis said frustrated.

Dr. Latimer stood up with Travis and blocked his path to the door. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder before pleading with him, "Travis, don't leave. We can switch the subject if you like. Please just, have a seat."

Travis took a look Dr. Latimer's arm and could help but stare. Part of the reason was he was trying to calm down, and another reason was that her light skin looked soft and he liked the way her small hand grasped his large shoulder. He hated feeling some sort of physical and emotional connection towards Dr. Latimer, but most of all, he hated that he couldn't do anything about it. If he tried anything and she didn't feel the same way, he could lose the one person in his life who was trying to help him out. On the other hand, if she did feel the same way, it still wouldn't be honorable of them to see one another.

With her hand still on his shoulder, Dr. Latimer could feel the grooves of Travis's muscles. He was a big man, and from the clothes he would wear she wouldn't have thought that a man of his size could have been in that type of shape with those broad shoulders. She felt a tingling sensation come over her as her hand slid off of him. There was an attraction between the two of them and she knew both of them felt it. Staying in the same room and talking for so long made it hard for her not to notice the positive qualities about Travis that made him so desirable. Sure, he had a drinking problem and he felt like a terrible father, but those were all things that could be fixed; at least in her eyes. But she knew deep down that the law and her morals wouldn't allow herself to pursue this relationship further.

Travis sat back down on the chair and watched as Dr. Latimer made her way back to her own seat. The two of them sat once more in silence as she thought of what question to ask next. She had to go about it the right way to not upset him again, but she still wanted to dive further into him.

“Let’s move on.” She suggested.

“Okay.” Travis nodded his head slowly as he cracked his knuckles.

The doctor let out a sigh. “Now, you told me about the beautiful dream you had with your parents, but what I really want to know is if you had another nightmare? Has it kept you from sleeping?” The questions flew out of her mouth more demanding than she intended and she hoped she didn’t startle him with her forwardness.

“Yes,” Travis said before he could stop himself.

“Yes, you had another nightmare?”

“Yes, to all your questions. The nightmare was the same one as always except this time it was a little different.”

“How so?”

“Well, this time I was in a white room and the door had been at the end of the hall.”

“The red door, correct? The one you tend to dream about?”

“The Crimson Door.” He corrected. “Giving it a name makes me feel better about it for some reason. Anyway, this time it was different because there were like vines or something that started to come out of nowhere in the white room the closer I got to the door. Not to mention that I could hear Riley’s voice coming from the other side. I started running but the vines kept cutting me up. By the time I reached the door, I woke up.”

“Interesting.” Dr. Latimer paid attention to the story of the door as she had done numerous times before. She tried to analyze in her head what the door could possibly mean but couldn’t quite put her finger on it. She thought it might have been some sort of metaphor for something unattainable. “Have you ever tried to open the door?”

“Yeah, I’ve tried. I try almost every time I have a dream about it, but I can’t ever get close enough. Sometimes I think I’d sleep better, or longer, if I could actually open it.”

“*Do* you want to open the door?”

Travis had to think about the question. He really didn’t know what to say. The door had always been there waiting to be opened and he did want to open it, but he didn’t know if he really wanted to see what was behind it. It was a paradox of wonder and fear that pulled him to the door but also one that kept him from ever actually seeing beyond it. Was it really his dream or himself that kept him from ever opening the door? He didn’t know and was too afraid to find out.

“If you decide you want to open it, I can help you.” Dr. Latimer sat at the edge of her chair, leaning closer towards Travis. She noticed that Travis seemed to grow pale from hearing the statement. “I can help you open the door, Travis.”

7

Pulling up to the house, Travis could see the blinds from inside peek open with Riley's tiny eyes hiding behind them. The door flung open and she ran outside still in her flannel pajamas.

"Dad! You're early!" she shouted excitedly as she jumped into his arms.

He picked her up and gave her a hug back, immediately putting her back on the ground and said, "Go inside."

Walking into the house, Travis could see that Rosa was busy folding laundry while watching the T.V. as Riley was playing with some colors that she left on the couch. It looked like Riley had been coloring for quite some time as the picture that laid on the coffee table was elaborately decorated with several colors and shading.

“You’re early. For once. Too early,” Rosa said suspiciously. “¿*Que pasó?*” Rosa continued to watch the show without ever once glancing at Travis. Her tone sounded as if she already knew bad news was on the horizon.

“Something happened at my session today, and it just made me feel a little indifferent,” Travis told her without expecting her to say anything about it. “Were you, um, planning on staying for the rest of the day?” he asked nervously.

She didn’t respond at first until she realized her show was going to a commercial. “*No juegues* Mr. Travis, you know I’m staying! I’m not driving all the way back home for only a few hours of work!”

“Okay, okay, I was just asking,” Travis said, wondering why everything with this lady had to be a battle.

Travis sat on the couch across from Rosa as they stared aimlessly at the T.V. A movie trailer appeared on the screen that Riley had been bugging him to watch for a few weeks. Rosa turned to look at Travis to see if he’d been seeing the same thing, hoping he’d take the hint. It was as though they had communicated telepathically when he smiled to oblige her. Riley had noticed the trailer, stopping her masterpiece to turn and look at the two of them.

“Daddy, look!” She exclaimed, pointing at the screen, the colors of the trailer bouncing off her cheery face.

“I know, I see it.”

Riley knew from experience they wouldn't go watch it, so she continued with her coloring without complaint.

It had become clear to Travis that he wasn't going to be able to get any rest with Rosa in the house so he told Riley, "If you hurry up and change, we can go see that today if you want." Pointing at the T.V. she realized what he was telling her. She looked at Rosa, her eyes wide in disbelief, and looked back at her dad with a smile before running to her room to get ready. Her little feet stomped on the floor in excitement as Rosa and Travis could hear her drawers opening and closing as she scoured for clothes.

"*Pues*, that's very nice of you Mr. Travis, *pero* I hope you don't think that means I'm going home early. You scheduled me for the entire day. You either pay me to leave or keep me for the time you promised me." she said defiantly while continuing to fold the clothes in a laundry basket next to her.

Travis rolled his eyes and reluctantly nodded his head, "You can stay here. I'm not feeling so well anyway, so I could use the help around here."

She continued to do her work, paying him no mind as her show reappeared on the T.V. A few moments later, Riley ran from the hallway struggling to put on one of her shoes. She hopped around with her fingers prying at the back of her shoe.

"Ready, kid?" Travis looked at her as she finally managed to wedge her foot into her light-up shoe. With the flash of the shoe she nodded and the two of them made their way to the truck. Travis closed the door in the driver's seat as Riley started to open up the door on her side. She always struggled opening the door and struggled climbing up the step boards to get in. They buckled up and then drove to the movies in silence as Riley kicked her feet in excitement.

At the movies, Riley got a large popcorn with a side of jalapeños, her own box of candy and her own drink. Travis had no idea where the kid managed to put it all since she wasn't chunky, not even in the slightest way. He knew if he ate as much as her, he'd have one foot in the grave. Another thought that crossed his mind was the fact that she was putting a rather large dent in his pocket, but he could tell she was excited to go to the movies, so he didn't mind paying for the extra snacks.

One of the biggest things that Travis hated was waiting in lines. No matter what the reason for the line was or where the line was, he hated the thought of having to wait. It was a bit extreme to feel that way, but he couldn't help but feel as though every minute spent inside of a line was a minute of his life that calculated to the inevitable end of his existence. He had taken a high school psychology class towards his junior year, and the teacher had shown them a video about living up to their full potential and how every moment they had was precious. The part that stood with him the most was the part that said people can spend up to four years of their lives just waiting in lines. Out of all things in the video that were supposed to motivate them to do better in life and to be better people, this was the one thing that shouted at him and pissed him off most about life.

Waiting in the line for their designated theater wasn't all that bad compared to the snack lines. The smell of the freshly popped popcorn invading the air around them mixed with melted butter made him grab a handful of Riley's popcorn as she was looking at one of the upcoming movie posters hanging on the walls. She made a face pretending to be mad and he stuck his tongue out at her, exposing a mouthful of chewed up kernels. Although partially disgusted, she laughed and almost spat a large amount of her own popcorn on the person standing in front of them.

Looking at the same posters Riley had been looking at, he couldn't find anything that interested him. A lot of the same movies that had come out only five years ago were being remade. While nostalgia was something a lot of people enjoyed, he found it as more of a cop-out from these big-time movie studios to just make another fast buck, rather than producing something of value. Movies were being popped out of the studios just as fast as cars on an assembly line and although it kept kids like Riley entertained, he longed for the movies he grew up watching as a kid with his dad. He could remember when they had to drive to the video store and rent movies rather than getting them straight to their T.V. to stream instantly. The convenience factor of life started to take over and the enjoyment he got searching for movies at the video store was taken away.

Inside of the theater, Travis and Riley took their seats and the reality of the situation began to set in for her. She again got excited as the lights dimmed and the previews came on. Travis always enjoyed arriving early enough to the movies to watch the movie trailers before the actual movie. It made him feel as though he had some sort of secret knowledge that the rest of the world. Now with the way technology was increasing, that kind of secrecy faded and anyone who had access to the internet could see the trailers even before they arrived in theaters. Each of the previews were of movies he hadn't heard of.

The lights went completely dark and the movie started. Riley propped herself up in her seat and went on autopilot: eyes wide and on the screen with handfuls of snacks going into her mouth. Travis on the other hand, despite his best efforts, immediately fell asleep once the lights turned off. The sounds of the movie and Riley and other children in the theater laughing drowned out as his eyes shut.

With his eyes closed, he pictured Dr. Latimer and him in her office. They were all alone in the dark as the lights had gone off during the storm that was rumbling outside. Rain and lightning beat against the outside night making them huddle together on the larger sofa that he never sat on. It was cold and the two of them held each other tight for body heat. A small vanilla scented candle sat where the recorder usually did. He could actually smell the candle and it was as though he could reach out and touch its vapors. A flash of lightning shined in the room making him shield his eyes.

Just as quickly as he had closed his eyes, they awoke to the feeling of Riley pushing him back and forth in his seat. She was standing in front of him with the rest of her drink and popcorn in her hands. Meanwhile, there was also an usher standing next to Riley looking down at Travis with all of the lights in the theater shining down on him. He had slept through the entire movie and they were waiting for him to wake up.

“Dad are you, okay?” Riley said looking worried at how long it took Travis to wake up from her shakes. She took a sip from her drink and then looked up at the usher who stood there impatiently with his broom and dustpan.

“Sir, you’re going to have to leave. The movies over and we have to clean up for the next showing.” The usher popped a piece of bubble gum in his mouth and continued to watch Travis’s confused face.

Embarrassed, Travis nodded and got out of his seat. The two of them made their way out of the movie theater and back into the truck. He hadn’t even touched the pickle in a pouch that he had bought himself, so he threw it away in a trash can outside. The lights hitting Travis’s face after opening the exit doors from the movies made him begin to develop a migraine.

“Did you watch any of the movie?” Riley said disappointed looking at the pickle that got thrown in the trash.

“I mean, I saw the beginning and part of the middle, I just fell asleep towards the end.” Travis tried to get her to believe in his lie.

“Who was the protagonist then, hmm? she said looking at him knowing that her question put him into a bind.

“Wait? What? How do you know what that word means?” Travis couldn’t help but smile at the word his daughter managed to throw out. He had completely forgot about her original question and was curious to hear her own response.

“I read it in a book that Rosa got me from the library. It’s cool, it’s about monsters and god’s and goddesses from old stories.” Riley’s face lit up with excitement.

“Well, I don’t know who the protagonist was Miss Smarty Pants. Did you enjoy the movie?” Travis tried to turn the inquisition around on her as he remembered her question.

She nodded her head as the two of them continued across the parking lot nearing the truck. They got inside and started to drive off. Travis could see her buckling herself up in the rearview mirror as he was beginning to exit the parking lot. Once he heard the sound of her buckle click, they sped home. Travis rolled down the windows as Riley let the wind blow through her hair. It was another small thing she loved about hanging out with her dad, going fast in the truck. She felt like a racecar driver, taking sharp turns and seeing the world go by in a flash.

Seeing the mess the wind was making of her popcorn, Travis slowed down and rolled the windows back up and they rode in their usual silence. He looked in the rearview mirror and noticed that Riley had something on her mind; something she either wanted to ask or something

she wanted to say. Then finally after a few minutes of fiddling with her popcorn inside of her popcorn bucket she said it, “Dad, I love you.”

“What?” Travis said knowing full well that he had heard her the first time.

“I just said I love you. Even though you slept through the movie!” Riley laughed as she grabbed more popcorn.

Travis looked behind and saw her smiling in the mirror and then smiled back but never said a word to her.

8

A few days after the movie when Travis fell asleep, a certain memory from years ago began replaying the events of when Travis’s wife, Elaine, or L as he liked to call her, woke him up in the middle of the night ready to have their child.

The two of them had gone out to eat that night with a few friends knowing that it would be their last hurrah before L would be induced the following day. It was a last-minute thing and the friends that did show, didn't really feel up for drinking like Travis had. He ended up having five mixed drinks to ease his mind about the following day. Even though they knew L was going to be induced, they had made plans to go out together to take a nice long walk and enjoy a good lunch before having to go to the hospital.

It was after the fifth drink that Travis started to feel a tad more than good as he had made the mistake of mixing some allergy medicine that L had given him a few hours before they'd gone out. He had completely forgotten about the medication and he passed out on their bed as L watched T.V. His mind was dead to the world until L woke him up at around three in the morning telling him that she thought the baby was coming. At first Travis thought it was a dream or just static from the T.V., so he laid his head back down and didn't think anything of it. When L shook him awake once more, Travis looked at the clock and began timing her contractions. All of a sudden, he became a doctor and knew more about carrying a child than she did, or at least that's what his mind was telling him. With one final awakening, Travis realized just how close the contractions had been and panicked. The intervals went from seven minutes to three minutes apart and that's when he realized it was go time. Immediately, with his mush for brains, he got out of the bed and started to throw everything into the truck.

Thankfully, they had most of their stuff already packed away in three backpacks. One for Travis, one for L, and one for Riley. As he was gathering everything, making sure they'd have everything they needed for the next couple of days, L waddled over to the truck trying to pull herself up to her seat. It was then that her water broke right there in the middle of the driveway. Travis's heart sank and he knew it wasn't just a drill. Everything was happening so quick, but

Travis kept double checking to make sure they weren't leaving anything behind. L laughed all the while and it increased his anxiety.

Along the way to the hospital, Travis started to imagine and worry about whether or not he'd get pulled over and get a D.W.I. On top of that, he worried that he'd pass out at the wheel and neither of them would make it there at all. They hadn't planned for the delivery to be that night, otherwise they wouldn't have gone out in the first place. Travis wouldn't have had a single drink had he known everything was going to go down the way it did.

Travis finally managed to pull himself together behind the wheel, sobered up as best as he could, and focused on the drive ahead. There was almost no one on the highway at that time of night except for the few random big rigs that drove going the opposite way. The lights above shone even brighter with no cars to pass under them. Even with this in mind, Travis kept to the speed limit to make sure that if there had been some cops lurking, they wouldn't have a single reason to pull them over.

The hospital was only a few miles away from their place, but everything felt as though it was going in slow motion and at full speed at the same time. Travis's mind couldn't completely process at how fast things were happening. One moment they were laughing and relaxing, the next they were in complete chaos preparing themselves to become parents. The feeling was surreal to say the least.

L looked ready as she could ever be, and Travis tried his best to keep calm for her but inside he was freaking out more than he was willing to show her. When they arrived at the hospital, a couple of nurses took her inside while he took the baggage down with him. Up on the fourth floor, they had wheeled her away to prep her for delivery while they kept Travis away from her for a few hours. All he could think about was how every single movie he had ever seen

lied to him and led him to believe that he would have been in there with her every step of the way. He was getting frustrated at how long they had kept them apart and started to ask the receptionist way too many questions that she didn't have the answer to.

A few hours into his nagging, a nurse finally came to get him from the waiting room. He got up from his seat, gave the receptionist one last dirty look and made his way into a small room where they had begun to put an I.V. in L's arm. Travis had never been good with needles and watching them stick L made him nearly pass out. One of her nurses had to sit him down and give him a cup of water.

Eventually the nurses moved them into a room where L received her epidural and Travis once again had to leave the room for a matter of moments. His frustrations continued to grow the more they told him he had to leave the room. No one had told him what to expect when this time had come, and he didn't understand why he had to constantly be away from her. Time continued to tick away the more he paced around in the hallway and watched the relaxed faces of everyone pass by. He saw a nurse walking around with their lunch and it upset him for some reason. Travis felt that everyone in the hospital should have been tending to his wife; not starting their lunch break. Once they finished with the epidural, he was able to go back into the room. He found the spare bed that was tucked away into the couch. He unraveled it and sprawled out on top of it with the spare pillow and blanket that the nurses left for him.

Travis ended up stealing a few hours of sleep while nurses and doctors continued to go in and out of the room waking the both of them throughout the morning. L made a joke about how they were prepping them for the rest of their lives in the sense they would never sleep again once Riley was born. Travis laughed at the joke even though inside he knew she was one-hundred percent right. The war stories he heard from their mutual friends about how their kids would

wake up every hour on the hour for thirty minutes to eat, poop, or just yell, made him wince with fear.

The sounds of rain battering the window pane woke Travis. He got up to see that there had been several clouds in the sky but right outside their window in the only part of the sky that had light shining on it was a huge rainbow that extended for miles. The colorful rays seemed to be going from one side of the mountain to the other. It was a beautiful sight and he couldn't help but admire it, even with the bags that had grown under his eyes. He turned to see if L had been witnessing the same thing, but she was slowly beginning to wake up herself. The first thing she did when she rolled onto her side was grab at her stomach, cringing in pain as her heart rate monitor started to increase and beep rapidly.

The nurse that had been taking care of L throughout the night came in looking more nervous than either of them. Without speaking to either one of them, she began to check the monitors and then quickly ran out of the room. Travis was scared too, but tried to stay tough for L. He got up to hold her hand, but she refused, still grasping her round belly telling him how excruciating the pain was. Her eyes began to water as did Travis's. He wanted to be able to help her but didn't know how. Travis wished that he could have switched roles with her to take her pain away and he hated feeling that level of worthlessness.

A doctor rushed in with several other nurses and they told them it was time for L to deliver. Travis's sadness immediately faded once he realized that Riley would be arriving and that all the pains L had been feeling were merely from labor. Travis wondered if the epidural had worn off, and if she was feeling all the pains she couldn't feel before, or whether the sensations were overpowering the medicine.

They quickly propped her legs up into the stirrups and gave her the run-down of how to deliver. L took a deep breath in, putting on a brave face and a smile as she started to push. Travis held onto her hand tightly, while still holding onto her leg in the stirrup so it wouldn't fall over. With every push and with every breath that L gave, Travis couldn't wait until the moment he would be able to hold their daughter. It was such an amazing experience to witness life coming into the world. L cried and groaned in pain the entire time, but she never once faltered in doing what had to be done.

Prior to delivery, Travis and L had spoken whether or not he was going to look at Riley come out. L sincerely didn't want him to look down there while she was giving birth, but it was something he had to do. She thought Travis wouldn't look at her the same way after seeing what Riley did to her body, but with every inch of their daughters' hair that was slowly came out, his love for her multiplied. Any iota of manliness he had managed to bottle up was gone and he had become a blubbering mess at the sight of the woman he loved bringing in their child to the world.

It didn't take long for Riley to be born. She entered the world without a cry. Travis cut the cord, and the doctors announced she was still in fact a girl, and lovingly handed her to L with plenty of congratulations. Riley and L looked at one another as though they were two separate beings that had been apart for ages and were now being reunited. L smiled down at Riley and Riley cooed and babbled on back towards her mother. They were made for each other and Travis stood there eagerly waiting his turn to hold her.

L offered Riley to Travis, which he nervously accepted, as he had never held such a tiny being before. Travis looked at the little creature in his arms as he felt every bit of himself love her instantly and unconditionally. It was a feeling he never had, especially that rapidly and he

didn't know how to handle his emotions, so he wept. Travis held Riley close to his body and took her to the window where the rainbow was still brighter than ever. As the two of them looked on at the colors in the sky, Travis gave Riley a kiss on the forehead and promised her that he would love her forever and day; a saying that L and he had told each other every day.

In that moment of pure bliss, he turned to L and she gave him a smile. She reached out towards Riley and Travis for a moment, but as the two of them made their way back towards her, L's arm went limp. Travis looked at her wrist as it dangled mid-air. Her wedding ring fell off her finger and spun about on the floor. As Travis looked up, L's eyes were shut, and her mouth was slightly open. The doctor immediately tried to wake her up as the nurses started to check her breathing and her pulse. The joyous feeling that was once in the room was beginning to get clouded over by the uncertain looks that everyone in the room was giving.

When the monitor started to fluctuate again, they pried Riley out of Travis's hands and started to kick him out of the room. With his eyes fixated on L, Travis didn't do anything to stop them. He watched as the door to the delivery room closed and L continued to lay with her face still angled to where he and Riley had been sitting. All he could see was the back of L's head as the workers inside scrambled to get her to wake up. The window showed the rainbow had vanished.

Travis went from complete happiness to utter paranoia as no one would let him back into the room. His mind could only think of the worst. He had no idea where their baby was, and he had no clue what was going on with L.

When Travis started knocking on the door to the room, one of the nurses had come out and told him that he needed to let the doctors work. When he asked what was going on, she told him to go into the waiting room and be patient. She insisted that everything was fine, and he

shouldn't worry about a thing. He didn't know whether it was the situation or if he was right in hearing her tone, but it sounded more patronizing than anything and his anger grew. She rushed back into the room and all he wanted to do was break something. Travis became furious and he started to throw whatever he could get his hands on. "Let me see my wife! Tell me what's going on!" His pleas fell onto deaf ears.

Travis went to the front desk to see if there was anything he could figure out, or if he could at least know where his daughter was so he could be with her. There was a different receptionist from the night before and even with this new face in front of him there was still animosity towards everyone. With every question he asked, the vaguer the receptionist responded. He kicked the front of her desk in frustration hoping this made someone realize how upset he was. Two security guards ended up arriving from the elevator and immediately took him to the ground.

"Sir, you need to calm down before we arrest you," they explained in harsh voices as they held him down. Travis tried to squirm his way out of their grasp with all that he could. From the corner of his eye, he could see another pair of nurses making their way towards him. When the nurses got to where the officers were wrestling Travis down, they administered a shot that weakened him. His legs and arms were giving out the harder he tried to fight, and his eyes were closing. The last thing he saw before his eyes shut were people flooding into the delivery room.

When he woke up, Travis was handcuffed by one arm to a bed, confused but still angered by everything that he could recall. He tried to pry himself out of the handcuffs, but they were just as real as the memories he had from before he had been given the shot. Travis knew right when

he awoke that he needed to talk to someone. He shouted at the top of his lungs for someone to come in the room. “Somebody help me! Hey! Anybody! Help!”

He didn't know how long he'd been out, and he didn't know how close or far away he was from the delivery room. He tugged once again at the handcuffs and realized the bed was mobile. Easing out of bed he began to walk towards the door, dragging the bed behind him. The handcuffs were cutting into his skin, but he didn't let that stop him. Using every bit of energy that he could muster, he tried to get closer to the door in hopes that the bed would somehow fit through the tiny frame.

