Prologue: Bubbling and Popping

Empty and crumpled cans spilled out onto the sidewalk as Haagenti floundered out of his door. He caught himself on a nearby lamppost and stumbled forward, struggling to gain his footing.

A loud burp escaped his lips