The same two security guards that had taken him down came back and met him at the door along with L's doctor. Before he could let them speak, all he wanted to do was throw a punch at both officers but convinced himself to listen to the doctor. With the doctor's long, blank face, Travis knew whatever the doctor was going to say wasn't good. His face had said it all, whether he meant to or not. Something had happened. Something Travis never thought in a million years was possible had happened.

L had died.

The guards unhandcuffed Travis from the bed as he dropped to his knees on the floor. He cradled himself and cried the hardest and longest he'd ever cried in his life. The doctor tried to console him and told him they did everything they could do to try and bring her back, but it was out of their hands. The doctor said she went peacefully, but he didn't believe him. He didn't care what he had to say as all he could think about was how L was gone. The thought didn't seem real and above all else he had a daughter who was somewhere in the hospital in need of him.

After a while when he was able to get some sort of control over himself, the doctor took Travis away to a group of people in another room that made him sign document after document

before he got to see L or Riley. Travis signed everything like a mindless drone. He must have heard, 'I'm sorry for your loss' a thousand times before it finally started to become white noise. Hours seemed to have passed and they finally let him go see L.

The two guards escorted Travis towards the hallway where he terrorized the employees and destroyed way more equipment than he'd intended. L was still in the delivery room and although the doctors did their best to hide what had happened, he was able to put two and two together with the way she looked. The doctors had told him what to expect earlier in the day, but he still couldn't believe it until he saw her first hand.

L had lost a lot of blood and the color was gone from her skin. The sheets below her were fresh and he didn't want to imagine what they had looked like before someone went in and had gotten rid of the evidence. His beautiful L had been reduced to nothing but a lifeless corpse on the table with her eyes shut as though she was just sleeping. She was gone and there was nothing he could do to bring her back. He gave her a final kiss on her forehead and left the room with his heart and soul broken.

When Travis left L, he was guided to where Riley was sleeping. The walk to where she was felt like death row. He didn't know what to do without L being there to help him and he didn't know whether or not he'd be a good father without her. The weight of the world was on his shoulders. Was he going to have to plan the funeral, while planning on taking care of a kid all by himself? Did he have to quit school and focus on getting a job to support the two of them? He wanted some kind of reset button to put everything back to the way it was. There was no means of escaping the reality that was collapsing in on him.

When he arrived at the room, Riley was in a nursery with one of the nurses giving her a bottle. Riley was quiet as she drank her milk, swaddled in tightly in a pink blanket. Her dark hair

peeked out from under her beanie as the nurse rocked her back and forth in her arms. When he went inside the room it took him a few moments before he decided to take Riley into his arms. Looking down at her he cried once more.

Riley was just as beautiful as she was when he first saw her. She had her mother's eyes, chin and lips. He couldn't help but feel as though he was holding onto the last little piece of L in his arms and that brought him to a sense of closure that he didn't know he needed. Smiling at Riley, he knew that he would do whatever he had to in order for her to have a good life, but the feelings of love and admiration he had before were gone. Replacing his once proud and joyous admirations for this little baby was now an evil resentment towards her. For she was the one that had killed his wife.

Dr. Latimer sat in her office mulling over the details of her notes from the last few sessions with Travis. She had already understood his drinking and parenting issues but was more interested in The Crimson Door. Travis had talked about it so much that she was beginning to become curious herself as to why he'd never open it to see what lurked behind it. She could almost feel the same sensations and worry of the door as Travis described it.

She knew reoccurring dreams were elements of our physical world that we took with us into our subconsciousness, but she'd never heard such a story of a door. Dr. Latimer wondered herself if she managed to have the dream about the door what would be behind it waiting for her? Would it be different or was it all the same for people who might have had a similar dream?

In her thought process her door knocked and she put away her notes. "Come in. The door's open."

Travis walked in looking sadder than ever and Dr. Latimer didn't know how to address him.

"Hey, Doc." Travis took his seat without shaking her hand or even making direct eye contact.

"Good afternoon, Travis." Dr. Latimer had been going over an idea in her head that should bring Travis to a conclusion of his issues, but she didn't know if she wanted to take the risk.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” Travis looked at her half-heartedly slouched back deeper into the chair.

“I wanted to try something different with you today, Travis. It’s a little out of our usual wheelhouse but I think at this point, it’s something that couldn’t hurt.”

“And, what’s that?”

“Rather than me asking you a bunch of questions, I’m going to just tell you a couple of things and I want you to tell me a story.” Dr. Latimer looked at him to see if he was paying attention. “Is that alright with you?”

“Sure, I mean, you know better than I do.” Travis picked himself up from the chair and leaned forward to give her his undivided attention.

“I’ve been thinking about some of the things we’ve gone over, and I want you to talk to me about the death of your parents.”

Travis immediately became defensive and said, “What do you want to know?”

“I want you to tell me the story of how they died. Don’t leave anything out. From beginning to end, tell me what you remember about the whole thing.” Dr. Latimer made sure her recorder that she had left on the coffee table was turned on.

“I don’t see what—”

“Please. Just tell me.” Dr. Latimer held her hand up, stopping Travis before he could put up one of his emotional defense walls.

“Well, I mean as you know they died in a car accident.”

“I know, but I want you to be specific from the very beginning of what you can remember. From morning, noon and night. What you did during the day prior to hearing the news. Be specific as possible.”

Travis had to think for a second. She wanted to hear the whole story and he was trying to figure out where to start. The request was kind of strange to him, but he did as the doctor ordered.

“Well, my wife and I were getting ready to go with my folks up to our family cabin up in the mountains. We had the whole thing planned.” Travis stopped to see if Dr. Latimer was going to ask any questions, but she didn’t. She sat silently watching him. “We would often go with them when they made their weekly trips to make sure their cabins were running smoothly. It was a free getaway from the city, and it helped that my parents loved L. It made the whole pregnancy thing easier to deal with. Anyway, we were planning on going up for the weekend, but we needed some last-minute supplies. I think they had gone out to get a couple of propane tanks for the heaters, but I can’t remember.” Travis stopped to think about what it was they went to get but after trying to recall he continued with his story. “L and I waited for them to come back from the store, but they were taking a little longer than usual. The store was only a few minutes away and they didn’t need to get a lot of things. The trucks were already good to go so I thought they would have been back. It wasn’t until the sun started going down that I got worried. I left L back at the house and I went to the store to make sure everything was okay. I should have known from all the sirens I’d been hearing on the way over there that something had gone wrong. When I showed up to the accident, one of the police officers in charge told me they had gotten into a hit and run on the intersection. Apparently, someone had run the red light and t-boned them into the light post. As I looked at the accident there was almost nothing left of the truck. It looked like a bent spoon that had been warped in two places. I was so busy looking at the damage to the truck, I didn’t notice that there were two bodies covered with white sheets on the asphalt. I went home

and cried myself to sleep.” Travis took a deep breath and then finished. “If it hadn’t been for L being there for me, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Dr. Latimer let the quietness of the room take over to make sure that Travis was done with his story. She looked at him and he looked so helpless. She wanted to go and offer him a shoulder to cry on, but she needed to make some kind of headway with him today. It was her goal to get him to understand his problems.

“There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t wish I would have gone to the store instead of them.”

With that last comment, Dr. Latimer was off. “It’s not your fault, Travis. None of it, and I mean nothing, you couldn’t have done anything that would have prevented something like that from happening. Your parents’ death, your wife’s death; all these are things that were out of your control. You can go over in your head a million times about the things you should have done or the things you shouldn’t have done, but none of it was your fault.” Dr. Latimer was getting teary eyed herself, but she didn’t let that stop her. “Being there for your daughter who needs you, stopping all this excessive drinking; these are things that are in the realms of your control.”

“Yeah, but you don’t understand—” Travis tried to get a word in, but Dr. Latimer was not having it.

“I do understand, Travis. You have no idea how much I understand. Every day that you come in here I just want to get up and slap you across the face.” Dr. Latimer couldn’t believe she let that last part loose. “There are people out there that have really, really messed up heads that need these kinds of sessions. But not you. You just need someone to tell you how it is and I’m hoping I can be the one to do that.”

“It’s not your job to fix me.” Travis looked at Dr. Latimer as she stood up out of her seat.

“It is my job, Travis and you need to realize none of the terrible things that happened to you aren’t your fault. You are a victim of circumstance and all-around shitty luck, but you are a great guy who has a lot of great things going for him.” Dr. Latimer took a step around the coffee table and turned off the recorder. “This is by far one of the most unprofessional sessions I’ve ever had with a client, but you need to know—” she stopped to breath before her full-on sobbing began. “—you need to know that you can change. There is still time for you to change, Travis.”

Travis couldn’t help but cry along with her. These were words he always wanted to hear, but even now, he couldn’t accept them as truth. Before he knew what he was doing, he reached out for the doctor and gave her a hug. She embraced him back as the two of them cried in each other’s arms. Dr. Latimer had no idea what had possessed her to go through with that strategy, but she was happy she did.

With everything that happened to Travis during the week and with everything that was constantly in his mind he was finally able to smile. It wasn’t a forced smile that he had to give so people would leave him alone, it was an actual smile that he couldn’t control. Travis enjoyed the warmth of Dr. Latimer and didn’t want to let go.

10

After the session with Dr. Latimer Travis, didn't make his usual stop at the bar. He found his way up the mountains and sat in the truck, watching the sun go down. All he could do was think about everything the doctor had told him. For the first time in years he felt as though someone was on his side. He no longer felt that it was him against the world.

Travis got home and immediately cried when he saw Riley.

"What's wrong, dad?" Riley looked at him as her own voice was beginning to crack at the sight of her father crying inconsolably.

"I'm so sorry, Riley. I'm sorry, honey." Travis couldn't hold back the tears and Riley jumped into his arms to give him a hug. Rosa watched, confused as to what was happening.

"Don't cry, dad. It's okay. What's wrong?"

"I miss your mother." Travis bawled in her shoulder as Panda began to whimper from the other side of the room where Rosa had begun to wipe her eyes dry as well.

It was quiet in the room for a few seconds until Riley said, "I miss her too." Her own voice broke and he could feel her little heart fluttering with sadness. Rosa went up to the two of

them and they all shared a hug. It was hard for Travis to open up the way he was doing, and it was something he never thought he would have been able to do.

“Don’t worry, daddy. We still have each other,” she said as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

It was getting late and Rosa was getting ready to tuck Riley into bed. She was about to read to Riley her favorite story, but before she could start, Travis took over. “I got this.” He smiled, taking the book from her as she nodded her head and went to the living room to finish her cleaning. Travis laid in the bed with Riley as he began the story.

The story was about a pig that had gotten lost from the rest of the other pigs as they had made a journey from one farm to another. It was a tale about being about being strong, being able to survive on your own and to know your worth. To any other kid it would have been just a silly story about a pig that got into all kinds of mishaps along his way to find his family, but Riley knew better. She loved other classic pieces of literature that Travis would have never thought to read but for some reason she always wanted that story read to her before she went to bed.

The small plush pig that came with the book that they dubbed “Piggy Smalls” was her favorite toy that she loved more than any of her other hundreds of toys that she had piling up in her room and in her closet. Travis finished the story and got up from the bed to put the book back on her nightstand.

He leaned over her, “Goodnight, Riley. Goodnight, Piggy Smalls.” Travis snorted like a pig hoping to get a laugh out of Riley. She giggled before he gave her a kiss on her forehead. Just

as he was about to leave, she stopped him as he was closing the door and said in a sleepy yawning voice, “Love you, dad.”

Before Travis could realize what he was saying he looked at Riley and said, “I love you too, kiddo.” He was about to close the door when one more thing came to his mind. He looked at Riley once more and said, “Things are going to be different from now on. I swear. I’m going to be a better dad for you, okay?”

She nodded her head but didn’t say a word as she rolled over in the bed, covering her face with the sheets. He didn’t know if she believed him or not, but he was finally starting to believe in himself. He couldn’t bring L back from the dead, but he could make sure her legacy would live on through their daughter with all the love and support a dad could give their child.

When Travis closed the door behind himself and went to the living room, he completely forgot that he had left Rosa there by herself.

“Rosa, I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were still here.”

She got up from the sofa and put away a tissue that she had been crying into away in her purse. “I heard everything you said, *si te pones pendejo otra ves—*” Travis stopped her before she could finish.

“I meant every word, Rosa. I’m going to change.”

Rosa took a look at the several half-finished bottles of booze that were resting on the kitchen counter next to the sink. “Prove it.” Rosa pointed at the bottles.

Travis didn’t hesitate as he reached for the bottle of whiskey that he had been drinking every other night and poured it down the drain. The brown liquid swished and sloshed into the drain making a hollow sound. He proceeded to grab the rest of the bottles and continued to do the same, each one making the same sound going down and out of his life. He wondered if the

hollow sound was similar to the noise going that went down his gullet all the nights he'd spent drinking rather than being with Riley. Travis thought about all the dumb choices and every bad decision he ever made when he was drunk or had been drinking. None of it was worth losing his family over and with every bottle that got poured out, he could feel a piece of himself reviving back to life.

"I'm proud of you, Mr. Travis," Rosa whispered as she patted him on the back.

In that moment of Rosa's comment, Travis couldn't believe those words came out of her mouth. He turned around to see if she had still been watching him, but she was gone, and he could hear the door closing from the front of the house a few seconds later.

He finished pouring the bottles down the drain and made his way to the bedroom where Panda was snoring on top of his comforter. He slowly made his way into bed, closed his eyes and wondered what the rest of the night had in store for him.

His eyes grew heavy until finally he couldn't keep them open any longer. As he fell asleep, he could feel his mind racing inside his head wondering what was going to come, what dream, what nightmare, what kind of world would be waiting for him on the other side of his eyelids. As he continued to think about it his brain finally turned off and he managed to go to sleep.

There wasn't anything waiting for him on the other side. He fell asleep without a dream, without a nightmare, there was nothing except complete nothingness and he was fine with it.

In the morning when he woke up, Panda was still snoring, and he could hear Riley competing with her snores from her own room. Little bits of lights came through the windows, as he laid there thinking about the completely normal sleep he had. It was strange to sleep without dreaming but it was an experience that he welcomed.

With the rays of light upon him, he felt as though that day was the first day of the rest of his life. It was going to be the day that everything changed for the better and he was completely ready to take on the responsibilities and honors of being a father. After years of suffering and after years of not knowing what to do with his life, he had a purpose and that purpose was sound asleep, snoring in the other room. He turned his body around and tried to grab a few more minutes of sleep hugging onto the ball of fluff next to him.

Pills

*I hate to advocate drugs, alcohol
violence or insanity to anyone,
but they've always worked for me.
-Hunter S. Thompson*

1

The week of Travis's epiphany, he did his very best to be a part of Riley's life. He had felt bad for what happened at the movies the last time they went, so to make up for the error of his ways, the two of them went to an early movie; another one of Riley's choices.

Travis made sure to grab a large caffeinated drink to keep himself awake throughout the duration of the movie. Despite his best efforts, he still hadn't been sleeping well at night. He was worried that he would fall asleep again during the movie, but the soda was doing its job. There had been a few times where Travis had nodded off, but only for a second. He had managed to stay awake throughout the whole movie and he could tell Riley was excited that he hadn't fallen asleep.

“So, what did you think about the protagonist?” Travis looked at Riley to see if she would remember her asking him the same question on their last movie venture.

Riley turned around and said, “What did *you* think of the protagonist?”

“I thought that it was pretty awesome the way he sacrificed himself for his friend. That’s something only a real friend would do, you know?” Travis couldn’t help but feel proud of himself that he was able to deliver such a perfectly executed answer.

“I agree! I couldn’t have said it better myself!” Riley laughed as she took the remainder of her dad’s drink and gulped it down.

Following the movie, the two of them went to the park where Riley and Travis took turns pushing each other on the swings. There hadn’t been anyone there, so the place was all theirs. Riley ran around the whole playground and jumped on and off of the slides and climbed up the spiral staircases that led to the top of the jungle gym. Travis tried to squeeze himself through the gymnasium and ultimately resorted to attempting pull ups on the monkey bars.

The effects of the soda were long gone as Travis couldn’t help but yawn as Riley raced around with all of the energy in the world. He was jealous that he couldn’t be in the same energetic category as his daughter, so he took a seat down on one of the nearby picnic benches to catch his breath and relax for a moment.

“Dad! C’mon! Check this out!” Riley twirled around on a tire swing, sending her hair spinning like a mop top.

“Go crazy, kid! Your dad needs to take a break for a quick sec’.” Travis looked around at the empty park and took in the serenity of it all. The nesting birds in the trees sang their songs to the blue sky above, which almost seemed to be brighter than Travis could ever remember. The grass was a shade of green that he hadn’t seen in a long time from the spring months and it was a

friendly element to the park. Even the air felt different on Travis's skin. He had only been sober for a week but he felt a sense of clarity that he hadn't in a while.

Travis started to think of Dr. Latimer and how he couldn't wait to share the good news of his sobriety. He hoped that there would have been some sort of congratulatory hug that came with his new-found lifestyle. It was a strange feeling to miss the doctor, but she had become a part of his life that he didn't want to lose. There were still issues that needed to be resolved in their sessions but even if they somehow managed to fix everything about him, he didn't want to let go of the connection they developed.

When Riley and Travis got home, Rosa was about to leave for the day when Travis stopped her. "Where do you think you're going?" Travis said to Rosa in a playful tone.

"Home, where else *pendejo*?" Rosa looked at Travis confused.

"Do you want to stay and have dinner with us?" Travis held the door open for Riley who entered carrying in a few boxes of pizzas.

"Please, Rosa? Stay and have a slice?" Riley made a sad face at Rosa but smiled immediately after as she couldn't contain her excitement.

Rosa looked at Riley's face and then back at Travis who was smirking holding up a box of pizza towards Rosa. "*Pues*, I guess I could stay for a little bit. *Tienes* pepperoni?"

The three of them gathered around the kitchen table and ate their food while Riley went on about the movie and the park. Rosa listened attentively as Travis poured himself cup after cup of soda.

"Take it easy *señor*! Save some for the fishes." Rosa took the soda bottle that had been in the center of the table, put the cap back on and placed it on the floor away from Travis's grasp.

“Sorry, I just can’t stay awake. It’s been rough trying to get some sleep.” Travis took another sip from his cup and then bit into his pizza.

“Well, maybe if you stopped drinking soda.” Rosa looked at Travis and then back at Riley who was lifting up her eyebrow.

“It’s not that, it’s just that—” Travis caught himself wanting to tell Rosa about his dreams and nightmares, but he didn’t want to alarm Riley. “You’re right, I need cut out the soda. I’m trading one bad habit for another.”

After Rosa left for the night and after he had laid Riley to bed, Travis went to the living room and sat staring aimlessly at nothing. He didn’t want to turn the T.V. on and there wasn’t anything in the house to keep him occupied. There were several books that he could have read from the bookshelf and several possible shows to watch, but nothing seemed to grab his attention. Normally, when Riley was in bed, he would remedy himself a glass of whiskey, but that was out of the question. He didn’t know what to do with his free time, so he sat on the couch with Panda stroking her fur hoping that would lead to some sort of idea in his head to keep busy.

The clock ticking on the wall behind him was enough to drive him mad. Had things always been this dead at that hour? Or was he barely starting to notice it? He tried to clean up whatever dishes they had used during dinner to keep himself from getting cabin fever.

As he washed the dishes, he started to think about how long he had been out of work. He had worked since he was fifteen and the idea of not doing something for a living was a new concept to him. He felt useless and wanted to find something that would help ease his mind about having to use his parent’s money to pay for everything. The weekly checks he got from his parents’ cabin rentals was enough to provide for everything they needed and wanted but Travis couldn’t help but feel guilty for using that money. It was his long-term goal to use whatever his

parents left him for Riley's possible college fund. Even when he was drunk as a skunk, this helped him feel better about not being there for his daughter. Now that he had been putting forth an effort, he still lingered, sinking into his stomach the longer he stood out of work.

After drying his hands, Travis went to his room to change into pajamas. He turned out the lights before climbing into bed and tried to get comfortable as Panda leapt onto the other side, making her usual indent on her side of the bed and closed her eyes.

"Glad one of us is getting some sleep." Travis groaned as he looked towards the closet in his room and had a quick flash of The Crimson Door in his mind. It escaped almost immediately as it came, and he ran his fingers through his hair trying to get some sort of comfort to finally lay down. He could hear Riley was already sound asleep as the snores flooded the hallway from under her bedroom door.

Travis decided enough was enough and it was time to try and shut his brain off. He rolled over and closed his eyes, but Panda's heavy breathing still wasn't loud enough to cover the ticking clock that Travis could still make out in the living room. Frustrated at knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep, he got up out of bed and walked to the living room. Panda adjusted herself but didn't choose to follow him. Travis walked to the living room and took the small clock off the wall. He pulled out the batteries and placed the gutted clock on the couch and went back to his room.

As Travis laid in his bed once again, he closed his eyes and waited. He tried counting sheep and tried to sing a song in his head to get him to fall asleep, but nothing seemed to work. It was in that process of trying to tire himself out, that he remembered what his mother had told him as a kid when he couldn't sleep. She would tell him instead of counting sheep to count his blessings and to say them over and over until he'd finally fall asleep. He envisioned his mother

tucking him in repeating the same process to him when he would complain about sleeping and he remembered how every time he'd try it, it worked.

He started to think about everything he was grateful for: Riley, Rosa, Dr. Latimer, his truck, his family's wealth that provided for him, his decision to get sober, and finally the sleeping beast next to him. Travis repeated these things over in his head until he managed to fall asleep with his mother in his thoughts.

When Travis opened his eyes, he was back in his father's Impala. As usual, he was in the backseat watching his mother and father in the front seat. This time however, not a single one of them were acknowledging that he was there with them. Even the look of the car felt different to him as he could see the sky above was a strange green color.

Travis lifted himself up from the seat that he had been laying across and could see that the road they were on was empty. His mother and father seemed to have been talking about something joyful as the two of them smiled at each other. Travis tried to get their attention but neither of them budged as they drove down the street, listening to Chuck Berry or Chubby Checker; he still wasn't able to tell.

Looking outside of the window, Travis realized what street they had been on. In a few moments, a car would come barreling down the road, hitting them, and his parents would die, and he'd lose them forever. He tried to kick the seats and pull at his parents' hair, but they couldn't see or feel him.

"Please, let me save them. Let me wake up. Please, let me wake up." Travis could hear his thoughts and pleas echo in the dream as his parents continued on down the street without a worry. Travis could see that in front of them was the intersection of the accident. Their light was green and the car went along its path.

Time slowed down and Travis could hear the roar of a vehicle coming from the intersecting street. The car itself was hidden by a row of buildings and couldn't be seen, but Travis knew that the driver on the other end of the vehicle was Death.

“Dad! Please! Stop the car!” Travis shouted hoping that somehow his voice would get through to him. “Mom! Make him stop!”

As they neared the intersection, Travis could see the oncoming car flying down the street. There was no driver, and no sign of the car stopping. Travis watched as the car drew closer and closer before colliding into them at an unimaginable speed and with such a brute force that it sent the Impala flying into the air. Travis could see the necks of his parents snap like sticks upon impact. His mother's head bashed against the window of the Impala, leaving a bloody imprint on the glass. Her blood splattered onto Travis's face as his own body thrashed and slammed into the car door before being ejected from the backseat window. Glass rained down on him as he hit the pavement below watching as the car bent in half. From his blurred vision, he could see his father was mangled and wedged between the caved in car roof and the light post. Blood poured from his face, mixing with gasoline and oil on the concrete.

The scene of the crash was painted red as white smoke rose from the car's engine. Travis did his best to lift himself from the ground so he could try and help his parents, but with every moment, he could feel every bone in his body shatter like toothpicks. From where his broken body laid, he could see the car driving off in the distance without a single scratch on it. He didn't know the make or model of the vehicle but before his eyes closed to embrace death, he saw its' color. It was crimson.

2

After the dream of his parents, Travis couldn't wait till the end of the week to go see Dr. Latimer so he called to ask if she could somehow squeeze him into an earlier session. The dream had upset him to the point where he had gone a little over two days without sleeping. He was relying on soda, coffee, and tea to keep him awake; to keep him from dreaming.

Walking into the doctor's office, he couldn't stop the trembling that had taken over his body. He didn't know if they were from nerves, shock, or all the caffeine coursing through him. Dr. Latimer immediately took notice and guided him to his seat.

"Dear God, Travis sit down." Dr. Latimer's voice was breaking as she couldn't understand why Travis had been so strung out.

"Thanks, Doc." Travis nearly threw himself on the seat and crossed his legs. He basked in the comfort of his usual seat as the weight of exhaustion melted from underneath him. Yet he couldn't stop shaking his foot as it rocked back and forth at an unnatural speed.

Dr. Latimer already had her recorder on and its red light blinked from the coffee table. She took a look at Travis, and at the flashing light, and turned the recorder off.

"Alright, Travis, off the record. What's going on? I can't help you if I don't know what all this is about." Dr. Latimer straightened herself up on her seat and waited.

Travis continued to shake his foot and bite his lip before talking to the doctor.

"Well, good news is, I haven't drank in about a week."

"That's good Travis but—"

"—I've been able to spend more time with the kiddo, but I haven't really been sleeping." Travis stopped to take a breath before continuing. "Last time I slept I had a terrible nightmare and since then I haven't wanted to even try."

"Do you want to talk about it, Travis?" Dr. Latimer, hearing that Travis had a nightmare, changed her stern tone to that of a soothing one, hoping he would reveal the details.

"No, definitely not. Definitely not, Doc. That's honestly the last thing I want to do right now." Travis wiped his face and started to tap his foot on the floor while slapping his hands against his lap.

“Okay, okay, we don’t have to talk about that. Just tell me what’s this all about?” She motioned to his foot and his hands.

“Been on a lot of caffeine, if I don’t sleep the nightmares don’t happen, ya know?” Travis offered the doctor an awkward grin with his voice just as jittery as his body.

“You need to get some sleep, Travis. Filling yourself up with caffeine isn’t healthy for you. I understand the nightmares have been rough but if you keep going at this rate you can give yourself a heart attack.” Dr. Latimer went to her desk directly behind her and pulled out a pen and a prescription pad.

Travis looked on as he couldn’t help but eye the doctor’s every movement. She sat back down at her seat and started writing on the pad.

“Travis, I never like resorting to medication but it’s clear that you need a little something to help you out.” She continued to write and then said, “I can’t make you take it and it goes against my better judgement to replace your alcohol intake with medication, but I think that you need it. I wanted to prescribe it to you before, but since I knew of your condition, I didn’t want to risk you mixing the two.” Dr. Latimer ripped up the paper from the pad and handed Travis a copy.

“What’s this?” Travis looked down at the medication name, a name he didn’t recognize nor could pronounce. It sat above the doctor’s perfect elaborate signature.

“They’re sleeping pills. They should help to put you into a deep, sleep state to the point where you won’t even pass through the dream state that you continue to find yourself in. It’s extremely potent and you need to follow the recommended dose or there could be—” Dr. Latimer had to stop to think about sharing the extra piece of information with Travis.

“There could be what?” Travis continued to look at the paper admiring the doctors’ penmanship.

“If you don’t follow the recommended dose, there could be negative side effects.” Dr. Latimer hoped that she didn’t scare Travis with her comment, but she wanted to be completely honest with him.

“What kind of negative side effects, Doc?” Travis didn’t sound too concerned.

“The drug hasn’t been on the market long and it’s almost a last resort when it comes to sleep medication. With that being said, since it is such a powerful medicine, people who have strayed from the recommended dosage have stated that they’ve had very vivid dreams, hallucinations and even hyper realistic visions to the point where they couldn’t separate reality from fantasy.” Dr. Latimer looked at Travis with serious eyes as she caught his glance.

“If it’s that bad, then why even prescribe it?” Travis stared back at her, his foot still wiggling frantically.

“Like I said before, I’m here to help you Travis. If I think that you can handle these pills and that they will help you, then please don’t prove me wrong. I care about—” Dr. Latimer nearly choked, catching what she was about to say.

Travis felt his heart flutter, but it immediately went away when the doctor paused.

“—I care about my patients and it kills me to see you this way. You’re doing your best to change and I’m just trying to push you in the right direction.” Dr. Latimer’s voice went from caring to stern instantly. “Don’t take more than the recommended dose and if you start to have any of the side effects then come back and we can change the dosage.”

Travis looked down at the prescription slip once more and then got up from his seat with his nerves slightly settled. He went around the coffee table and extended his hand to shake the

doctor's. "Thanks, I really appreciate it." Travis nearly retracted his hand for offering it in the first place, instead of offering her a hug for his gratitude.

Dr. Latimer pushed his hand away and offered the hug that they both had wanted. "Take care of yourself and I'll see you next week."

As Travis embraced the hug from the doctor he smiled and had to pry himself away before doing something that he might regret. "Thanks."

Dr. Latimer watched as Travis started to walk out of the room and said, "I'll call in the prescription for you. Have a great day, Travis. Get some rest."

Travis nodded his head, but just he was about to leave he turned around and told the doctor, "Doc?"

"Yes, Travis?" Dr. Latimer was about to make her way to her desk when she turned back around to look at Travis.

Travis had to think about whether or not he wanted to tell her the dream about his parents and how the car that hit them in the dream was the same color of the door. He stopped himself and instead said, "Thanks again."

Travis came home after picking up his prescription and rushed through the door. He startled both Riley and Rosa as he headed straight for the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water.

“Dad?” Riley ran to the kitchen.

“Hey, honey, sorry. Sorry, my mind is all over the place right now.” Travis bent down and picked up Riley to give her a hug. “Listen, why don’t you go and find us something to watch on the T.V.?”

“Uh yeah, sure.” Riley sounded concerned as Travis put her back down.

Rosa made her way into the kitchen and watched as Travis manically paced around before taking the pills out from his pocket, placing them on the breakfast counter.

“*¿Que es esto?*” Rosa picked up the pills in concern and disgust, looking at Travis with a white-hot fire in her eyes.

“It’s not what you think Rosa, it’s a prescription. I haven’t been sleeping and—” Travis paused to see if Riley was listening to their conversation, but she was busy scrolling through channels. “The doctor ended up giving me some sleeping pills so I can try and get some sleep.”

Rosa’s internal fire subsided as she looked at the bottle and then back at Travis. “Is everything fine?”

Travis shook his head and almost immediately his eyes started to glisten. “I’m trying to do better Rosa, I am. It’s just—it’s just—I need some kind of a break. Trying to do good by Riley and trying to find some kind of way out of the mess I put myself in is just adding to the stress that’s already on me.”

“*¿Pero*, what stress *señor?*” Rosa looked at Travis and couldn’t understand what he meant.

“Trying to find a job, trying to sober up and trying to refocus my attention on Riley is all too much to deal with at once. I tried to quit cold turkey, but I’m afraid that if I don’t chill out, I’m going to end up going down to the corner store and buy a bottle and—”

Rosa did the first thing that she could think of and slapped Travis across the face. Before Travis could do anything, he took the hit and stood with the pain pulsating against his cheek. Riley stood in the living room still oblivious to their argument.

“*¡Primero*, you made a promise to Riley that you were done with that *mierda!*” Rosa realized her voice was rising, so she pushed Travis from the kitchen into the hall. She wagged her thin and crooked finger in his face, “Second of all, you’ve been spending time with Riley so I can see you’re trying. *Y* lastly, you already know you don’t need *un trabajo* to keep your head above water. That should be one last thing for you to worry about. Sometimes I think you put stress on yourself to make excuses for acting like a *pendejo!* You got fired from your job, big deal! Your parents made sure that no matter what you’d be taken care of with or without a job. I understand that you want to make your own way and provide with your own money, but right now is not the time.”

Travis stared at Rosa, still holding onto his face in complete disbelief of what had happened. He could still hear the channels mindlessly changing in the other room.

“Use those checks that you’ve been getting from the cabins and stop making *pinche* excuses!” Rosa put her finger down.

“That’s not for me, Rosa. I wanted to use that for Riley.” Travis finally pulled his hand down from his swollen red cheek, checking to see if she had broken the skin.

“What do you think providing for her, feeding her and clothing her is, huh? Do you think that’s not for her?”

Travis couldn't argue with Rosa. She was right and even though he didn't want to admit it to himself, he knew that she was also right about him making excuses to go back to the booze. He stood there, disappointed in himself. He scratched the side of his head before pulling Rosa in for a hug. She hadn't expected that reaction and it took her a second before she hugged him back.

"Thank you, Rosa." Travis whispered into her ear before he let her go when Riley entered the room. She decided to join in on the hug.

"Family hug!" she cheered. "And I found something for us to watch!"

"Awesome, we'll be right there, sweetheart," Travis said watching as Riley rushed back to the T.V.

Travis and Rosa separated. "*Mira*, this is what you're going to do. You're going to do as that doctor said, take those pills and get some rest, *dios mio!*" Rosa pointed at the bottle of pills on the counter.

Travis stood there confused, "What, like now?"

"*Si pendejo*, I'll stick around with Riley and tell her you had to go to bed early because you didn't feel good. It'll be fine. I'll watch her and you get some sleep *señor.*"

Travis couldn't believe how strange their exchange of words had been. One moment they had been arguing with hands flying and the next, she was telling him to take a nap. He was at a loss but did as Rosa said. He took the bottle of pills with him to the restroom. He bent over to take a drink of water from the sink. Holding the water in his mouth he popped open the top to the bottle and fished out a yellow pill. As he held it in his hand, he couldn't help but feel as though he was holding onto a salmon egg that he used to use when he went fishing.

"Here's to hoping." He tossed the bitter pill in his mouth and swallowed it.

In the last thought of the salmon egg, he remembered the times he had spent with his family in their cabin. He hadn't been to the cabin since the accident, but he immediately remembered all of the good times he had there: fishing, grilling, hiking, and all of the other memories he had made there. The recollections waved over him and that's when he realized what he could do to take his mind off of everything. Before going to his room, he went to the living room and talked to Riley.

“Sweetie, I'm not feeling so good, so I'm going to have to take a raincheck on our show.”

“Aw, for reals?” Riley looked disappointed.

Travis took a knee and put one hand on Riley's shoulder and said, “Say, how about soon, we take a trip up to Grandpa's cabin? We can even bring Rosa, if she wants to come.”

“Grandpa had a cabin?” Riley asked looking confused but also surprised at the offering.

“Well, he had a cabin business and would rent those cabins to guests, but him and grandma had one just for us. And I haven't been there in a long, long time so it's just there collecting dust.”

Riley looked at Rosa as if to ask for her permission to say yes, and when Rosa smiled, that's when Riley knew she had her answer. Her face illuminated with excitement.

“Can we take Panda too?” she said looking at the dog who turned to Travis to see what he would say. Travis nodded his head and patted Panda on the head.

“I'm going to go lay down now, alright?” Travis got up from the floor and immediately felt the medicine course through his body. He felt exhausted and struggled to keep himself from falling over. He was able to hobble to his room without breaking a wall and threw himself on his bed.

As he laid down on his bed, he started to have more vivid memories of all the trips he had spent there at his father's cabin. The images had merged together into one big montage of fantastic events: kayaking down the river, snowboarding in the frost covered hills, riding go carts at Mr. Funtimes Putt Putt, and even taking Riley's mother up there for their first official getaway.

He had forgotten about that one particular memory completely. Just as quickly as the memory returned, it started to play in his head like a re-run and he was able to remember everything as if it were yesterday.

Even though Travis was upset that he hadn't gotten the sleep he was promised from the doctor, he was surprised to have the pleasant dream he had. It wasn't so much a dream but a memory that he was a part of. He was on the outside of himself looking into the dream as though he was watching it but experiencing everything for the first time.

It was the year of their first date anniversary, during L and Travis's sophomore year of college. Travis had been wanting to do something special for L since school had begun to take over their lives. Their relationship was beginning to strain from the workload they had taken on with all of their new classes and extracurriculars. They were both taking the max amount of credits they could and between the both of them, they had to have been in at least ten different academic clubs. The school they went to was only an hour away from home and they had already tackled everything there was for a couple to do in both towns. Travis was running out of new and interesting things to do with her. His worst fear was that she would get bored of their relationship and leave, so he called his dad for ideas.

His dad suggested L and Travis go up to the cabins to spend the weekend enjoying country life for a while. It wasn't a bad idea, and Travis figured it was something they could share together for the first time. Travis had known most of the cool spots to take her to, so he thought he could get some brownie points by showing her all of the beautiful landscapes and hideaways that many of the locals didn't even know about.

On the weekend before their anniversary, Travis decided to tell L about the trip, and she was beyond thrilled. It was going to be a short trip but neither of them cared. They both packed their bags into the Dodge and left.

As they drove on the freeway entering even smaller towns, the landscape began to change, and they could tell they weren't home anymore. In the city, the mountains were dark with dried vegetation, but as the couple got further into the woodlands, the greys turned into lush, green pine. With each twist and turn of the road, it was revealed to them that there was much more natural beauty to see on each side of them.

Travis turned to see L taking in all of the surroundings as if it were the first time she had ever seen a pine tree. Travis honestly hadn't known whether she had been up there or not, and he never asked. To see her stare out into the vast openness of wilderness let him know that his dad's idea was working.

Once they made it into the center of town at the top of the mountain, Travis pumped some gas into the truck. Inside the small convenience store he got them a couple of drinks, chips and dip, and proceeded to the first spot he wanted to take her.

Travis's father had once brought him and his mother to a hidden waterfall that laid in the deeper part of the hills. It wasn't easily accessible by car and since no one really knew about it, Travis knew he and L would have the entire place to themselves.

Just thinking about the plans he had once they reached the top of the waterfall made his hands start to sweat. He rubbed them against his pant legs and could feel the box in his pocket was beginning to create a crease in his leg. He couldn't have thought of a better place to propose to her than at that very waterfall and he had no clue as to what she would say. They both loved

each other tremendously and being so young, he worried that her first reaction would be the ultimate denial, leaving him crushed.

Pulling up to the waterfall, L gasped in amazement and quickly got out of the truck even before Travis could shift into park. She took out her phone and began to capture the views around her with every possible angle that she could, adjusting the lighting, contrast, and depth that would have made any professional photographer envious. Travis had a hard time keeping up, as she bounced around the area.

He almost had to wrangle her up to take the lead so that he could take her closer to the water. Carefully, they made their way next to the waterfall where slight splashes of water were hitting their faces. The cold water cascading down the fall led to a small trickling creek down by where they parked. The soothing sound of water was the only thing to be heard as they proceeded to walk up the pathway that lead to the source of the water.

The walkway was leveled like a staircase, which made it easier to navigate and climb up. As they walked, he constantly checked his pockets to make sure the ring hadn't fallen out. In his nervousness he started to fall a little behind L. She was a good thirty paces ahead, so he knew he had time to turn around and take the ring out of the box. He didn't want to risk the ring falling out of his pocket, so he held it firmly in his hand the rest of the way. He chucked the felt box somewhere deep into the forest.

Finally reaching the top of the hill, they looked out at the landscape to soak up all the beauty and fresh air. With every breath Travis took, the harder it was to breathe and expel all of the smog that had filled his lungs from the city. The small river at the top of the hill, which created the waterfall, was small enough for the two of them to jump over with ease. They followed the path for a little while until they came upon a huge open field of yellow wildflowers.

Once more they stopped to take pictures and admire the nature they didn't have back home. The silence surrounding them was only broken apart by the sounds of the water crashing against the rocks below. Sitting on a fallen tree, L placed her head on Travis's shoulder, and he placed his head on her brow. It was a subtle yet perfect piece in time that he would never forget. The feeling Travis had in that moment let him know that there was no better time to pop the question than right there as the two of them were in a frame of sheer lucidity.

Everything he had planned and everything he wanted to say was stirring into a complete blur of fear and unsureness as his hands shook. The next thing he knew he was holding onto her hand and pulling the ring out of his pocket asking her, "Will you marry me?"

She jumped into his arms and the two of them fell into the creek, soaking them both in its chilly waters, but it didn't matter. He had his answer and he embraced her, wet shirts and all. The two of them dusted themselves off and he finally placed the ring on her finger.

Heading back to his father's cabin in bliss, the two of them were equally excited to see it. For L, it was going to be the first time she'd seen the place that Travis had spent many summers in. Pulling up the steep dirt road that lead to the entrance of the cabins, he met the guard at the front gate. Travis hadn't ever seen him before but when he showed him his license, the guard nodded and reached for the keys hanging behind him.

Travis felt nothing less of a big shot going through those gates without having to worry about paying, parking or even room booking. His father had owned every single cabin in the several hundred-acre estate that he had built the Whispering Lodge Resort on. Driving through the park, they saw the several cabins ordained with wood carved animals and figures that let both of them know they were far away from the city. There were several people sitting outside on the rocking chairs waving at them as they drove through.

Towards the rear end of the park, where the cabins started to fade and the trees started to reappear in multitudes, there was one final gate. It wasn't a big gate, but behind it was a large clearing.

The process of opening and closing the gate was annoying to his father and he never knew why until Travis had to do it for himself. He got off the truck, opened the gate, drove through it, got off the truck once more, locked it and drove the rest of the way through the field. There were several more wildflowers in both directions that shrouded the clearing in their vibrant colors. The sun shone brightly overhead for the brief period of time that they drove through the clearing but was immediately hidden once they entered the next set of trees following the field. The shadows from the trees made it hard to see as their reflection casted onto the windshield. After a few more bumpy turns through the trees they had finally made it.

The cabin had looked the same from the last time he had visited. L once more jumped out of the truck and made her way up the wooden steps that lead to the porch and waited eagerly at the door. Reaching into the back of the truck, Travis got both of their packs and followed her. There was still the drinks and the other bags they had brought with them in the back of the truck, but he could tell that L was anxious to see the inside. Travis put the backpacks on the ground and opened up the cabin.

As the two of them walked in, it smelt like a new home; a new home fit for the company of a newly engaged couple. There wasn't much difference between the cabin and the apartment he had back home except for the walls were coated with stained wooden logs rather than aged white sheetrock. It looked like a brand-new remodeled home and there were no other indicators that let them feel that they were in the middle of the woods. There were updated appliances in the kitchen, a large screen T.V. in the living room and the brand-new sectional for them to sit on.

The dark wooden floors gave the cabin a much more modern appeal along with the artsy fartsy paintings that his mom had hung up on the walls.

Travis closed the door behind him and as he turned around, L leapt into his arms as they shared a kiss. Trying to be sweet and carry her across the threshold like he'd seen in old movies, he tripped on a backpack strap that sent them both crashing to the floor as they laughed in hysteria. They couldn't help but continue their laughter whenever they looked at one another, but finally they settled down and Travis could see the love she had for him. He pulled her in close, sharing another kiss and they began to make love on the floor. And unbeknownst to them both, that was the weekend Riley was conceived.

A few weeks after L figured out she was pregnant, they hoofed it to Vegas and had a quick wedding. They were still barely finishing their early years of college and Travis grew worried everyday thinking he wouldn't be able to handle being a father, a husband and a student all so suddenly. His mom and dad on the other hand, were thrilled once they found out L was pregnant. They had been excited about the engagement, and the pregnancy along with the wedding was the icing on the cake. His mom had always wanted to be a grandma and although it happened much sooner than she anticipated, she loved L and didn't flinch in the slightest when she heard the news. His dad was never really a man to show emotion towards anything, but once he heard the news his mentality instantly shifted, and he went from manly dad to decorated grandpa within a few months.

The fantasy of the dream was fading away and Travis could feel reality trying to pull him out of its' grasp. He remembered he was dreaming, and the memory was just a memory. The whole scenario felt so real and he couldn't help but feel as though he was given a second chance with L.

When the realization of the dream came to full effect, Travis had one final image of L. They were back at his apartment and she was already showing her baby bump. She was wearing his cut up Van Halen t-shirt as the bottom of her belly showed. It was a sight that he didn't remember until that moment. He was watching her from his couch as she was making her way for the entrance door. When she turned around to look at Travis, the door behind her changed from the egg white color to the rotted red door that he feared. As he watched her head for the handle of the door, he hesitated to get up from his seat. It wasn't until L managed to open the Crimson Door that Travis lifted himself up and ran to get her before the door closed. He could see the door closing in on her and the moment he touched the handle, he woke up.

5

As the week progressed, Travis found himself able to get used to the idea of sleeping. The medicine hadn't stopped the bad dreams completely, but they allowed him to continue to have wonderful dreams about L. The only thing he didn't like was the fact that The Door still somehow managed to make its way into his dreams. He continued to wonder as he slept why everything else had been the same, but the Door was the one thing that didn't match.

With the nightmares he had of his parents gone, he hadn't been so stressed out. He had taken Rosa's advice and stopped looking for a job to focus more of his attention on getting sober, spending his time with Riley and getting the rest he needed. There were times that Travis found himself going stir crazy being home so often, but it was better than feeling the way he had been feeling.

Travis had also learned that he found a joy in cooking. He wasn't good at much, but he was able to find his niche with breakfast. Every morning he woke up before Riley and cooked her a hearty meal fit for a family of ten. He made sure that he made enough for the both of them

and for Rosa in case she hadn't ate at home. His go-to skillet had been filled with eggs, bacon, potatoes and cheese. It was simple but no one in the house complained to a cooked breakfast.

When Riley didn't want to watch movies or T.V. with her dad, she kept occupied with her toys while Travis started to read the dusty books from his bookshelf. He hadn't read in so long and he didn't realize how hard it was for him to jump back into it. When he started, it took him nearly an hour to read a short ten-page chapter in a book that Riley had suggested to him. He enjoyed the plot of the book, but he didn't like how long it took him to read.

His relationship with Rosa was getting better as well. He made sure to help her out with the chores around the house. Even though he was paying her to pick up and watch Riley, he didn't care that he was taking on the extra work. It was a pleasant distraction from anything that might take his mind off of his goals.

Travis learned a lot about Rosa in the few times they found each other washing dishes, throwing out the trash, or the times he'd look over her shoulder to watch her cook some of the Mexican dishes that Riley had fallen in love with. Not only was he taking notes of her cooking, he was learning about her life and where she came from. Travis learned that before meeting his parents, Rosa had worked in a cannery where she would seal thousands of cans of food in an assembly line. When she left the cannery, she worked odd jobs as a cleaning lady, a baby sitter and even picking crops for a brief period of time in the summer months. It wasn't until she had started working for Travis's parents that she found a steady income and was able to provide for herself and her family. Travis wanted to pry more into her life as he found it fascinating learning about her, but he didn't want to freak her out with a barrage of questions.

As the week played out, Travis couldn't wait until his next session with the doctor. He wanted to tell her the good news with his sleeping patterns and he wanted to share how things

were way better than the week before. Travis knew that their last meeting didn't go the way he wanted, and he was completely ashamed in himself for acting the way he did around her. With that in his mind he knew that there were things that he still wanted to tackle in his next session. He had been enjoying his dreams of L, but he wanted the Doc's help in opening the door to see where L had vanished to in his dream, and to see why she would leave him at all.

The intent behind why he wanted to open the door was clear to him, but he didn't know if he wanted to be completely honest with Dr. Latimer about his reasoning. She might be likely to say no if she knew the real reason why he wanted to open the door. His fears of the door were still there lingering in the back of his head, but he was more focused on L and trying to see if the door led to even better dreams with her. He was enjoying the vivid memories of L and he enjoyed being a part of that one moment over and over again every night, but it just wasn't enough. At the end of the dream, and the beginning of the morning, he knew that no matter how real the dream had been it was just a figment of his imagination. A "side effect" as the doctor said. That one memory wouldn't ever be enough to fill the void that had taken over the place in his heart. He needed more and he hoped he'd find answers behind the door.

6

When Travis walked in to talk to Dr. Latimer, he knew already what his plan was. Dr. Latimer opened the door and offered him a seat. Immediately she could already tell the difference in his appearance. Travis seemed to have a new tone to his skin, and he had a pep in his walk.

Dr. Latimer took another good look at Travis and said, “Well, you definitely look better than you did the last time we met.”

Travis chuckled but he knew that she was right. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that Doc. Things were getting rough and I’m glad that you were there for me the way you were. It was nice having someone in my corner.”

“I’m glad I could help. So, have the pills been helping? Have you been able to get any sleep?”

Travis waited before answering, he needed to be completely sure of what he was going to say if he wanted the Dr. Latimer’s help with the door. “Actually yeah, I’ve been getting a lot more sleep recently and I’m feeling way better. No dreams, no nightmares, it’s amazing what those little guys can do.” Travis didn’t know if he was overselling his reaction, but it was too late now.

“That’s great, I’m glad to hear that. I was worried that I scared you the last time when I told you about the potential side effects, but I’m glad you gave them a chance.” Dr. Latimer reached for the recorder and realized she hadn’t turned it on. She had been so used to being off the record with Travis that she was forgetting her training. She turned on the recorder and placed it firmly on the table. “So, what’s new, Travis? It seems that things have changed for you for the better, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Ah, nah, Doc. You’re right. Things have been better. I’ve been able to spend more time with my kid and my sleep has been the best I’ve ever gotten it’s just—” Travis knew that that was the moment he needed to introduce his concern. He knew that if he timed and delivered everything the correct way, he could get the doctor to help him out. “—it’s just that I keep thinking about the door, ya know?”

“And that would be The Crimson Door, correct?” Dr. Latimer placed her hands on top of knee as she listened to Travis. Travis got sidetracked by the realization that the doctor had been wearing a skirt and her legs were slightly more exposed than usual.

“Um, yeah, that door.” Travis gulped and hoped that the doctor hadn’t seen him staring at her attire. “So, I keep wondering about what you said. About how you could possibly help me open it. What did you mean?”

Dr. Latimer had taken notice to Travis’s wandering eyes and her heart skipped a beat, but only for a second until she heard his question. “Technically if you wanted, I could put you under and guide you through your dream state.”

“Put me under? Like hypnosis?”

“That’s a term I don’t really like to use. People have negative connotations when they hear that, so I tend to stay away from that word. But in simple terms, yes. I could put you under and my voice can guide you within your dream, taking you further into it than you’ve been able to on your own.” Dr. Latimer looked at the confused face of Travis and tried to continue on with her explanation. “With my help, and with your descriptions of the dream while you’re under, we can open the door together and you can finally see for yourself what is on the other side.”

“So, it’ll be like a dream basically? That’s what you’re saying?” Travis questioned the doctor trying to make sense of the caliber of what she was saying.

“Basically, yes.” Dr. Latimer pulled her hands from her knee and crossed her legs into a more comfortable position. “There is something about your dream sequence that doesn’t allow you to go further past the door, but with my guidance we can get you to open it for yourself.”

Travis was starting to make sense of the situation and was getting slightly excited but nervous at the same time hearing the possibility of opening the door. His nerves quickly subsided when he realized that he had already known what was on the other side of the door, L. He took one glance at the recorder and then back at Dr. Latimer before saying, “Let’s do this.”

Dr. Latimer closed the window blinds in her office, shut off the lights, and locked her door. She pulled out a single candle that she lit with a barbeque lighter and placed in on the coffee table next to the recorder. She had made Travis take the couch and had him lie down. The office had grown quieter somehow and the only thing Travis could hear was his heartbeat getting faster the more he waited for the doctor's instructions. The aroma of candle was filling the darkness of the room and Travis was able to tell that it was a vanilla scented candle.

"Okay, listen, Travis. It is very important that you follow all my instructions if we are going to do this. I want you to close your eyes and try and picture the flame of the candle in your head. I want you to visualize the flame, do you see it?"

"Yeah. I think." Travis imagined the same candle that was only a few feet away from him in his mind floating in blackness.

"Perfect, now I want you to imagine that the candle is flickering as if it's searching for oxygen to stay lit." Dr. Latimer watched over Travis in her chair to make sure that he was as calm as possible. "Now imagine the candle's light starting to dwindle. Imagine that the light is starting to turn off and you are surrounded by a room full of nothing but the darkness behind your eyes." Dr. Latimer continued to watch Travis as she could tell his arms were starting to twitch with her words.

"Okay." Travis's voice was growing weak as his eyelids were getting impossible to open.

"Now, when I say so, you will be in a dream. It is very important that you remember that everything you see is simply in your head and nothing else. Understand?"

"Yes." Travis's voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Alright, Travis. The lights are off, the candle has died out and we are now in your head."

7

As Travis stood in a vast area of nothingness, he could hear the voice of the doctor floating all around him as an echo.

“Alright, Travis. The lights are off, the candle has died out and we are now in your head.”

It was with that last comment that he grew confused, so he said, “What do you mean we?” It was then that Travis could see the doctor standing next to him holding onto a similar candle that looked just like the one in the office.

“I told you, I could guide you to the door. As long as you see something or feel something so will I. I’m not actually in your head, I’m just a vision of myself that you’ve placed in there with you.” Her words seemed ethereal as Travis couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He reached out and touched her hair, only to find that his hand went straight through it like a cloud in the sky.

“I want you to describe to me everything in as much detail as you can. The more detailed, the better I’ll be able to help you.” Dr. Latimer watched as Travis slept on the couch, his chest rising and falling with every breath. Meanwhile Travis could see the depiction of her speaking the very same words to him in his mind.

“This is all so crazy,” Travis couldn’t help but say.

“From here on out, just imagine I’m not there with you. Just imagine that it is you and your dream. Go ahead.” The image of Dr. Latimer pointed off in the distance as Travis’s dream commenced.

“I can see the door. The Crimson Door.” Travis felt his heart begin to thump harder as he spoke. He looked to see if Dr. Latimer would respond, but she stood there in the dream with him, speechless and motionless. He could feel his skin getting warmer and the sweat started to pour down his forehead. He wanted to see what was behind the door. He needed to know why this thing continued to make its way into his head and into my dreams. More importantly he wanted to see L behind it.

“Go to the door, Travis. It’s okay.”

Travis continued to slowly make his way to the door despite his fear. Even if the Doc really wasn't right next to him, it was nice to have her company in the presence of the door.

"Can you see it too?" Travis couldn't help but ask.

"Yes." Dr. Latimer admitted frightfully, as the door had been just as terrifying and intimidating as Travis had made it out to be.

Travis continued to make his way closer to the door. He wiped his brow and could feel the force that had held him back so many times before worked its way into his body. It was like a rush of wind that kept him from getting any closer to the door. The vision of Dr. Latimer had put the candle down on the ground and went towards Travis.

Travis screamed over the invisible force and said, "I can't! I can't get any closer!" The force was too strong for him to get through and it felt like he was trying to move a house.

Just as he was about to give up, he could feel another force pushing him from behind, it was the vision of the doctor. She was pushing him and guiding him closer towards the door. They were getting closer to it despite the force that was wreaking havoc on the both of them.

Travis was the closest he had ever been to the door and felt his fears growing the more prevalent the door became. He could see the intricate details of the wood and just how black the handle was up close.

Nearing the door, he reached out in with every bit of energy he could muster inside of himself and held onto the handle. Almost immediately the force that was keeping him away vanished. Travis couldn't believe it. He was holding onto the handle. It was a deep sense of relief that he was feeling with the door and couldn't help but shed a tear knowing he had finally reached it. The door always seemed unattainable yet there he was, with the doctor by his side, holding onto the very thing that had terrorized him for years.

He worried that if he waited any longer the chance he'd have to open it would go away and he'd never be able to open it again. He grasped onto the handle and pushed the lever down to disengage the locking mechanism and opened the door with the doctor right behind him.

As he slowly opened the creaking wooden door, he waited to see who or what was on the other side. With the door completely opened, he couldn't comprehend what was in front of him. It wasn't a person or some kind of looming monster but just a room. The room looked familiar but at the same time had a different kind of vibe to it that made Travis feel as though he'd never been there before.

"What do you see, Travis?" The voice of the doctor came back into his head as he stood there in confusion.

"It's just a room, there a long hall that looks like it's part of some other building but that's it," Travis said sounding disappointed.

In his moment of confusion, he heard something coming from the other end of the hallway. The noise bounced off the walls until it reached him, giving him goosebumps all over his body. It sounded like voices.

His mind was beginning to go crazy with the ideas of what was waiting for him down the hallway and he couldn't help but feel that if he didn't go and see what was waiting for him, he would never see L and the dream would never end.

He shut the door behind him and started his journey down the hallway towards the voices. The lights at the end of the dark hallway flickered as if to give him one more sign that entering was a bad idea. He continued forward looking at the white tiles along the wall as he ran his fingers on them to feel just how real they seemed. The closer he got, the more he realized that there were another set of doors at the end of the hallway. The doors looked to be painted the

same color as The Crimson Door, except there was a noticeable difference. Although they looked very similar, they were also slightly askew in the sense that the doors were swinging doors like that of a hospital or a saloon. The voices from behind the doors grew louder the closer he got, and his worries were continuing to grow. He turned to look at the doctor who hadn't looked worried.

As Travis finally approached the doors, he tried to look through the glass partition in them to see if he could see through the other side in order to catch a glimpse of what was making the sounds. The light behind the doors was too bright for him to see through so he decided to push open the door. Just before Travis could open it, he looked behind himself to see the red door still waiting for him behind where they stood. It was all the way down the hall, and he didn't know why he wanted to make sure it was still there but he checked nevertheless.

Travis pushed open the doors and entered the next room, ready to face whatever it was that was creating this sense of dread within him. The light pulsating from the room faded into a normal level of lighting and Travis could finally see where he was. It was a hospital room. Not just any hospital room, *the* hospital room. The very same room where he lost his wife years ago. He turned around in fear noticing the exact uncanny resemblance of the room and tried to run back through the doors, but they wouldn't budge. On the other side of the door he could see the vision of the doctor trying to open the doors for him.

While trying to fight through the closed doors, he heard the pleas of a voice that was echoing in the halls before he had entered the room. It was L. He continued to push the doors hoping they would somehow magically open, but with every push the weight of the doors grew heavier and heavier. Looking down at the floor he noticed that his boots he had worn to the doctor's office were no longer there, but rather a new set of tennis shoes. He looked at his pants

and at his shirt and they had all turned into the clothes he had worn the night L passed away. He looked at the glass partition in front of himself to see if he could catch a glimpse of himself in the reflection. Other than Dr. Latimer fighting to push the doors open, he could see himself but years younger.

“Honey?” L spoke but Travis didn’t want to turn around. “Please don’t leave, it’ll be alright.”

The voice was just as he remembered it, but he still didn’t want to look back. He felt if he saw her back on that table in that room that he would just break down and fall to tears. Or worse, she wouldn’t even be there, and his mind would just be playing more tricks.

“Travis, what do you see?” Dr. Latimer shouted back in the office trying to help Travis the best she could. “Travis, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what you see!”

Travis couldn’t hear the doctor as the voice on the operating table continued, “It’ll be alright, babe. It’s just another routine delivery. There’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine. They just gave me the epidural. I feel great.”

As the words continued, there was a very hollow sound coming from her voice as though she was speaking in the same echo that Dr. Latimer had. Travis knew if he turned to look at L the dream would continue and eventually he would be forced to relive her death all over again.

Then L’s voice spoke once more and said, “Don’t leave me again. It’ll be different this time.”

Travis couldn’t help feeling as though the voice of his wife hadn’t just been a vision in his dream but in reality, his wife was somehow communicating with him. He started to stop fiddling with the doors when L spoke again, “Travis, please look at me. Stay with me for a little. I need you.”

With that final request Travis couldn't help but turn around and look at her. She looked different from when he remembered her. She was still L, but she had a different glow about her, a glow that she didn't even have when she was alive. He was immediately drawn to her and continued to slowly walk over to the delivery bed where he helplessly held onto her hand. She looked perfect, she hadn't looked this way when she delivered Riley. She didn't look as though she was about to deliver a child, she looked as though she was ready to throw off her medical gown and be ready to go out on a date. It was as if every great memory he had of L was blending together to create one perfect image of her; the change was a welcomed one and he embraced every second he got to look into her big, almond brown eyes.

"Thank you, honey. Everything will be alright. There's no need to worry anymore." She said as she leaned over to kiss his hand that was holding hers. He felt it. He could actually feel her lips on his hand, and it felt just as real as any other kiss he had ever had.

Before he could help himself, he began to cry and dropped to his knees and said, "I've missed you so much! Why did you have to leave me? Why did you have to go?" The babbling words flew from his mouth.

"I never left, I've always been here, honey. Now get up, the doctors are here." L's voice seemed to have changed at the sight of the doctors.

Dr. Latimer didn't want to wake Travis up without him allowing her to do so. If he didn't answer her, she knew she just needed to give him time for them to somehow reconnect in his dream. She paced around the room for some sort of sign to help Travis but there was none. The last thing she saw was Travis enter the double doors and she was hoping that whatever was happening behind them was helping him face his demons.

As Travis got up and wiped his face clean of the tears that had dried, he noticed there were three nurses and a doctor standing in front of them with their delivery gear on. Travis hadn't heard any doors open or their footsteps; they had just appeared from nowhere. He thought possibly somehow the door that he came through was able to open, but he didn't want to leave anymore. He held onto the words that L said about him not having to worry anymore.

"You ready?" The doctor said in a tone that made Travis think his voice wasn't that of a doctor. It sounded much rougher than a doctor's voice, almost like that of a mechanic or a hot dog vendor from Brooklyn.

Travis turned to see L prepping herself for delivery. He looked at her and looked at the doctors, and said, "No, wait. Not yet, she's not ready. Give her time. L, please, not yet. I can't lose you again."

Without listening to a word Travis said, she continued to lift her legs up into the stirrups with ease and started to push as the doctors guided her delivery. Travis didn't want to have to be there to see her die again, so he ran to the doors to pry them open, but they still wouldn't budge. His previous thoughts of L's promises faded, and he just couldn't witness that event again.

Rather than the screams and shouting that had been in the room from his memory of the delivery, it was silent as Travis turned to L who was continuing to push with ease. She looked at Travis confused as if she wondered why he was behaving the way he was. Her focus however wasn't broken as she continued to deliver Riley with a look of determination across her face.

From the outside of the doors he could hear the doctor's voice once more. He had forgotten all about her. "Travis, what do you see?"

Travis ended up shouting as loud as he could and said, "Push the doors!"

It was in Travis's shouting that Dr. Latimer was finally able to sit down and concentrate on opening the doors that had divided them. She tried to imagine herself much stronger than what she actually was and started to feel the door budging.

"Sir, we are going to have to ask you to please sit down." One of the nurses came towards Travis as the doctor continued to help L. Travis turned to look at L struggling to deliver, and it was then that he noticed the window. Rather than a rainbow waiting on the outside, the sky had been a dark overcast with red droplets of what looked like water raining down from the sky. The longer he looked the darker the sky became.

Travis knew what was coming and he continued to claw at the door so he could escape the fate that awaited his wife. Dr. Latimer's voice grew closer as Travis could hear the doctor telling L to continue pushing. He could feel the door being pushed open from the other side as he continued to try and wedge his fingers between them to get them open.

Travis turned around when he heard the cry of a baby. The nurses gathered around the child that was hidden from him with the doctors back as a shield. Travis looked toward L who no longer had a glow about her. L's face had twisted in confusion as the nurses eyed the child in the blanket that they had just wrapped her in before handing the child to her. L looked down at the bundle in her arms, still bewildered as to what she was holding. Travis didn't want to look as he knew the seconds were timing down until he heard the sounds of her flatlining.

In a strange turn events L shouted, "That's not my baby!"

Travis couldn't help but freeze at the thought of what L had said. The baby continued to cry louder. He saw the nurses' faces frown with anger as they scooped the child from L's arms, handing the child to the doctor. The doctor turned around to show Travis the baby and in a monotonous voice said, "It's a girl. Congratulations!"

When he revealed the blanket to Travis there was nothing in it. No baby, no little Riley. The empty blanket got closer to Travis as the doctor was practically shoving the thing in his face. It was then that Travis heard a bang coming from the other side of the door. Dr. Latimer had finally pried the door open.

Travis wanted one last glance at L before leaving, but when he stared at her she looked in pain. Something else was coming out of her. She wasn't delivering a baby, but something was forcing its way out of her entire body, seeping through every pore like a cloud of black mist. Her body looked as though it was steaming, and the steam was forming into a large black shadow. The more the image made its way out of L's body, the less she was looking like herself.

Travis looked back at the doctor and the nurses who were all crying like newborn children. He didn't understand how their voices were able to produce such a tone and it freaked him out to the point where he quickly turned around and darted down the hallway with Dr. Latimer at his side.

He could hear L shouting in the background, "Don't leave me again, Travis!" but her voice grew deeper, no longer a peaceful angelic voice but a voice that was beginning to sound like that of the doctor. The shadow muffled her voice and continued to rip out of her body.

Travis stopped hearing the voice but turned around to look behind him and could see the nurses and the doctor running after him with the empty blanket still crying like infants. "Sir, your daughter needs you. Your wife needs you. Come back!" the voices shouted, and they seemed to grow louder despite Travis getting farther away from them.

Dr. Latimer had been able to see the hospital room for a moment and had been able to see the people chasing after them, but she didn't know the context of what happened. She couldn't

take them out of the dream without exiting the door they had entered together. Even though she knew Travis was alright, there was nothing she could do but try and run.

The vision of Dr. Latimer was the first to reach their original entry point and with Travis right behind her. Travis turned around to see the doctor and nurse had gained on them and were only a few feet away from the door. Travis fell to the floor, tripping over the door entrance and quickly got up to try and close the door behind him. The door felt heavier than it did when he opened it.

“I can’t close it!” Travis shouted hoping that Dr. Latimer would be able to help him.

“Just forget about it!!” Dr. Latimer’s voice rang in the dream and she said, “Tell me you are ready to get out!”

“What?” Travis sounded confused at the statement.

“I need you to tell me it’s okay to bring you out!” Dr. Latimer felt frightened as the images of the nurses, the doctor and the increasing size of the shadow entering the hallway were getting closer.

“Yes! Take me out!” Travis shouted watching in fear of The Crimson Door standing with the hallway on the other side of it clearly visible. Everything was getting closer to them. He shut his eyes and waited.

In that moment of panic, the vision of Dr. Latimer reached down and grabbed the candle she had placed on the ground. She looked through The Crimson Door at the images heading her way and she hesitated. A large blackness had taken over every inch of the hallway and it was about to take them away. Before she could let the visions get any closer, she lifted up the candle to her face and blew.

8

When the candle went out Travis leapt up from the couch and look around at his surroundings. He couldn't comprehend everything he saw, and he tried to catch his breath in the middle of his panic attack.

“Travis, I'm so sorry, that wasn't supposed to happen. I lost you there for a minute and I didn't want to wake you up without you giving the okay,” Dr. Latimer paused as she couldn't help but blame herself. “I'm so sorry.”

Travis didn't know what to say and tried to run out of the room. He left the doctor alone in the dark as he stumbled to find his way to the door. As he found the door, he struggled to open it. He then ran out to his truck where he turned around to see if the doctor had been following him. He felt as if he was overreacting but even then, he didn't want to be in that room with the doctor another minute. The whole hypnosis felt completely real. It was the worst thing he had ever experienced, even worse than when L had actually died. The fantasy and reality of the situation being merged into one disaster piece was enough to get Travis to forget about the other nightmares he had.

Travis got into his truck and slammed his fists against the steering wheel and screamed. Tears ran down his face and he hated how often he had found himself crying. His whole life was emotionally draining, and he just wanted a break from it all. When things had been looking up, they immediately came back crashing down.

All he wanted to do was find out what was behind the door and why L had been walking into it. Now that he had managed to find his way inside, he never wanted to go back. Whether it was the darkest part of his imagination, or if by some chance he had opened some other worldly portal, he never wanted to see the door again. Where had the shadow come from? Why were the doctors crying like babies? Why had the sky been filled with red clouds? Nothing made sense and he was tired of the whole concept of the Door. It was in that fury there was one thought that continued to linger above all else and he didn't know why it felt important for him to know the answer. Had he closed the door, or had he left it open?

2

The rest of the week hadn't gone as planned for Travis. He had hoped the trouble with the door was over, but he was wrong. Travis continued to take the pills that Dr. Latimer had prescribed for him and they allowed him to sleep but they didn't stop the dreams from continuing. The positive aspect about the nightmares was that the door had somehow vanished. Whether it was because he hadn't thought about it, or whether it was because he had faced his fear, the door wasn't showing its face.

Dr. Latimer had tried to contact Travis on more than one occasion, but he refused to answer. Travis didn't want to talk to her for several reasons but mainly he didn't know if he could talk to her. So much had happened in the dream that he didn't know what she had seen or what she didn't see. Part of him was frightened that he had put her through whatever he had seen.

Over the course of a couple of weeks, Travis was noticing several things occurring throughout his house that he didn't want to acknowledge were possible. He had merely brushed

these occurrences off as his mind playing tricks on him, just another side effect of the medication, but there was a part of him that feared what he saw was real.

One night he felt as though he was being watched. Travis was always slightly paranoid of this very fact, but he was actually able to feel eyes on him in the middle of the night. Throughout the day when the sun was out, or lights were on he felt normal. It wasn't until things grew dark that he felt as though he wasn't the only one in a room when he was alone. Inside of his room was the worst, especially when he tried to sleep.

As Travis would lay in his bed, he felt as though any part of the room with a shadow in it would have someone lurking in it, watching him. On several instances he could have sworn he had seen movement within the shadows. Images running from the darkness into another dark area of the room. He could hear footsteps that matched the images he saw running. It had gotten to the point where he had to jump up from his bed, turn on the lights and look all around his room to make sure there hadn't been anyone there.

The idea that the shadows had eyes would have kept Travis up at night if it hadn't been for the pills. He was taking them regularly as he should, but there were times that he wanted to take more to sleep longer. The only thing keeping him from taking more was the doctor's voice as his conscience reminding him not to self-medicate.

It wasn't until one night that Travis actually saw something that he began to panic. He thought he had heard a noise in the kitchen and went to go check what it could have been. The clock that he had forgot to put back on the wall was somehow ticking away from the end of his hallway. Travis hadn't found batteries to replace it and he forgot about it altogether, but he heard it clearly as he did before. It was ticking.

When he left his room to go check, he was greeted by something in the hallway. He couldn't put a name to what he was seeing but it was in the shape of a human but had the stench and sounds of an animal. Travis was struck with fear as he couldn't make out the figure in front of him. He wanted to scream but he was paralyzed with a sensation that he only felt when he was facing the Crimson Door. It was with that thought of the door that the figure's eyes shone a deep red and Travis could tell just how huge the figure was. The hallway was at least eight feet high and he could tell that the figure was hunching over as its eyes looked down on him. As if by instinct, Travis turned on the light switch in the hallway and the figure was gone. There was nothing there except Travis standing with a loss of words. When he went to check the clock, it was hung back up in its original spot on the wall, ticking away as if with new batteries in it. He didn't sleep that night as he sat in the living room making sure that the creature didn't return. The clock still ticking on the wall behind him.

A few days after the event with the creature in the hallway, Travis was hearing noises coming from within and outside of his house. He would get up from his bed to check the sounds and would look outside of his windows. On more than one occasion he thought he saw two people standing out in the front of his lawn watching him. When he would blink his eyes, the people would vanish and with them the sounds he heard. They were cries and laughter all merged into one single monotonous tone reminding him of the doctors and nurses in his nightmare.

Travis couldn't find the source of the noises one night. Frantically pacing about, he checked all windows and even the backyard, but couldn't find anyone or anything making the noise. He opened Riley's door to make sure she was alright, and when he opened it, he saw a shadowy version of his mother and father standing before him. They looked on at him while both

of them pointed their hands towards Riley's bed. Travis watched as the two of them made their cry and then immediately were gone when he flicked on the light to her bed room. Riley didn't wake and it didn't seem as though she had heard the same sounds that Travis was hearing.

It was clear to Travis that whatever was happening was only happening in the shadows. That's when he recalled the dream he had with L when he first entered The Crimson Door. She had given birth to an empty shell and screamed about how it wasn't her baby. Then he remembered the way her body was overtaken by the black mist that expelled from her body. He wondered if the shadow that chased him out of the hospital room had something to do with what he was seeing. It couldn't have been a coincidence and it couldn't have just been his mind tricking him. He knew what he had seen, and he knew that it was real. The feeling of his world turning upside down with his final thought of the night made him panic. If it was real, he wasn't in control of what was happening. What he didn't like most about everything was how above all else, the images of his parents were pointing towards Riley.

Panda had woken up Travis one night to the sounds of her growling by his bed. She didn't bark but the growls were loud enough to wake him from the sleep he was under. He was deep into his sleep and was unaware of the two red eyes staring at him on the other side of his bed. Panda continued to growl and show her fangs until Travis managed to turn around and see the figure towering over him. Travis thought he had been dreaming but it wasn't until the figure was face to face with Travis that he knew the image was really right in front of him. Panda leapt from the bed and her body went straight through the ghostly image. All she could do was continue to growl as Travis and the figure locked eyes.

Travis could hear a voice resonating from within the stomach of the figure. The shadow didn't speak but it was as if Travis could hear the voice coming from within his own head. As

Travis tried to make out what the voice was saying the shadow transformed into his parents which again, pointed in the direction of Riley's room. Then, as quickly as they came, the shadow reshaped itself into an image of the doctors and nurses from the hospital room. A moment later the image transformed itself into a silhouette of L. It was just an outline of her body, but there was no mistaking the shape was of L. As Travis was able to see the shape of L, he finally heard a voice bellow from the darkness. The voice faded in and out of different tones and cadences, but the words were clear, "Bring me my daughter."

10

Things at the house started to get all too bizarre and frightful for Travis. In fear that there was some sort of malevolent force within his house, he wanted to leave before something else happened. The voice that spoke to Travis nights before had shook Travis to the point that he was already ready to leave the house and stay in a hotel for a few nights. He hadn't wanted to alarm Riley and he remembered something he had mentioned to her weeks before. He had already put into Riley's head the possibility of going to his father's cabin, so when he woke her up in the morning and surprised her with the idea once more, she jumped at the thought.

“Really? We can really go?” Riley looked at her dad from her bed as she instantly went from sleepy to hyper. Riley wriggled in excitement before asking, “What about Rosa?”

“I’m not sure what she has going on, but we can see if she can go with us.” Travis looked at her dresser and said, “Make sure you start packing your stuff. I’ll give Rosa a call. Hopefully I can catch her before she gets here, and we can see about leaving as soon as today.” Travis knew he was sounding slightly anxious, but he didn’t want to spend another moment in his house. Whatever was there lurking at night wanted Riley and he didn’t want to risk anything happening to her. It was his job to protect her and he couldn’t help but feel it was his fault that there had been anything in the house in the first place.

Luckily Travis had managed to get Rosa on the phone before she drove over to their house. “*¿En serio?*” Rosa couldn’t believe what she was hearing and thought Travis might have been playing a joke on her.

“Yeah, I wanted to get out of here as soon as possible so we can hopefully get there before dark.” Travis was speeding through his words and tried to calm himself down.

“*Pues, creo que puedo. No mas* give me a few hours to get my things.” Rosa hung up the phone and Travis started to gather his things.

Everything was happening so fast and it was a surprise to him how easy he was able to put everything together when he put his mind to it. As Travis was packing all of his things, Riley came into his room.

“Dad, we are taking Panda, right?” Travis nodded his head without saying a word and continued to put everything he could stuff into a large backpack. “Yay! I’ll go tell her!”

When Riley left the room, Travis remembered Dr. Latimer. He didn’t know whether or not he should tell her about his plans to travel. They hadn’t spoke in weeks and he was afraid of

having a conversation with her that he didn't want to face. He remembered from one of their first sessions that she had told him until he was no longer scheduled with her that he needed to tell her if he was making vacation plans. He thought it was a little intrusive, but he knew it was for his own good. At the end of the day she was still his doctor and he felt obliged to tell her despite what had happened between the two of them.

He sucked up his pride and fears and ended up dialing Dr. Latimer. The line was ringing, and he wondered what he was going to say when she answered.

“Hi, this is Dr. Latimer, if you would please leave your message, I'll get back to you as soon as possible. Thank you!” The voicemail beeped and Travis hesitated before he spoke.

“Hey, uh, Doc. Long time no talk. Gross, I rhymed. Bleh. Anyways, so me and the family are going to take a quick trip up to my father's cabin. I just wanted to give you a heads up in case for some reason you needed me. I don't know how good service will be up there, but I'll text you the address just in case you need to mail me a new prescription order or something. Anyways, sorry I haven't been to our last couple of sessions, I hope you understand.” Travis took a second hoping the voicemail could somehow forgive him. “Anyways, I'll talk to you later. Thanks for everything, Doc.”

Travis hung up the phone and texted the doctor the address. He watched as his message sent and then proceeded to finish packing his things. Looking into Riley's room he could see her scrambling to put away her things in her own backpack. Panda sat in the hallway watching the both of them as they scurried. Travis started to slow down to make sure they were taking everything they needed. Once he realized they still had to wait for Rosa he slowed ever more, double and triple checking that everything in the house was good before they left. His mind was

clear about leaving the house and all he could think about was how long it had been since he visited his old stomping grounds.

The Cabin

*Love is the joy of the good,
the wonder of the wise,
the amazement of the Gods.
-Plato*

1

Dr. Latimer had been with another client when she received Travis's voicemail. After their session ended, she gathered her belongings and turned out the lights to the office so she could begin her lunch break. As she locked the office door, her phone notified her of the voicemail. She rushed to the parking lot and got in her car, putting her phone on speaker as the

message began to play. At first, she thought nothing of it and started her drive, but when Travis began to tell of his trip, the doctor almost swerved off the road onto the other side of traffic as car horns blared in her direction.

The doctor brought her car to a screeching stop, taking a moment to breathe and regain her composure as her body trembled from what just happened. She tried dialing Travis's number but couldn't get through. She looked at the timestamp on the voicemail and realized Travis and his family must have already been deep into the mountains by then. Still she tried to get a hold of him but failed again and again.

The doctor put her phone down, thinking of another way to contact him as she rubbed her arm, wincing in pain. She lifted up her sleeve and looked down at a large scratch that had gone down the entirety of her arm, remembering the events that had unfolded the night before. Dr. Latimer shifted the car back into drive and sped home.

She pulled up to her house at an alarming speed barely stopping short of running the car into the garage. She ran inside and headed straight for the bathroom. Flicking on the lights to her bathroom she examined her cut in the mirror. The pain was unbearable, so she threw some cold water on the abrasion to numb the burning. The doctor took a towel and carefully patted her wound dry, before reaching down below her sink to retrieve some gauze and disinfectant.

Dr. Latimer had hoped during the time she headed home and worked on her arm, that she would have gotten a response from Travis. She pulled out her phone to check once more, but there was nothing. Looking up at the mirror, Dr. Latimer took a long hard look at herself. There were bags developing under her eyes and her complexion was getting worse, even with makeup. She wondered if that was how Travis felt when he would have his nightmares. Ever since

helping Travis open The Crimson Door, she too had a dream, and since that dream, she had felt strange... as though someone was watching her, or someone was trying to harm her.

2

Dr. Latimer had found herself in the white room that Travis had told her about. While in the white room, she could see that everything had been the same as Travis had described. The

light all around her was so bright she felt as though was staring into the sun. Shielding her eyes, she started to make her way down the hallway. As she walked, she anxiously awaited to be struck by the same vines that had cut Travis, but there were none. Lifting up her head, she could see a door at the end of the hallway.

The door was getting more apparent the further down the hallway she went, but she didn't find herself feeling the same opposing force as before. She anticipated pain and fear, but there was none to be found.

A couple yards later, she found herself facing the door. It stood in front of her with its wood cracking as though it was deteriorating right before her eyes. Without hesitating, she reached out to touch the black handle in front of her, carefully pushing the door with ease.

Behind the door revealed a darkened paradise. The doctor stood in the doorway wondering whether or not to enter. It wasn't until she heard a girl's cry for help that she ran inside.

Running fearlessly into the dark abyss before her, Dr. Latimer could hear the voice getting louder and closer. The doctor ran faster and faster, doing her best to get closer to the voice that called out to her. Running through the darkness, she became disoriented. The doctor stopped to look around her new surroundings, trying to get a better sense of direction, and to make sure the white room was still visible behind her. Though it was hard to make out in the distance, it was still there shining on the horizon.

Dr. Latimer continued to maneuver throughout the darkness, with the voice finally drawing near. A little way before her, she could see a hazy glow. The doctor held her hand out to touch the mysterious haze and suddenly found herself in a house. Shadows took over the house, but she was able to see the kitchen, the living room, and all of the furniture and appliances that

adorned it. She could hear the enigmatic voice much clearer and started to walk down a hallway that led to a room from where the voice echoed.

When she arrived at the room, the screams from behind the door stopped. Dr. Latimer twisted the doorknob and walked inside the room where a little girl was laying down sound asleep in her bed. The doctor got closer to the child, who seemed unbothered by her presence, and she wondered where the cries had come from.

Dr. Latimer turned to see a large man standing in the doorway of the little girl's room. Startled by his sudden appearance, her fear vanquished when she realized who it was: Travis. Dr. Latimer reached out to touch his shoulder, but her hand made the image of him disappear. For a moment, Dr. Latimer had forgotten she was in a dream.

The doctor directed her attention back to the little girl in the bed, wondering if the girl was Travis's daughter. As she turned around, she saw two bright red eyes staring over her in the shadows of the room. Gasping at the ghastly sight, she stumbled backwards before she finally managed to turn around and run out of the room.

The doctor darted out of the house, searching in the emptiness for the white room. Her heavy panting and gasps for breath were all she could hear as she struggled to figure out where to go. She didn't know north from south; and couldn't even see her hand in front of her face. Her sides began to cramp the faster she ran, making breathing difficult. But she couldn't stop. Not now. A low roar rang through the darkness, but she didn't dare look back.

With her feet growing heavy, and with every breath a struggle, Dr. Latimer's pace began to slow. She feared she would never make it out, and the being with the red eyes would take her. She pushed through with all her might as the growls drew near, and finally, there in the furthest distance of the void, was a spec of white.

The doctor mustered all her strength and energy to finally reach the end of the nightmare. As she stumbled closer the white room, Dr. Latimer felt something grab a hold of her. She fought off the painful grip with the last of her might and shook it off and fell into the white room, its brightness warding off the beast as it shrieked in defeat. The doctor reached for The Crimson Door but as she pushed against the door to close it, she felt the familiar invisible force fighting against her. She pressed her body against the door, and from the crack she could see two red eyes looking back at her.

A sinister voice spoke as she continued to try and shut the door, “Bring me the girl!” The walls of the white room shook from the intensity of the otherworldly voice that frightened Dr. Latimer. She continued to shove the door until it was only an inch from closing, when suddenly, she felt a scratch strew across her arm that came from the other side of the door. Her arm bled onto the stark white floor and she couldn’t hold onto the door any longer with the pulsating pain. The door flung open, sending the doctor onto her back. The startling red eyes looked at her from the darkness as the beast slowly made its way into the light, making any piece of the white room fade in its shadows. Dr. Latimer got up and did the only thing she could think of, run. As she ran, the beast continued to get closer to her. When she looked around, she could see that a string of vines were shooting out of the walls, slowing the beast in its track. With every step the doctor took, thorns appeared behind her, creating a barrier between her and the red-eyed monster.

When Dr. Latimer finally reached the end of the white room, she turned around to look at the monster closing in on her. She shut her eyes and waited for her fate to be sealed.

“It’s just a dream, it’s just a dream,” she repeated to herself as she tried to awake from her hypnotic state. When she opened her eyes, Dr. Latimer was staring up at her ceiling, back in the safety of her home. Her heart was racing as she jumped out of bed and searched her house to

make sure that she was by herself. She lifted up her sleeve and saw the fresh cut on her arm. It wasn't a dream. Whatever that being was, it was begging for the girl... Riley.

The drive to the cabin was always exciting to Travis; there was so much to see along the way that the drive itself felt like a separate vacation altogether. Although he hadn't taken the trip in several years, the landscape still felt the same, and a surge of comforting familiarity washed over him.

At the base of the mountain, Travis stopped to get gas. He went inside to pay and looked around the store for any last-minute items they might have needed. He took his time walking the aisles and remembered being a little boy with his dad, wandering around the same store. He gathered a few snacks and drinks before getting in line to pay. He looked to the truck to see if Riley and Rosa were okay. From where he was, there seemed to be something in the bed of the truck. It couldn't have been Panda because she was inside the truck with Rosa and Riley. Travis got closer to the exit not realizing the clerk had been asking if he needed help, but he ignored the clerk's questions as he continued to focus outside. He couldn't grasp what he was seeing. It looked like a person with its head pressed against the back window, directly behind where Riley was sitting. Travis left his items at the counter and quickly ran outside to get rid of whoever -or whatever- had hopped into the back.

When Travis got to the bed of the truck, there was no one. He looked around for any signs of the intruder, but there was nothing. No footprints, no tracks, nothing. He thought that possibly their luggage had propped up to make the shape of a head against the window, but all the bags laid flat in the bed.

The back door opened, and Riley popped her head out. "Dad? Everything alright?"

Travis looked at her and then to Rosa who was looking at him with a face full of worry and confusion. He nodded his head, embarrassed by his actions, and went back inside to pay for the gas and items left at the counter.

Travis sped away from the gas station, kicking up a cloud of dust behind them. Once more he felt as though something was behind them, watching as they drove. He kept checking his rearview mirror, only to see Riley smiling back at him. But as the cloud of dust settled, Travis thought he once more saw the shape of someone standing in the road looking at them.

Suddenly Travis felt indifferent about the trip. He had wanted to bring Riley here to escape the sense of dread and being watched, and yet it still seemed to follow him. The heavy stone in his stomach was hard to ignore, but he did his best to ignore his feelings and make the best of the situation.

Driving up the mountain, Travis lowered the windows to let in the fresh pine air as they all inhaled at once, exhaling in bliss. Travis started to cough, and Rosa and Riley laughed at him.

“Not used to this eh, Mr. Travis?” Rosa snickered as she continued to waft the air in her face as though she was sampling perfume.

Travis noticed Panda was enjoying the new sights and smells as well. Her head was hanging out of the window as her ears and tongue flopped in the wind. Travis looked at the side mirror and laughed looking at all the slobber flying off out of Panda’s mouth, raining down on the cars behind them.

Riley was smiling and Travis could tell she was enjoying herself. One of the biggest parts of the trip that he liked the most was knowing that they were closing in on a huge tunnel. It was the part of the trip that made him feel as though they were finally entering their vacation destination. The tunnel was long and dark enough that he needed to turn on the lights.

“Can we honk dad!? Can we!?” Riley propped herself up in her chair to get a better view of the tunnel in front of them.

The sunny sky vanished as they entered the tunnel. Just as Riley asked, Travis started to honk the horn in a rhythical pattern, *dun dundundun dun, dun, dun*. They could hear the car opposite them doing the same honking sound as they flashed their lights to the tune.

Riley cheered happily and Panda started to wail making the sounds of the tunnel echo back and forth. Rosa covered her ears and lowered herself further into the seat despite the light at the end of the tunnel growing bigger. Travis had to rub his eyes as the other car's brights had caused him to wince at the light. When he finished rubbing his eyes, he thought the light at the end of the tunnel had somehow been red. The image quickly faded once he rubbed his eyes once more.

As they exited the tunnel, there was a lookout where they parked the truck to get a better look at the canyon across from the mountains. Travis and Riley got down while Rosa stayed inside the truck. Straight down below there was a steep drop that led down into the canyon where several people were hiking. On the other side of the road, there was a small waterfall where a few people with climbing gear were rappelling. Riley stood next to Travis looking at the water, the climbers, and the hikers, all in wonder and amazement. He put his arm around her and pulled her close for a hug.

"I want to show you something. Follow me, but stay close, and don't let go of my hand," Travis said as he held onto her hand tightly while they made their way down to the ledge from the parking lot. Below them was a narrow but walkable path that led to a smaller ledge with a tree protruding out of the side of the mountain. Slowly they made their way down the path and wound up at the base of the ledge. There was open land as far as their eyes could see. The only thing keeping them from tumbling down to the bottom of the canyon was the tree holding the ledge in place.

“Dad, are you sure this is safe?” Riley asked as she continued to hold tight onto Travis.

“Yes Riley, it’s safe. Me and my dad used to always make a quick pit stop here before leaving to the cabins. What do you think?” Travis looked at her as she nervously gazed around her. “It’s okay Riley, you’re safe. I won’t let anything happen to you.” Travis pulled her close so he could show her why they had made the descent. On a part of the tree where the bark was starting to decay and crumble away, there were several names carved into it.

Riley started to get closer to the tree while still holding onto her father for dear life. “Is that your name?”

“Yup and grandpa’s is right there.” Travis pointed to another spot adjacent to where his own name was. Then, he reached for his pocket knife and opened it up for Riley. “It’s only right that you put your name next.”

Riley looked at Travis wondering whether it was okay to grab the knife or not. A few moments of hesitation later, she grabbed the knife and looked at it to figure out which was the best way to hold it. After getting a good grip of it, she got closer to the tree where she found a piece of bark that was falling off. With her little fingers she wedged them between the bark and pulled it off to reveal a fresh spot untainted by anyone else’s name. Knife in hand, she slowly carved the letters R-I-L-E-Y into the tree. After finishing her name, she brushed the tree with her hand to get rid of the splinters of wood that had gathered and gave Travis back the knife. He patted the top of her head with a sense of accomplishment and pride.

Panda started to bark from the truck, Travis turned to Riley, held her hand again and said, “I think it’s time to go.”

Continuing the drive, they made it to town about half an hour away from the tunnel. The entrance of town came up suddenly and they were greeted by a large banner that extended across

the road from two large trees. The sign read, 'The Greatest Place on Earth' as they passed underneath it. The town was small but there were several places that kept the tourists busy like antique shops, book stores, bars and restaurants that all seemed to have the same type of vibe but attracted the non-locals either way.

As they drove passed the gas station that L and Travis had passed years before, he felt a sense of nostalgia, but also a sense of grief noticing that nothing about the store had changed. As they drove by it, he looked in the rearview mirror to catch one final glimpse before heading towards the cabins. When he did, he noticed something that looked like a white trash bag flowing in the wind. The longer he looked, the more he realized it hadn't been a trash bag at all, but a dress. A wedding dress.

Travis shook his head in disbelief, and the dress vanished. As he drove on, he tried to remember when he last took his medication. He knew he hadn't been taking more than the required dose, but he couldn't help but question the length of its effectiveness. If he had taken the pills late at night, then it was possible he was just having side effects. It was something he kept trying to reiterate to himself, but the more he argued in his head, the more he felt that wasn't a possibility.

Travis was greeted at the front gates of the cabins by an elderly woman maintaining the entrance. She had on a little yellow reflective jacket and was wearing a sun visor even though there wasn't any sun hitting her. The booth still looked the same as it did so many years ago. Travis asked for the keys to the Bingleman residence, pulling out his driver's license to show her, and with a smile she said, "Welcome back, Mr. Bingleman."

Travis took the keys, thanking the lady, and then proceeded through the gates. Looking at Rosa, Travis could tell she had something on her mind.

“What?”

“Don’t think because these people knew your father that you’re all *chingon* now or something *guey!*” Rosa sneered. The two of them laughed as Riley looked at them in confusion, not knowing what they were talking about.

There were countless trees spread about the cabins’ estate and both Riley and Panda had their heads out of the window looking up in amazement at all of the endless pine towering above them. The sounds of the creek ran the same, all the cabins still were adorned with their wooden bears and windchimes. Travis pointed to different parts of the camp like a tour guide, showing Riley each part of the camp where he used to roam.

“You see that broken gate over there next to the main offices?” Travis started to slow down the truck so Riley could get a better look.

“Yeah.” Riley poked her head further out of the window.

“Well one time, your grandpa and I came down here to get some of the money from the tenants and I had gotten bored of sitting in his car. So, I got out one day while he was gathering up the money and started to climb on the gate,” Travis was trying to hold back the chuckles. “I thought it’d be a good idea to climb the gate and try and balance on the top plank. Don’t ask me why I did it, I was just young and dumb, I guess.”

“And then what happened?” Riley was looking more interested as she waited to hear the rest of the story.

“Well, your grandpa caught me climbing on top of it and scared me when he told me to get off. So, I did what he said, and I pushed off the top plank with all my might to jump off. But,

when I did, the entire board snapped in two and I went crashing down to the ground. All grandpa said was, ‘Maybe you’ll learn’ and watched as I dusted myself off.” Riley started to laugh, and Travis slapped the side of the truck in his own laughter. “He told me that he wasn’t going to fix it and that I needed to take care of it. I never did though, as you can see.”

They continued to drive through the lot and eventually came up to the gate separating them from their cabin. Travis got out of the truck and used one of the keys from the key ring to open up the lock. He could see Riley perking up in the back seat trying to see what he was doing. He first unlocked then gate, then got back into the truck, drove through the gate, got back down, locked the gate, got back in his truck and proceeded to drive through the clearing. The journey from the gate towards the darkness of the woods in front of them let Travis know that two things were happening: they were one step closer towards the cabins and they were one step closer towards the memories.

After a few sharp turns and some steep inclines, they had found their way there. The cabin had a ray of light hitting it as though sun placed a spotlight over it. Travis turned into the driveway and looked at Rosa and Riley who were ready waiting to get out. “We’re here!” he exclaimed. The four of them got out of the truck and headed straight towards the stairs that lead to the front door.

“You need some help there, Rosa?” Travis asked, offering his hand.

“I’m not that old yet *pendejo!*” She pushed his hand away, grunting and groaning in pain.

He let her and Riley head up the stairs first before he opened the door so they could explore inside. As he opened the door, a familiar musty smell came from inside. It was the same smell that used to hit Travis in the face every time they opened the cabin after a long period of time. Hearing Riley’s yells and gasps at the cabin made him feel as though the whole trip was

worth it. He went for the bags in the back of the truck and started unloading everything into the living room.

“Riley, let Panda outside in the back. She might have to pee after the drive, and I don’t want her peeing all over the floors.”

“But won’t she run away?” Riley hesitated before opening the door as Panda wiggled about

“She’ll be fine. She knows where we’re at. Let her explore.” Travis left the porch and continued to bring in bag after bag. He piled them on the couch and watched as Rosa started to take things into the separate bedrooms.

With the truck now empty, all there was left to do was clean up the dust that had gathered on every inch of the cabin. Travis opened up some of the windows and called Riley to help him. She had been busy venturing into every single part of the cabin and managed to find a broom and a dustpan in one of the closets.

After Rosa had finished putting the bags away, they got started cleaning. It was one of Travis’s least favorite part of going up to the cabins but from the look on Riley’s face, she didn’t seem to care. Everything was new for her and even cleaning had become more fun than a chore for her. Rosa on the other hand was growing tired of the cleaning quickly. She ended up retiring to the couch after a few hours while Riley and Travis continued to pick up the bedrooms and the bathrooms as quickly and as best they could.

“I promise tomorrow will be more fun than it was today.” Travis looked at Riley in hopes that she knew he had meant it.

“I had fun,” Riley admitted while throwing away paper towels like basketballs into the trashcan.

Travis went back to the master bedroom which he had been cleaning the most to make the space livable and to make it his own, so it wouldn't be weird having to sleep in his parents' bed. The thoughts of what they must have done in that room started to circle in his head and it was making him ill.

From inside, Travis could hear Panda barking. He hadn't realized how late it had gotten- the sun was nearly gone and the shadows cascading down from the mountains made the area look much darker than what it should have been. He figured Panda was done exploring and ready to come inside. Travis left the room and went through the kitchen to open the back door. Rather than running, Panda continued to bark out into the woods at seemingly nothing.

"Hey, chill out! Come inside!" Travis shouted trying to get her to hear him over her constant barks.

Panda continued her cries until finally Travis had heard what she was barking at. In the back of the cabins was a small storage shed in which a constant tapping was coming from, the alone noise made Travis's skin crawl.

"It's probably just the wind girl. Let's go inside," Travis said trying to convince the both of them. "Well, let's go check it out, ya big scardy cat." Travis changed his mind immediately noticing Panda's frightful eyes. Panda slowly followed him as the two of them made their way closer to the shed. The sound was constant, as though someone was knocking from within the shed. The tapping grew louder with every step they took. Travis became hesitant to open the doors, wondering what or could be lurking inside. Panda growled softly, leaving Travis to think of the person he had thought he had seen in the back of the truck, as well as the dress, and the entity with the red eyes. Before he could think of another boogeyman, he pulled the door open.

As quickly as he opened it, he was struck in the face. Travis let out a yelp as punched the air before realizing it was fishing pole. It had been swaying back and forth with the breeze, knocking on the wall. He let out an embarrassed laugh as he looked for the light switch. When the light came on, he saw that his rod was lying on the floor.

Travis picked up the two rods and looked at them in the light, noticing they were still in pristine condition. He placed them on against the wall and walked into the shed to look around. There was a tackle box on the workbench filled with bait, lures and hooks; everything needed for a fantastic finishing trip. Excitedly, he ran back to the cabin with Panda at his side and showed Riley the fishing poles.

“What say we take a little trip down to the lake tomorrow?”

“Really? We can go fishing?” Riley shouted as she dropped her broom on the floor to hold the smaller fishing rod. “Is this yours?”

“It used to be, it can be yours now if you want it. I’ll use grandpa’s since it’s bigger.” Riley continued to look at the rod and pretended to cast it inside of the house.

“Rosa, would you like to go?” Travis asked as Riley started to look through the tackle box.

Rosa nodded and shot him a brief smile, moments later she gave a huge yawn that caught on with Riley and Travis. The three of them sat down on the sectional and relaxed. Although it wasn’t so cold, Travis quickly got up from the couch and went to start the fire in the fireplace. There were a few logs of wood left by the chimney, so he grabbed them, wrapped them in the paper towels that they had thrown away and turned them on with the box of matches that waited on the mantle. The fire immediately roared, and Travis made his way back to the couch where Riley was already resting her head on Rosa’s lap.

Travis sat down opposite Rosa and Riley and slunk down into the couch. After all these years it had still retained its comfort and he loved the feel of it.

“You’re doing alright for yourself Mr. Travis,” Rosa said just as he had closed his eyes and put his head back.

“What’s that?”

“I said, you’re doing good. This trip means a lot to Riley and I can tell you’re putting the effort.” Rosa explained as she continued to stroke Riley’s hair. Slowly, Rosa’s eyes grew heavy and she rested her head on the cozy headrest of the couch.

With the warmth of the fire surrounding them, Rosa, Riley, and Panda fell asleep on the couch. Travis watched everyone sleep, taking a few quiet moments for himself. He welcomed the needed rest, slowly closing his eyes as he felt his body become weightless as it entered the dream world. But there was something off; Travis could feel the dream taking shape even though he had barely closed his eyes. He tried to tell himself to wake up and get control of everything, but he couldn’t. The only thing he could do was fall deeper into the sleep.

“Come on Travis, wake up. Wake up!” he told himself. When Travis finally managed to open his eyes, he woke up knowing he was still dreaming. Travis was in the cabin but there was no one around. The fire was still going, and everything was just as clean, but everyone was gone. Everyone except for Panda, who was by the fire watching him. “What are you doing here girl?” Travis reached out to touch Panda and sure enough she was somehow there with him. She licked his hand and continued to stay by him.

Travis feared that Rosa and Riley had gone missing. He got up from the couch, looking around the cabin to see if he could find them, but they weren’t in any of the rooms. He went to

kitchen to check the back area of the woods where the shed was, but before he could exit, that's when he saw The Crimson Door.

Just as he was about to turn away from the door, hoping it would fade back into its own manifestation, he heard a loud scream coming from outside. Fearing the screams were from Rosa or Riley, Travis ran through the door and exited the other side where he entered the same woods as before, but the shouting continued. Although he tried to tell himself not to continue forward, he pushed on with Panda to follow.

Trekking further into the forest, Travis could feel eyes on him. From one corner of the woods, he could see shadows floating in the air like black clouds of smog hovering over the fallen pine needles. On his other side, he could hear twigs breaking and strange animal noises. His mind started to wonder about wolves, bears, and mountain lions parading around waiting to strike both Panda and him at any moment. Travis knew it better to keep moving than to be still, so he motioned for Panda to keep walking.

Breaking through the eeriness of the woods came a sudden shrieking behind Travis that made him stop his pace. He checked on Panda, ensuring she hadn't hurt herself, or been attacked by anything but she was fine, looking at him confused as to why he stopped their walk. When he turned back around to continue forward, he was stopped by what stood before him.

“Son.” A voice spoke from the obscurity of the woods.

“Our son.” Another faint voice added.

Travis heard the words coming from the voice's mouths, but his eyes refused to believe what they saw. “Dad? Mom?” Travis spoke as Panda took a seat right next to him, watching him talk to the darkness.

It was then that the two voices appeared in the little light that the night provided. Travis's mom and dad stood before him, looking as young as they did when he was a child instead of the shadows that had terrorized him a few nights ago. He took a step towards them but before he could embrace them, they spoke again, in sync with one another in a harmonious chorus.

“Son. We have missed you.”

“I've missed you too,” Travis said as tears started to roll down his face. He wiped them away and tried to stop his weeping.

“We need to tell you something,” They said as he waited. “We—We—We—,” and their voices stopped abruptly without any kind of warning.

“You what? Mom, Dad, you what? What do you have to tell me?” Travis looked at them standing before him nearly frozen.

“We—We—We—,” they continued struggling to get the words out. Travis continued to look at them while Panda rose from her seated position and hid behind Travis. Her soft growls turned into aggressive barks.

“What's the matter girl? It's okay.” Travis tried to calm her down, but Panda continued to whine and bark as she would peek around Travis to see what was happening on the other side of him. As he tried to console her, he heard something like squelching mud.

Travis looked to his parents and saw that their flesh was melting off their bodies like liquid cheese running onto the floor. “Dad! Mom!” he shouted hoping for the image to stop. Their voices continued to struggle while plops of meat fell from their waists and arms, leaving a pile of fat, blood and skin on the floor of the forest. Travis reached out for them hoping that his touch would get their pain to stop, but they both reached out for him before he could touch them.

Grabbing his shoulder with such intensity, he felt a heat coming from their hands that he couldn't believe. "We—We—We—are so ashamed of you son." The words, now clear as day, hit Travis with such a pain that he forgot about the pain in his shoulder. "You've brought nothing but shame to our family and now you bring it to your daughter."

Travis tried squirming out of their grip, but they latched on tighter as their flesh continued its recession. Their guts hung from the gashes on their bellies as the scent of decay made its way into Travis's nose.

"Stay with us, and you will see how to make things better. Stay with us and pay for your ways," they continued to say.

"You're not my parents. Let me go! Leave me the hell alone!" Travis shouted prying their hands from his shoulders, gory flesh coating his hand. The shock of the sight sent him tumbling to the floor.

The decaying bodies withered down to skeletal remains as they began to reach out for Travis, but before they could take hold of him once more, they collapsed into dust that rose above him. The cloud of remains manifested into a silhouette. L.

"Give me our daughter!" the shadow demanded in a low, malevolent voice.

"No! You're not L!" Travis shouted trying to lift himself up from the ground. "You're not my wife!"

Travis managed to lift himself from the ground and darted back towards the cabin. He stopped suddenly once he realized that Panda still laid at the feet of the shadow. His gut told him to leave her, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He struggled to lift her, and when he got up, he saw L's face. The silhouette was uncanny, but it was the blood red eyes that let Travis know

he wasn't supposed to be there. With Panda in his arms, he ran straight for the cabin nearly missing the grips of the shadow.

“Come back!” The shadow yelled with a shrieking cry.

Travis continued to run in fear of what was behind him, and all he could hear was the voice taunting him.

“You set me free! You did this! Now I want the girl! I want to be a family again!” The voice shouted as the mighty branches above him began to break off, crashing near Travis. He leapt over the debris, struggling to keep his footing with the heavy dog still in his arms.

His mind was focused on getting to the cabin, but he couldn't help but wonder what the shadow meant by everything it was saying. How did he create it? How was it his fault? He couldn't have created any of this, it was all just a dream.

Travis could see the porchlight of the cabin drawing near. He knew he could run faster without the extra weight, and with the dark shadow closing in on them, the choice was easy. He tossed Panda on the ground, her body wiggling back into an upright position as she began to sprint alongside Travis. The two reached the backdoor and after ensuring they were both inside, he threw himself against The Crimson Door, hoping to close it before the shadow could reach the house, but he couldn't. It was too late. The apparition barged through every crevice and every window, consuming everything within the cabin as Travis begged for everything to stop.

Travis awoke, screaming, as he watched Riley and Rosa trying to pry him awake from the catatonic state he had fallen into. He tried to stop his cries and his heavy breathing but couldn't. He had somehow gotten stuck between the dream and reality. Riley looked terrified as Rosa tried to lift him from the couch, but he was solid, stuck to the couch like concrete. His eyes watered as he couldn't close them. The look on Riley and Rosa's faces made him worry as to

how frightened they had become. He managed to move my eyes slightly and realized L's shadow was in the room. It was only inches away from Riley.

"N-n-n," Travis stuttered, trying to speak.

"What is it dad? Wake up please!" Riley shouted while shaking Travis.

The shadow got closer, nearly touching Riley on the shoulder. It looked at Riley up and down, examining her like some kind of zoo animal behind the glass wanting to break through.

"A daughter needs her mother," the voice spoke, but only Travis could hear it.

"No!" Travis shouted leaping off the sofa, falling to the floor.

"Dad!"

"Mr. Travis!"

Travis got up from the floor quickly and looked around the room checking for any sign of the shadow. "Did you see that?" Travis asked as he search every bedroom.

"See what?" Riley asked with tears welling in her eyes out of fright and confusion at the sight of her father going berserk.

"Mr. Travis, you're scaring Riley. What's going on? Tell us!" Rosa consoled Riley who was now fully sobbing in Rosa's arms.

"You're telling me you didn't just see that? How couldn't you?" Travis yelled, his voice rang through the silent cabin.

He stopped for a second realizing that his actions on the sofa, along with his frantic running around, wasn't doing anyone any good. Slouching towards the floor he reached for Riley and held her in his arms. "Sorry, honey. I'm so sorry. Daddy had a nightmare that's it. Dad just had a bad dream." Travis continued to look around the room holding onto Riley as tightly as he could. Rosa looked at him nervously. "Let me go lay you down in your bed. Everything is fine,

honey. I'm sorry I scared you." Riley's crying eased as Travis lifted her and carried her into her room. Tucking her into bed, he kissed her on her forehead, handing her Piggy Smalls as she drifted off into sniffling slumber.

Travis retreated back into the living room where Rosa was waiting for him. "*¿Que chingao paso?*"

Travis sat on the sectional rubbing his temples trying to regain his thoughts, ignoring Rosa's harsh words as she continued to scold him in Spanish. Taking in a deep breath, Travis did his best to explain everything that was going on. She sat down in disbelief as he told her about the dreams, and the nightmares. He told her about the medication that he was taking and how he had opened The Crimson Door with the doctor. He described how the shadow was behind the door, and how it was waiting for him in the hospital when L delivered Riley in his dream. Travis believed that the shadow was some sort of malicious spirit that wanted Riley.

Rosa sat there dumbfounded at all the information Travis was dumping on her before she shook her head and pointed to him, "You need to stop taking that *pinche* medicine, it's messing with your head!"

"I've been having weird dreams and I've been seeing things that aren't there. It doesn't make sense, but you're right. That medicine did something to me." Travis stopped speaking for a moment wondering if it had been the medicine or if it was something else.

"*¿Es posible?* Is it possible that it could be real? In my family we have experienced several things that we can't explain too. Seeing ghosts, hearing your dead *familia's* voice when you're sleeping, *todo!* One time I thought I saw my *comadre* making *tameles* for Christmas late at night when everyone was sleeping. Everyone thought I was crazy, but I knew what I saw. I'm not saying you're crazy Mr. Travis, all I'm saying is that be careful with stuff that you don't

understand.” Rosa lifted herself up from the couch. “There are things in this world that we don’t have control over and things that we can’t even begin to comprehend. *¿Me entiendes?*”

She left to her room and Travis sat there thinking about what she said. He couldn’t make sense how any of what was happening to him was possible. He wanted to call the doctor. He needed to call the doctor. When he looked down at his phone, he saw that he had no service. He decided to go to the porch and sit for a while, hoping the crisp air would clear his mind.

4

Dr. Latimer made the decision to find Travis. It wasn’t an easy choice considering what she had seen in her nightmare. She and Travis had been connected, somehow, by his dream and she felt partially responsible for releasing what was behind the door that wanted Riley. Using the address that Travis had sent her, Dr. Latimer packed a quick bag of necessities for the road. She put the address in her phone’s GPS and started for the uncertain journey ahead.

The doctor worried if she might have been overreacting about the whole situation. She’d seen things that she couldn’t comprehend, and she had felt in her heart that everything was happening to her for a reason. With all this in mind, she couldn’t help but wonder if she was

falling into some sort of web that Travis had spun for her. She also wondered about the injury to her arm. She couldn't explain that, no matter how much she tried to think of a reason. She'd witnessed something first hand and knew she had to go with what her gut was telling her, to help Travis.

The road ahead started to curve the closer she got towards the mountains. Up ahead she saw a large tunnel. As she entered, she turned on her high beams and saw something standing right in front of her vehicle. Panicked, she careened her car away from the figure as she narrowly missed an oncoming car. Failing to gain control of her car, Doctor Latimer swerved into the concrete barrier next to the mountain, smashing her car as it slid to a stop against a large boulder.

With the airbag's mighty blow, the doctor fell in and out of consciousness, with shards of glass embedded into her skin. As she slowly awakened, she tried to make sense of what had happened. She looked around to make sure there were no other cars involved and glimpsed into the rearview mirror catching sight of the tunnel. Swaying in the wind was a perfectly white wedding dress.

5

Travis unknowingly dozed off sitting in the patio chair as he felt Rosa touching his shoulder waking him up. Her hands sent an unexplainable pain through his body. He cringed and winced in pain and got up from his seat without saying anything to Rosa. He went inside the cabin to the master bedroom.

In the distance he could hear Rosa, "*¡Pues* good morning to you too *guey!*"

Travis pulled off his shirt to examine his shoulders in the mirror. Both of them were badly bruised, and he remembered the grotesque dream with his parents. He also recalled Rosa's

words, about things in this world that couldn't be explained, and truly this was one of those instances. Travis could hear Riley's footsteps coming into the bathroom and he quickly put his shirt back on to hide the marks from her.

"Are you okay, dad? You really freaked us out last night," she asked, truly worried about his wellbeing.

Travis smiled looking down at her in reassurance, "I'm fine honey. Are you ready for fishing?"

She nodded and the two of them went off to gather the necessities for the trip. It was early but that was the best time to go fishing; on occasion, Travis had seen the fish literally leap out of the water and onto the dirt next to him. Riley and Travis both changed their clothes as Rosa and Panda both sat on the couch eager to leave. Travis grabbed the rods and the tackle box along with some water and snacks before motioning for the door.

The sun was still coming up over the mountains, but the shadowy canopy of trees kept the air chilly. Panda and Riley rushed out of the cabin first, while Rosa defiantly refused Travis's help down the stairs. There were deer in the distance grazing on dewy morning grass, ignoring Panda's playful yaps. Travis whistled for Panda to come back and the four of them began their scenic walk to lake.

The walk to the lake was a quick fifteen-minute commute and only attainable by foot, but had Travis know how much complaining Rosa was going to do along the way, he might not have invited her at all.

"*¡Este pinche calor con este frío es algo mas!* I don't know how you can stand this heat with that wind chill, Mr. Travis. *Es como el diablo esta entro de un pinche igloo!*" Rosa whined the entire way and all Riley and Travis could do was laugh and share their annoyance with her.

Panda trotted along and would sometimes go beyond the group, wandering about the forest high and low in search of new sights and smells. She would dig, leap and run wherever she found space. Every now and then she would get a little further ahead than Riley liked, and she would shout, “Panda! Come back! Dad go get her! She’s going to get hurt!”

“She’s just being a dog. She’ll be fine. She loves you too much to just leave,” Travis said as he smiled at the playful attitude of the dog. He wondered if somehow, she had remembered the dream as well. He had been so wrapped up in his own worries that he hadn’t even check on Panda to see if her attitude had changed.

Panda listened to Riley’s commands and darted back, running across Rosa’s feet causing her to trip slightly. “*Aye!*” She shrieked. “*¡Pinche perra estúpida! ¡Ese maldito perra esta tratando de matarme!* You all are!”

“No one is trying to kill you, you can go back if you want.” Travis smirked as he pointed back to the cabin. Rosa clenched her jaw and dusted off her shoes before continuing her walk in silence. Travis and Riley looked at one another, snickering at what had happened.

After all the trials of the short journey, the group had finally made it to the lake. There was no one in sight and the soft splashes of the fish leaping in and out of the water could be heard. Riley turned to Travis as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Panda darted into the water and started swimming after the fish, killing any surprise advantage Travis and Riley might have had.

Along the bank of the water were several wooden logs that provided plenty of seating. Travis brought a small fold-out chair for Rosa since she had refused to, “sit on the floor.” Propping the chair open, she took a seat as Riley eagerly awaited to see what was coming next.

Travis took a knee next to her, placing the rods and the tackle box down within arm's reach. The hook at the ends of the rods were rusted but thankfully the line was still solid. Travis took out a small knife from the tackle box, cut the hook off the line, stretched out a few feet of new line and cut once more. He grabbed a couple of hooks and showed Riley the proper way of tying it to the line so it wouldn't fall off, and so a sneaky fish couldn't yank it off.

"Seems easy enough," Riley said confidently looking over his shoulder.

Smiling at Riley he looked behind himself and said, "Time for the best part."

He reached into the tackle box and found a packet of fish bait. Remembering that the fish in the water were trout, he put the catfish bait back and reached for a container of salmon eggs. He took an egg, piercing it onto the hook, and making sure there was enough bait to cover the hook. The small egg reminded him of the sleeping pills, but he quickly dismissed the thought when Riley spoke.

"That's it?" Riley said confused.

"That's it, kiddo. Want to give it a try?" She reached for her pole that had the hook already waiting for her. She grabbed some salmon eggs and placed them slowly on the end of the hook and looked back at him to make sure she had done it right.

"Now that all the fun and games are over, it's time to get serious. You can do all that work, but if you don't send a proper cast then it's all for nothing. You need to be able to send your line as far out as possible where all the hungry fish are." Travis pointed towards the middle of the lake.

"How do I do that?" she said holding up her rod.

"Let me show you. This is a good rod for practicing. All you have to do is flick this part right here," he said motioning towards the reel. "Grab the line so it doesn't spin out of control.

Pull it back with the line in your hand. Throw it out as far as you can and release!” Travis sent the line all the way out into the middle of the lake where he had pointed.

Riley looked on in amazement and then looked down at her rod as though it was some kind of alien machinery. Travis could tell she was growing more and more nervous the longer she stood there.

“Listen, you got this. Just believe in yourself.” Travis became sentimental remembering the very same lesson his father had given him so many years ago. His voice echoed with that of his fathers and he smiled a little bit. Riley had worked up the nerves to get closer to the water. She followed his steps and set her hook reeling far out into the lake. Jumping up in excitement he gave her a high five as she continued to look on in astonishment with herself at what she was able to accomplish on her first attempt.

Travis turned to Rosa who gave him a nod of approval as he and Riley sat down on a larger log next to where the two of them had sent out their lines. They sat there quietly for quite some time watching the water and watching their lines for any sudden movement.

“What do we do now?” Riley said looking at the water.

“This is it, kiddo. This is the best part about fishing, the silence and the waiting,” Travis said crossing his legs, trying to get a little bit more comfortable on the log.

The sun was starting to rise about the tree and everyone could hear Panda barking off in the distance as several birds flew high into the air in fear for their lives.

“That dog sure is something else,” Travis jokingly said looking at Riley who had a different kind of look on her face. “Something wrong, honey?”

There was a moment of hesitation in her voice before she let it out, “Dad? Do you sometimes wish I was never born?”

The words hit him like a bag of hammers. They hit about just as hard, if not more, as when he found out his mother and father had died. They drained the color from his face and made him ill like when L died. It was every ounce of bad news in one hard hit. He didn't answer her at first—he couldn't.

On one hand, he did. If it hadn't been for Riley's complicated birth, L would still be here. But on the other hand, he really did love his daughter. Even if it didn't come across that way. Riley was only thing left of L. But Travis would be lying if he didn't say it hurt him to look into Riley's face- the spitting image of her mother; and perhaps that's why it hurt him more when he ignored her and drank so much, because he was failing L as well.

Riley looked at Travis as he struggled for clarity in answering her question. He didn't want to look at Rosa for an answer and didn't want to see the judgement in her eyes, but he wondered if Riley had ever asked her something similar.

“Why would you say something like that?” Travis asked sternly, putting down his rod and clearing his throat. He looked at her for a reply, but the look in her eyes demanded her question be answered first. “Riley, you are the only thing that I have left in this world. You are the only reason why I get up every day. Do I wish your mother was here so we could have our family whole? Yes, of course I do. But me missing your mother has nothing to do with you.”

“Then why do you avoid me so much? I'm glad we started spending more time together, but how come it took so long?”

He looked at her and couldn't help but hold back his tears. She needed to hear everything, and he needed to tell her, in full honesty. “When your mother died, I didn't know what I was going to do. I had never been a dad before. I didn't even think I'd be good at it, but your mother made me feel differently. She made me feel as though I could do anything, including being a

great dad to you. When she died, I guess that confidence that she built up in me left with her and I didn't know how to handle raising you." Travis turned to look at Rosa who was watching them with all of her attention. "I know I haven't been the best dad and I know Rosa has been more of a parent to you than I have but that doesn't mean I wish you weren't born." The tears in his eyes began to fall into the dirt below, and he pulled Riley in for a hug as she hugged him back. "I don't ever want you to think that ever again, do you understand?" Travis said as she nodded her head against his chest.

"*Señor* Travis!" Rosa shouted but he couldn't hear her at first. "*Señor!*" she shouted once more.

He turned to look at her before directing his attention back to the rippling water where she was pointing at. Riley's rod was almost completely in the water being yanked into the murky brown liquid below.

"Look, look!" Travis shouted leaping out of his seat handing Riley her rod.

Almost immediately both their tears fled as they looked on in excitement at the rod.

"What do I do?" she shouted while laughing, trying to hold onto the rod and not fall into the water.

"Slowly start spinning your reel. Pull on the rod slowly. Spin the reel and repeat until we see what's on the other line. You want to go slowly to make sure you don't lose that fish." Travis looked on excitedly.

She continued to follow his directions. Surely but slowly, whatever that was in the water was getting closer to the two of them. In a quick pull of the rod, she reeled out a medium sized trout. The fish leapt and flopped around the floor.

“I did it!” Riley shouted jumping up and down as Travis reached for the line. “Thanks dad! Thank you so much! I love you so much dad!”

It was as if their conversation only moments prior had vanished, and everything was fine. “I love you too. I’m so proud of you Riley.” Travis held up the line and gave her a hug. “Rosa! Look! She caught her first fish!”

Rosa’s own eyes had watered up and she nodded her head, dabbing her eyes with her shirt. It was a moment of humanity that neither of them had seen in Rosa in a long time and it was a sight for the both of them.

“What do you want to do with it? Catch and release, or cook?” Travis asked as he continued to look on at her in amazement.

“What did you do when you caught your first fish with Grandpa?” she asked.

“Well, if you would have known your grandpa, that wasn’t a choice. I cooked it.”

“Can we release it back?” she said hoping he wouldn’t be disappointed in her words.

“Of course, we can.” Travis slowly pulled the hook out of the fish’s mouth and sent it back into the water on its way.

The two of them watched as the fish disappeared into the water and from their lives. Panda continued to bark off in the distance but sounded as though she was getting closer to them.

“I’m proud of you, Riley!” Travis said once more looking at his daughter in the eye hoping she knew just how happy and proud she had made him.

“Panda!” Riley shouted looking at her dog running towards them from off in the distance.

Travis looked at the dog running. From as far as she was, she looked like a little white cloud running as fast as she could.

“Dad?” Riley said confused. “What does she have in her mouth?”

Travis looked closer as best he could to see what Riley was talking about. The closer Panda got, the more he realized Riley was right. Panda did have something in her mouth. At first, he thought it might have just been one of the birds she was messing around with or possibly an unfortunate rabbit, but the motion of the object didn't look like either. Once Panda had gotten close to them, Travis realized that the object was some kind of fabric caked with mud.

“What is it?” Riley asked talking a few steps towards the dog's direction.

Even Rosa had got out from her seat to see if she could get a closer look at the dog. The three of them stood there by the bank to see what it was the dog could have possibly found there in the middle of nowhere.

Once Panda had made it to their feet, Riley had pried the fabric from the dog's mouth, and it was then that Travis had to take a few steps back realizing what it was.

“*Señor?*”

“Dad?”

Travis shook his head and got closer to the dog. He pried the fabric from her mouth and confirmed it was what he thought. The material was the same, the floral pattern was the same, it was a large piece of a dress. A wedding dress—L's wedding dress.

Travis looked in every direction to see if there had been anyone in sight, but there was none. He had prayed to see a face laughing off in the distance, as their joke had made the three of them frightened. but there was no one.

“You see that, right?” Travis asked, looking at Rosa who nodded with dread and disbelief in her eyes.

It just wasn't possible. How was the dress at the lake? How did it find its way to his dog? What did Panda find on the other end of that dress? Every question he had didn't have a single

answer and that made him even more concerned, but nothing frightened him more than knowing Rosa and Riley could see the dress too.

Dr. Latimer had fallen out of consciousness again after seeing the dress, but awoke to several people hovering around her car, asking what happened and if she was alright. The pain in her head was immense, but she remembered everything all at once. Before an ambulance could arrive, she got out of the car and sat on the side of the road.

“Miss, are you alright? I already called the police, they’ll be here in a few. They’re coming all the way from town so it might be a little bit longer,” a pedestrian informed her.

She didn’t answer as she continued to wonder about what she had seen in the tunnel. She assessed herself to see if she was fine. Once she realized everything was alright, she went to look at her car. Most if it was totaled. There was no way of driving it now and all she could think was how far off Travis had been at that point. She took out her phone and looked at the time. An hour had passed from the accident and she quickly lifted herself up from the floor.

“Can someone take me into town?” she asked to the group of people that taking pictures of the wreckage.

“I got a tow truck. I can take you into town and see if they can fix up your ride, but I think you’d outta wait until the police get here.” A man in blue overalls pointed at his truck.

“Please, just take me to town. The car can wait.” Dr. Latimer begged. She was short of breath and struggled to keep herself calm.

“I think we should wait for the police,” the man in the overall said once more.

Dr. Latimer grabbed her wallet and flashed the man a one-hundred-dollar bill and the man immediately went to her car and chained it up.

The ride through town was short lived as the doctor closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, she was inside of a garage listening to the sounds of power tools echoing against the sheet metal walls, but it felt as though the tools were piercing through her skull instead.

“Hey lady, sorry to wake you. You were sound asleep, and I didn’t wanna bother ya.”

The man in the overalls put down a wrench and went up to Dr. Latimer, still in the truck.

“How long have I been out?” Dr. Latimer rubbed her eyes and continued to survey the area.

“Oh, I’d say a few hours. They got a small motel over there where you can stay the night. We won’t have your car ready until the morning, if it don’t need special parts.” The man pointed at a shady looking motel a couple of blocks down the road.

“So, it won’t be ready until tomorrow?”

“I’ll try to have it ready by morning by I can’t promise ya.”

Dr. Latimer got out of the tow truck and walked towards the main street where only a few cars were driving by. She looked at the motel and went towards the front office to get a room. Inside of the office, she almost vomited from the amount of cigarette smoke that lingered inside the small area. As quickly as she could, she got a room and ran out of the office.

When she got to her room, she immediately opened the door and threw herself on the bed. She was tired and she wondered she had a concussion. Even if she did, she didn’t care. She just wanted to sleep, and she hoped that morning would come soon, and she’d be able to get a hold of Travis.

In the morning, the doctor woke up with the sun hitting her in the face making her feel hungover. When she checked the time on her phone, she realized that it wasn't morning, but noon. She quickly left the motel and went back to body shop from the day before.

There was no one at the shop, only a sign on the door that read 'Off to lunch. Be back in fifteen.'

Dr. Latimer slammed her fists on the store's door and went back to the motel. Inside of the motel, she tried to get some sort of phone signal but there was none. She looked around the room to see if there was a phone she could use, but there wasn't. The night before she hadn't realized just how terrible and run down the room was, but everything was now starting to reveal its ugly face. She laid back down on the bed and just waited. That's all she could do.

7

After the incident at the lake, Travis couldn't think about anything else. The walk back to the cabin was much more silent than before. He had tucked a piece of the dress into his back pocket and on occasion Panda would pry it out of his pants, but he swatted her away each time. The sky above was getting darker and he could feel a few drops of rain hitting him.

When they arrived back at the cabin, Travis tried to take his mind off of what happened by playing board games with Riley and Rosa. Riley and Travis laughed at Rosa getting angry over losing, accusing everyone of cheating, ultimately refusing to play anymore, but no matter how many laughs, no matter how many stories he shared with Riley about his childhood, he still couldn't shake the thoughts of the fabric sitting in his back pocket.

Nighttime came and Travis laid Riley down to sleep with Piggy Smalls as usual. He kissed her on the forehead and whispered, "I love you," and shut the door. Leaving her room, he could see Rosa waiting for him in the kitchen. There was a subtle aroma of fresh coffee grounds roasting in the coffee maker and he quickly aided her in the kitchen grabbing two mugs from one of the higher pantry shelves.

"¿*Todo esta bien?*" Rosa said as she went to the cupboard to see if there was any sugar or powdered creamer.

Before Travis could catch himself, he said, "No."

The two of them made their coffees to their liking and went to the couch to sit down.

“*Pues diga me señor* Travis. I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.” Rosa took a sip from her coffee mug noticing that his face was growing more concerned with each passing moment.

“I don’t know what’s happening, Rosa. How do you explain this?” Travis pulled the fabric from his pocket and placed it on the coffee table, staring at the looming object. His glance broke, looking to Rosa for any kind of answer.

“*No se señor. No se.* No matter what is happening, all I know is you need to protect Riley no matter what. *Me entiendes?*” she said leaning forward on the sofa looking at him, blowing the steam lifting from her mug.

He nodded his head and drank his coffee a bit more before saying, “I think I’m going to get some fresh air. No need to stay up if you’re feeling tired.”

“I think I’ll stay on the sofa *poquito mas.*” Rosa sank into the pillows of the sectional.

Travis got up and called Panda to follow him outside into the backyard. Outside was nearly pitch black, the moon blanketed by a thick layer of clouds. The sounds of the forest were working in harmony to create what sounded like one of those CD samplers Travis would mess with as a kid in the retail stores with names like ‘Sounds of the Forest’ or ‘Cool Nights’.

Off to the side of the cabin was a large assortment of cut firewood stacked on top of each other against the cabin wall. Travis grabbed as many logs as he could carry and poured them into a cement firepit that he helped his old man build. When he had found the rods in the shed, he had seen some lighter fluid and a small booklet of matches. Grabbing the fluid from the shed, he realized there wasn’t much of it left and didn’t even know if it would work after all these years, but he doused the wood anyway. Taking the booklet of matches he struck one—nothing. One

more and nothing again. Finally, he took one more, angled his back against the wind, struck it and there it was. The flame ate away at the match as he carefully placed it in a section of the wood that he knew had enough lighter fluid on it to start the fire.

Panda looked at the fire gorging itself on the wood as though it was an animal that hadn't been fed for days. The fire quickly went through one of the smaller logs and Travis went back to the wall to gather some more pieces so he wouldn't have to get up so frequently.

With his coffee getting cold, Travis downed the rest of it as quickly as he could. L had tried to get him to drink cold brew coffee when they were in college, but he despised it every time, and now was no different.

"L." Travis found himself saying out loud, confusing Panda. He knew whatever he had seen the night before couldn't have been her, but either way, the sense of longing turned quickly to a feeling of paranoia. He stared aimlessly into the fire watching the flames dance upon one another.

In his trance, Travis heard a sound bellowing from the woods behind him. Panda heard it too and stood immediately up from her spot with full alertness. Travis got his phone from his pocket and shined the light of it in the direction of the woods from where he heard the sound. Then he heard it again once more, and much more clearly.

"Daddy!" Riley shouted and he ran into the woods without a second thought.

"Riley! I'm coming!" Travis shouted as he darted through the brush and vegetation, making sure he didn't stumble on one of the fallen over trees. Panda barked and headed out in front of him. He turned around to look at the cabin and could barely see the fire crackling in the distance.

He could hear Riley continuing to shout, "Help! Daddy! Help me!"

Travis ran as fast as he could trying pinpoint her location, calling for her with each step. “Riley! Where are you sweetie!” He shouted hoping for an answer.

It was then that he heard another voice, Rosa’s voice, coming from the cabin. It was faint but he could hear her calls, “*Señor* Travis!”

Travis stopped in his tracks as Rosa and Riley’s pleas began to blend together. He didn’t know which voice was real, or which voice to follow. He didn’t know if he was in a dream or not. He just didn’t know anymore.

He fell to his knees with tears of frustration flowing from his eyes while the world around him spun. Panda stood by his side, whimpering and pawing at his side. He looked at her and she was wiggling with uneasiness, she nuzzled him to stand up as she pointed her body in the direction of the cabin. Travis could tell something was wrong and he mustered the courage to run back to the cabin.

Travis ran back to the cabin and was met by Rosa who was looking at him as though she had something to say but was too afraid to say it.

“Where’s Riley?” He demanded to know.

“Riley is inside Mr. Travis.” She said looking at him confused.

“What? I just heard her right now. Is she okay?” Travis said looking just as bewildered as Rosa was.

“She’s asleep *señor* Travis.” She assured, almost condescendingly.

“Then why were you screaming for me? I could have sworn—”

“You need to come see this.” Rosa said apprehensively.

The two of them walked inside the cabin in silence as Rosa guided him through the living room to Riley’s room. She stopped and let him go in front of her. It was then that he saw why

she had stopped. There at the foot of Riley's door were two footprints caked in mud and pine. Without hesitation, Travis barged through Riley's door where she sat straight up in bed, eyes wide with fear and clutching her stuffed animal.

"Honey, are you alright?" Travis asked noticing she couldn't stop looking outside the window.

"I saw someone." She whispered with a quiver in her voice, pointing towards the window.

"Rosa, stay with her." Travis said heading outside of the cabin where Riley's bedroom window was to see if he could see anything. There were indentations in the ground, but it was hard to determine whether they were footprints or not, unlike the ones inside.

Travis went back inside and stopped to look at the footprints by Riley's door. The feet were small, a little bit bigger than Riley's, but they were definitely human.

"What did you see, Riley?" Travis questioned as he reentered the room.

"There was..." she paused with hesitation. "A woman. Outside my window." Riley said hiding her face in Rosa's side.

"What is going on *señor* Travis?" Rosa asked looking at him hoping for an answer.

He turned back around to look at the footprints, but realized that in the time he had entered the room and in the time he had turned back around, more prints had appeared.

"Panda!" Travis called for the dog, hoping that if she came inside the cabin, she would encounter whatever, or whoever was outside, stopping them before they had a chance to leave or harm anyone. She showed up in the doorway and the two of them slowly made their way into the living room. Travis followed the prints and examined them thinking it might have been him who

tracked in the mud, but the path didn't make sense. The barefoot footprints went from Riley's room out through the back door.

"Rosa," Riley whimpered.

"What is it, *mi amor*?"

Travis and Panda came back to the room, standing in the doorway without any answers.

Travis looked at Riley and back at the window.

"The lady looked like Mom, Dad."

Travis slowly turned his head to look at her, wondering if he heard correctly. His eyes met with Rosa's as an uneasy heaviness fell upon the room.

"She looked like Mom."

After doing his best to console Riley back to sleep, she still refused to go to bed alone. Rosa offered to share her bed with Riley, and though it gave Travis some piece of mind, he still couldn't sleep the rest of the night as he worried what would happen when he closed his eyes. It was becoming clear to him that his dreams were somehow the cause of all this, but he didn't know how or why.

The sprinkles of rain that had tickled Travis's skin at the lake found their way to the cabin, turning into a sudden, nasty storm. Travis went outside to check the severity of the storm with its harsh winds whistling and slamming through the trees. As he made his way back inside to see if Riley and Rosa were fine, he realized all of the lights had turned off.

The cabin's generator needed to be re-cranked, so Travis went out back towards the shed and started turning the heavy handle. Slowly the shed light started to flicker on and off signaling that his efforts weren't futile. He continued to crank the machine, hoping that it would kick on

everything and somehow get rid of the storm that was pounding heavily on his back. When he managed to get the generator working again, he rushed back into the safety of the cabin.

Back inside, Travis came in to see that the larger window by the living room had been broken. “What happened?” Travis said looking at Riley to make sure there were no shards of glass anywhere near her.

“The tree. It broke the window,” Rosa said pointing to a fractured tree branch on the floor.

Travis could hear the wind furiously picking up, its howls fluttering through the trees. Suddenly, the other windows in the house slowly started to break with the sheer force of the gusts funneling in. The three of them retreated to his room where Travis called for Panda, as the four of them took shelter on the side of the bed, away from any window.

The pounding of the trees against the house made it sound as though people were banging against the walls trying to get in.

“Dad, what is that?” Riley shouted.

“It’s just the trees, honey. It’s just the trees.” Travis said trying to calm her down while also trying to convince himself that’s all it was.

As they sat there on the floor, Travis looked towards the door in front of them that led back out into the living room. The pounding forcefully continued but his stomach churned and sank once he realized the pounding was coming from within the house. Looking underneath the door, he could see several dark shadows that looked like feet circling around the living room. Panda must have noticed too as she leapt from her spot on the floor and broke through door in pure terror, sending in a whirlwind of debris. Pine needles and dirt hit everyone in the face making it hard to see. Shielding his eyes the best he could, Travis saw that the shadows had

vanished, and Panda was off to find where they had gone, her growls and barks mixing in with the sounds of the wind.

“Panda!” Riley shrieked, reaching her arm out for the dog to return.

“She’ll be alright, Riley.”

“But dad!” Riley said as tears started to fill her eyes.

Travis knew the only way to get her to calm down was to go outside and find the dog. Even though he knew it was a bad idea he didn’t want Riley to have to worry about Panda on top of everything else that was happening. Travis got up off the floor, bracing himself and made his way outside, hoping that whatever shadows Panda chased had left.

Travis could hear Panda’s barks off in distance, but they were growing fainter by the minute. The hordes of trees made him susceptible to any malevolent force that might have been lurking in the obscurities of the woods. His senses were dulled, but he steadied himself against the wind hoping to find Panda.

The further he went into the woods, the better he could now hear Panda. She sounded as though she was whimpering, as if she had been hurt by something. When he found her, she was huddled against a tree trembling, her eyes darting back and forth across the skyline.

“Panda, come here girl, it’s okay.” Travis called to her, trying to get her to calm down.

She wouldn’t budge from the tree, so reached down to pick her up. It didn’t seem as though anything was wrong with her, but she undeniably was in shock. Her unwillingness to cooperate made it even more difficult to carry her. He picked her up and slung her across his back like a prized deer and started back towards the cabin.

It was as he was trying to navigate through the darkness the storm suddenly stopped. The wind silenced as though it had hit a brick wall and the clouds above faded to reveal the brilliant

moon. Travis sighed hoping the worst of it was over, but that smile quickly escaped once he heard the screams. They were coming from back at the cabin.

Once he got to the cabin, he could hear Rosa's cries but the other screams that had harmonized with hers were gone. He laid Panda down on the couch inside and went for his room to see what had happened. He feared that a wall, or a part of the cabin, fell and injured Riley or Rosa but he hoped for the best.

Entering the room, he saw Rosa weeping on the floor but there was no Riley. Rosa looked at her hands as if she had lost something from, or as if something was pried from them.

"Rosa, where's Riley?" Travis looked at her confused.

"*Señor*, she was right here. I tried *señor*, I tried, but I wasn't strong enough. She just took her out of my arms *señor*. I swear I did everything I could!" Rosa sobbed uncontrollably, wailing louder and louder with each gasping breath as she recited prayers and begged for forgiveness.

He knelt down beside her, "Rosa, who took her? Where is she?" Travis asked sternly trying to find some clarity in the chaos.

Rosa looked up at him with her palms still in her lap, tears rolling down her face and said, "Your wife."

8

Rosa was inconsolable as her haunting cries rang through the busted cabin. Travis couldn't waste any time, so he left her where she was and spent the next couple of hours looking everywhere in the cabin to see where Riley could have possibly gone. Part of him knew that Riley wasn't going to be anywhere in plain sight if that distorted version of L had taken her.

Travis's heart and mind were racing with what to do next. He didn't know whether to call the police, to pray with Rosa, or just end it right there. Without Riley he had no more purpose, he had no more reason to go on living and he was beginning to feel that the only way to ease his pain was to hurl himself off the side of a mountain. Travis went outside and looked around to see if there had been foot prints or something that could have shown him the way that they had gone but there were none. To his surprise, Panda was next him, brushing her head against his leg in sympathy. Travis fell to his knees, grabbing the troublesome dog in the tightest of hugs and helplessly bawled.

Rosa heard his cries and hobbled her way to him as well. The three of them sat there on the porch crying, not sharing a word.

“Maybe you should go and lay down *señor*. Take a *siesta* and when you wake up, we can see what we can do to find her.”

Travis jumped up from the floor angrily and said, “Sleep? Rosa how in the hell am I supposed to sleep at a time like this. Riley is gone and I don’t have any clue what to do. I can’t call the cops, they’ll think I’m crazy if I told them what happened.”

“*Pero señor*, I can tell them too and they’ll believe us. What else can we do?”

“They aren’t going to believe anything. They are just going to see an out of work, alcoholic, drug dependent dad too incompetent to take care of his own daughter! We never should have come up here, I should have never started taking those stupid pills! I never should have opened the door!”

Suddenly, it hit Travis: the pills, the door. They could be the answer to everything. If Travis took the pills then he could go back into the dream, find whatever took Riley and her, and bring her back. Even as Travis was coming up with that plan, he knew it was ridiculous and he knew that it was impossible. Rosa was talking as Travis was thinking about his game plan. He knew the idea was overzealous, but it was the only thing he had to work with.

The last thing Travis caught Rosa saying before he interrupted her was, “Everything will work itself out *señor*, you just need—”

“I have a plan,” he said picking up Rosa from the floor. “I have a plan.”

The two of them went back inside as Panda followed along.

Rosa looked confused at the entire conversation but still listened to Travis. “What are you going to do, Mr. Travis?” Rosa looked at him as though he had gone insane. Or perhaps, she

herself had lost her mind and nothing was making sense. With everything happening so sudden she didn't know what to believe.

“It's simple Rosa, I told you about the door and I told you about the medication. Well, the pills are the answer. If whatever that thing is from my mind could somehow come into our world and take Riley with her, there should be no reason I couldn't go to that world and bring Riley back.” Travis was getting excited even though he really didn't know if what he was saying was making any sort of sense to anyone.

“*Pero, señor*, that's impossible. *Es imposible!*” Rosa put her hand on Travis's shoulder making him remember the pain that had been lingering there.

“It's possible, Rosa. I just need to take these.” Travis picked up the bottle of prescription meds.

“*Señor*, what you're saying can't be real. Those pills can do more hurt than anything. You even said that the doctor only told you to take the recommended dose or it could have negative side effects, no?”

“You said yourself that you believed in these kinds of things, Rosa. That your family believed in spirits both good and evil. So, what makes this any different?”

There was a moment that the two of them stood there in the middle of the room looking at each other to see what the next person would say.

“How are you even going to know where to find her?”

“I don't know but I have to try, Rosa. She's all I have left. She doesn't deserve any of this.”

Rosa nodded once more and sat by the bed as he laid down. Travis took two pills out of the bottle, swallowed them dry and waited. Rosa reached for his hand, blessing him with a prayer

as she watched him fall into slumber. Travis could feel the pills taking effect while thoughts of Riley swirled in his head. His grasp on Rosa's hand started to slip as he could feel himself slip into a dream.

When he opened his eyes, Rosa was gone as was the rest of the cabin. He was lying in a bed in the middle of the woods with a greenish sky above him. He looked around to see if he could see anyone, but the woods were empty. From a couple feet away, he could hear feet trampling towards him and saw Panda. She was waiting for him, just like in the previous dream, and the two of them started to wander and search throughout the vast and empty woods.

"Riley!" Travis hollered hoping somehow his voice would resonate far enough to where she was. The shadows of the forest lurked, and Travis did his best to ignore his paranoia.

"Riley!" He shouted once more, but this time someone answered.

"Dad!" The voice responded above the sky as though it was shouting from the clouds.

"Riley, honey where are you?"

Panda and Travis raced for the woods in the first opening that I could see. They ran for what felt like an eternity. No matter how tired Travis got or how weary his legs were becoming, he still pushed forward.

Panda raced in front of Travis barking loudly. He could feel himself getting tired and he could barely breathe. Pushing forward he could hear Panda's cries off in the distance as he got closer to her, while the sounds of Riley's voice continued to echo from above.

Travis caught up to Panda who was barking and pawing at a skyscraping redwood, isolated from the rest of the woods, towering over the pine trees around it. Panda vigorously clawed at the tree as if digging for a bone, and little by little, the bark of the tree was falling off and behind it, Panda was beginning to expose something out of place.

Travis took over for Panda, pulling and tugging at the bark as splinters lodged themselves under his nails and skin. His hands became sore and raw, but none of that mattered. With the last of his might, Travis pulled the final piece of bark, revealing a door... The Crimson Door.

Travis stood back, looking at the door. He no longer feared its presence nor what waited for him behind it. What matter the most was getting Riley. He placed his ear to the door, "Dad!"

Travis took a deep breath before he put his hand on the door handle, slowly turning it open, hoping Riley would be waiting for him; but the darkness was the only thing that greeted him.

"Riley!" Travis shouted.

"*Señor*, did you find her?" Rosa asked hopeful.

Travis looked around the room and realized he had woken up from the dream. The door was gone but he knew where to find it and that was a start.

"I think the medication wore off, but I know where she is." Travis said reaching for the bottle of pills. He started to pour the remainder of the medicine into his hand, but before he could toss them back in his throat Rosa stopped him.

"*Señor*, you can't take all those, it's dangerous." She explained, grabbing his wrist firmly.

"I need them, Rosa. The more I take, the longer I should sleep, which equals to more time to find her."

"What if something happens? What if the medicine doesn't do what you want it to do?" She said with sorrow in her voice.

"Rosa, you told me you'd take care of Riley no matter what, right?" Travis said looking at Rosa.

"*Si*."

“Well I meant no matter what. If anything happens to me, you promised me you’d take care of her and I hope you meant it.”

“Of course, I meant it *señor*. I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“This isn’t about me anymore, Rosa. I’ve been selfish my entire life and now my daughter needs me more than ever. This is my one shot at making things right.”

Rosa loosened her grip on his wrist, hanging her head low. Travis rubbed her back in assurance before shoveling the pills into his mouth, feeling each one work their way down his throat. Travis immediately felt drowsy and Rosa slung his arm around her neck and aided him back to the bed to lie down. She sat beside him once more to which he offered her a loose, sleepy grin. She held his hand watching as his eyes grew heavy. Travis felt himself become weightless, falling haplessly into the obscurity of sleep, landing in a pile of leaves with Panda looking at him. The forest awaited. The door waited. Riley waited.

2

Dr. Latimer woke up to the crashing sounds of thunder. She got out of bed and looked about the room, wondering if she was dreaming. When she realized that the storm outside was real, she ran outside into the pouring rain, racing across the empty street towards the body shop. Her car was sitting underneath a street light and she hoped that the man in the overalls was around to give her the keys. She looked all around the shop before she saw the man leaving.

“Oh, thank God! Can I get the keys to my car please? Is it fixed?” Dr. Latimer was soaking wet, holding onto the man’s overalls.

“Calm down, little lady. Your car is good to go, we just gotta discuss payment.”

“Money’s no issue, just please give me the keys!” Dr. Latimer hollered as she hurriedly took out a credit card and handed it to the man. “Please, the keys!”

The man in the overalls, looked at the card and then back at Dr. Latimer. He reached into the glove compartment of his truck and pulled out her car keys.

“I’ll have an itemized receipt for you tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you! Thank you!” Dr. Latimer grabbed the keys and headed straight for her car. It still had cosmetic damaged but the second she put the key into the ignition the engine lit up and she bolted down the street.

She reached the cabins in a matter of minutes. There hadn’t been anyone at the gate to let her in, so she left her car in the driveway and walked the rest of the way. The rain continued to pour down on her until out of nowhere the rain ceased and the moon shined down on her. The strange change in weather confused her but it didn’t let her slow down as she had made her way towards the empty clearing with the help of moon and starlight.

The rest of the way to Travis’s cabin was difficult as the road had been flooded with water and mud, making each step up the inclined road that much more difficult to hike. She slipped and slid across the muddy floor creating a mess of her outfit. Dr. Latimer took her phone out of her pocket hoping she didn’t have any water damage so she could ensure she had found the right cabin. Her GPS chimed, alerting her of her arrival. She looked at the cabin before her, confused by what she saw. The entire place looked like a warzone with trees bent over and glass all over the front porch, as if a giant had come smashing through the woods.

Working her way up the cabin stairs, she knocked relentlessly. Mud flew onto the exterior of the cabin with each harsh pound.

“*Si?*” Rosa answered the door, but just by a little, enough to let her see the muddy being before her.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Latimer, Travis’s doctor, I need to speak with him immediately.”

“He’s in there, but he’s sleeping.” Rosa said making a path for the doctor to walk through.

“Back there?” Dr. Latimer pointed towards the room and rushed in, broken glass crunching beneath her shoes. As she made her way through the cabin, she came across Travis sleeping on a bed. “Travis, wake up!” She started to shake him violently in the hopes of getting him to talk to her.

“*Que paso?*”

“What happened?” The doctor looked at Travis and waited to hear from Rosa. She pried his eyes open, shining her penlight in them, but there was no response.

“*No, se* he took all those pills and he’s been asleep.” Rosa pointed to the empty pill bottle.

Dr. Latimer checked Travis’s pulse and his breathing. She then looked at Rosa who was looking more frightened than ever. “How long has he been like this?”

“For about an hour. It was his idea.” Rosa admitted almost in tears. “Is he okay? *Dios mio*, is he okay?” Rosa bent her knee and made the sign of the cross on her forehead.

“Where’s his daughter?”

“He went to go look for her!” Rosa cried with guilt.

“Where?”

“He said he needed those pills to go in his head. He tried to find her somewhere there.”

Rosa was incomprehensible at this point in her cries and explanations. “Is he okay?!”

Dr. Latimer looked at Rosa, “He’s dead.”

10

Once more the forest welcomed Travis. He picked himself up from the pile of leaves on the ground. He looked up to the sky and the green hue had shifted to a hazy red with black clouds. Panda’s barking told him the direction to go so he listened and followed. The clouds above danced back and forth, sending an orchestra of wind below. Travis looked above anticipating red drops of rain to pummel his face.

Travis blocked his eyes from the sidwinding leaves and dirt that tried to hold him back. The wind howled in his face with familiar voices, but still indistinct. It didn't sound like Riley, but someone older struggling to get their words out. Travis lifted his head up from staring at the ground to see if he was close to the tree with The Crimson Door, but he was still a good distance away.

The voices carried with the wind, but Travis tried to not let it stop him from continuing forward. With his head down, and with the shards of dirt flying everywhere, he was stopped when he came across two pairs feet. Travis slowly lifted his head and saw his parents. They stood in front of him like two statues aching to come back to life. Seeing them was enough to get him to forget about his mission as they stood there looking at him stone faced.

“Son,” they said in a harmonious bawling tone that mixed with the sound of the wind. “You don't need to go any further.”

Travis looked behind them and saw Panda continuing to claw at the door that was a few yards behind his parents. Travis wanted to slip by them and open the door, but their voices continued to hold him back. He was mystified by them and wanted them to hold him and tell him everything was going to be alright.

“Just stay here with us, son. Riley is with someone who can take care of her now. She doesn't ever have to worry about being loved or worry about having to prove her worth to anyone,” they said watching him with their expressionless eyes.

“She needs to be with me, she's not safe here.” Travis started to cautiously inch by them.

“She's not safe with you! She's better off with her mother! She's better off with someone who loves her and won't leave her side.” Their heads turned but their bodies stood frozen on the ground.

Travis continued to walk forward leaving them behind. Just as he got to the door and just as he was about to open it, they spoke once more and caught him off guard.

“All you will find behind that door is pain. All Riley will ever have with you is pain.”

Travis hesitated for a moment. The words almost sounded true to him. He opened the door and went inside, trying to forget about what his parents said.

Inside of the door was his house. It was much darker and harder to see inside, but the red sky above sent whatever light it could through the house’s windows. Panda’s weeps and groans came and went throughout the rooms as she searched for Riley. They looked in every possible room and there was nothing. Riley’s room was completely empty with no sign of anyone having been there. The only thing in her room was her stuffed pig sitting in the middle of the room, toppled over as if it had just been played with. Picking it up, there was a little bit of mud caked onto the back so Travis brushed it off and shoved the toy into his pocket as best he could and continued to look.

After leaving Riley’s room he could hear Panda barking in the living room towards the entrance of the house. Following her barks, Travis noticed that she was barking at the door that they had entered.

“There’s nothing there, girl. Riley’s not out there,” Travis said hoping to get her to stop. “Come on we have to keep looking.”

Panda’s bark was starting to become irritating to Travis. With each piercing wail his head pounded and stung. It became too much of a distraction, so he went to the door once more.

“I’m telling you she’s not out there!” Travis shouted as he slammed the door and continued to walk back towards the rooms to double check on any areas that he might not have covered. Even with the door closed, Panda continued to bark, even louder than before.

“Damn it, dog! There’s nothing there!”

No matter how much he yelled and tried to reason with her, Panda continued to yap over him.

“Look, do you want me to open the damn door? There’s nothing there!” Travis said as he ripped the door back open to reveal the forest had disappeared, and the door now led down the hospital hallway where he had seen the shadow monster for the first time. Panda was silent as Travis eyed the familiar territory. Without thinking, Travis closed the door, but Panda barked again the second it shut. He opened the door again and there was a brick wall blocking the entrance. Panda barked. Travis shut the door and opened it once more to a black sky and stars out, so he shut it again. Panda barked. Shut then open, an empty desert; shut, open, bark; shut, open, bark. The process repeated an uncountable amount of times until he finally found the hallway that they had seen earlier, and Panda’s barking ceased.

“Is this where we have to go?” Travis to her, only to have his question answered immediately by the echoing cries coming from down the hallway.

“Dad!” The voice hit his ears and almost sent him reeling to the ground. Travis ran down the dimly lit hallway and followed Riley’s voice with Panda not too far in front of him. Panda hit the door at the end of the hallway, pushing it open, allowing Travis to go inside.

There on the operating table was the silhouette of L holding onto Riley in her arms as though she was a newborn. Riley’s was completely frightened she tried to shield herself from the red eyes of the shadow.

“Dad! Help!” Riley shouted in a tearful, yet hopeful manner, as she saw her dad in front of her.

“Let her go!” Travis demanded as he watched the silhouette in front of him cradling his child. He looked around the room to make sure it had just been the four of them. He was expecting for the doctors and nurses to come rushing at him, but they didn’t.

“She’s mine! You kept her from me, and I won’t let you have her again.” The voice of the shadow shouted in L’s voice making the doors of the room shut behind Travis. The distorted voice let Travis know that he was certain the shadow didn’t have any kind of connection to his wife.

“Please, let her go.” Travis said hoping his pleas were enough for the shadow to release her. The shadow that had been L was now forming into a complete manifestation of her.

“You’ve had her all this time and you never once told me about her! How am I supposed to live without her? How am I supposed to go back to it being just me?”

Travis watched as L scolded him. She looked just the same as she did when they were young and arguing over petty things. He felt his heart yearning for her. Chills covered his skin as he noticed every loving detail about her: her hair, nose, lips, and curvatures of her body, but there was one thing about her that reminded Travis that this was not his wife.

Her eyes.

The haunting ruby eyes of the monster reminded him of why he took this journey, even if he couldn’t explain any of it. Nothing his parents or this monster said mattered. He’d hurt the ones he loved and was now going to pay for the error of his ways.

Travis sighed and stood boldly before the entity. “Take me L. You don’t even know her. Let her live her life and take mine instead. That’s what you want isn’t it? To be loved by someone who loves you back? Riley doesn’t love you! She doesn’t even know you!”

Travis could see from the look in her eyes that something was starting to click inside of the beast's head. Travis hoped that whatever he was saying was starting to work. The facts were simple, and Travis didn't know if he could reason with this supernatural beast. He didn't even know the reason for its existence nor why it had chosen Riley to claim as its own, but he wasn't going let it take her.

"Please L, she means nothing to you, just let her go." Travis watched as the monster's grasps slowly lessen.

"But she's my daughter." She said with hurt.

Riley made her way out of the being's grasp, heading towards her father while offering her hand to Panda. Panda refused, and without warrant, jumped up towards the monster and bit it in the neck, the two of them wrestling for dominance.

"Run!" Travis shouted as he pushed open the doors for Riley. She started to run out of the hospital room and Panda let go of the monster to follow. Travis stood there, watching as L had reverted back to its original shadow form. The shadow loomed over him, growling, and staring at him with the haunting eyes.

"You're not L! You'll never be her!" Travis declared as he ran through the hospital doors into the hallway from where he entered. He could feel the monster drawing near as he saw Riley and Panda waiting for him at the end of the hall by the door leading back to the forest. Travis ran as fast as he could, slamming his body against the door as he tried to shut the it but the force from the other side was too overpowering.

"Riley! Help!" Travis shouted as he watched Riley and Panda put their weight up against the door too. With all of their strength they managed to get the door closed. Travis locked the

door and caught his breath. From behind the door, he could hear the shouts of the beast continuing to work its way against the door.

“That door’s not going to hold it, we have to get back to the cabin before it finds us.”

Travis looked at Riley as she knew what he was saying was true.

Travis went towards the door that had continued to be pushed upon and he was about to open it.

“Dad, what are you—” Riley asked frightfully.

“It’s okay, Riley, I think I finally got the hang of this.” Travis opened the door once more revealing the woods that now contained a bright sky and pleasant animal calls.

“Let’s get you home.” Travis said as he reached for Riley’s hand.

They made their way through the forest with Panda by their side. As they continued their journey back home, Travis thought that he could hear someone whispering in his ear. It was an ethereal sound that sounded more human rather than ghost. Panda looked at him as though she had heard the same voice, but they continued forward until he heard it again, clearer than before.

“*Señor!*”

Travis turned around expecting to see Rosa, but she wasn’t.

“*¡Señor levántate!* Please wake up!”

Travis continued to look around hoping to understand where the voice was coming from but there was no one in sight. Rosa sounded worried but there was no telling where she was coming from.

“I’m so sorry *señor!* I told you about those pills! I told you!”

Riley and Travis continued towards the cabin until they finally saw the door that led inside. As Riley started towards the door, their grasp was broken as she left through the doorway.

Travis tried to push his way through the opening, but it didn't work. He was stuck. Panda had managed to find her way through the door, but he was still trapped outside.

"Dad, let's go!" Riley yelled, wondering what was holding him back.

In his struggle, Travis heard something coming from the forest. It wasn't Rosa's voice, but the sounds of the beast had found its way out of the door. Travis looked confused and thought they had solved all their problems, but he was wrong.

"I'm trying, I don't know what's happening." Travis said trying to get her to calm down. He heard Rosa's voice once more.

"Riley? Is that you? *¿Donde estas mija?*"

Rosa was close but he still couldn't figure out where she was or how she managed to get into the dream with them. Travis tried to think of a way to get through the doorway, but nothing was coming to mind.

"Riley!" Rosa's voice continued to echo.

"Travis!" Another voice spoke and Travis instantly knew who it was: the doctor.

The sounds of the beast continued to gain on them as Travis tried to make sense of everything that was happening. Rosa's voice spoke once more and that's when everything started to slowly piece itself together in his head. Rosa hadn't been in the dream, but he was able to hear her voice as he slept. His body wasn't ready to wake up and after putting two and two together, he realized he would never wake up. The Doc had been back at the cabin somehow and she could have woken him up, but she couldn't. There was no hope for him. But there was still hope for his daughter.

Riley's face was probably the most scared Travis had ever seen her before. She looked on at Travis and then walked out of the house once more.

“Dad, please we have to go,” she begged, holding out her hand. She started to cry and pulled his hand to get her attention. “Dad, please, come on. Take my hand, I’ll help you.”

Travis dropped to his knees and held her close to his chest. Her tears saturated his shirt as Panda made her way next to them. Travis held the both of them and tried not to cry as he realized what he had to tell her. The shadow monster was getting close to them and he needed to hurry.

“Daddy’s not going to be able to go with you, honey.”

“What? What do you mean? We’re here, we’re home, just come with me!”

“I came back here for you no matter what the cost, Riley. Now you’re safe, but I can’t go back with you.”

“You have to! Dad, please!” she pounded her fists against his chest.

“There’s nothing I can do about it, Riley. You need to go with Rosa, I’ll be alright. Even if you can’t see me, I’ll always be around. Now, please, go inside.”

Travis’s heart broke with what he was telling her. After everything he had done, he couldn’t believe it all was going to end this way. He had quit drinking, and promised to be around more, and now it all seemed like lies. Travis had to remind himself that this was the right thing to do. For Riley. The tears started to stream down his face, and he didn’t want to let her go, but he knew at least for now, there was nothing more he could do.

“Dad, don’t do this.”

“I don’t want to but I have to, for you. I want to go with you, but you saw, I can’t. Rosa will take care of you, but you have to go now before it’s too late.” Travis pulled in Riley one last time, kissed her on the forehead and let her go before the monster could find her.

She walked through the door slowly, greeted solemnly by Panda. She held her hand to the screen door, “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, kid. Panda will take care of you too.”

Panda looked at Riley and then to Travis, she licked Riley’s hand and made her way outside by Travis’s side.

“No, go with her.” Travis said, pointing back inside, but Panda stood firmly.

“It’s okay, dad. You need someone to take of you too.”

“I love you, Riley. Close your eyes, count to three and everything will be alright.”

Travis and Panda watched as the image of Riley slowly faded away in the frame of the door.

One.

Travis looked at her one last time knowing he’d never be there to walk her down the aisle.

Two.

The sounds of the beast continued to get closer as Travis and Panda turned around, fully prepared to face their fate.

Three.

Travis could see the shadow monster, making its way towards the two of them. Travis pictured the children Riley would have when she was older, and how she would take care of them better than he had ever taken of her. He imagined her having to do all of that without him, but he knew she’d be alright.

“Riley, *oh dios mio* Riley! You’re okay!” Rosa cried a sigh of relief.

When Travis woke up, he was still in the forest. The winds above had died, and it was a serene sight for him to see. Panda lifted herself off the ground and shook off whatever leaves and

pine had gathered on her. Travis got up and turned around to see the cabin. A soft thud hit the floor and saw Piggy Smalls laying down next to him. He had forgotten the toy was in his pocket throughout the whole ordeal. Holding onto the toy he felt sad knowing Riley wouldn't have her most prized possession. However, as he looked into its' plush face, he couldn't help but feel happy knowing he was able to hold onto a piece of Riley.

As he sat, he smelled a familiar scent. Panda barked, making Travis stand up at attention in fear that something was happening. Getting up from the floor, Travis smelt the scent of a candle while leaving the stuffed animal on a stump at the front of the porch and started to walk in search of smells origin.

The scent led him towards the front of the cabin where the front door had been closed. The thought of having to open another door was terrifying to him, but it wasn't as if his curiosity could kill him. The scent was welcoming, so Travis reached for the front door of the cabin, twisted the knob open and saw the candle in the cabin, lighting up the darkness. Travis smiled.

“Hey, Doc.”

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CURRICULUM VITA

Erik Joseph Medina lives in El Paso, Texas where he has lived for a majority of his life. When he graduated Franklin High School, he went on to New Mexico State University where he studied creative media at the Creative Media Institute. It was there at NMSU that he discovered his love for storytelling (specifically screenplay writing) and produced his first short film *Over the Counter*. After graduation in 2013 he went on to become a teacher back home in El Paso for the El Paso Independent School District. He is still working as a teacher and teaches English as a second language for middle school students. It is there that he helped established the children's love for reading and film in the school's first ever film club. It is during this time that he decided he wanted to continue his pursuit of mastery in the arts of Creative Writing. During his time at the University of Texas at El Paso he has had one of his short stories published in a short story collective known as *The Nightmare Society*. In May of 2020 he will receive his Master of Fine Arts degree from UTEP and pursue his writing to publish his works for others to read.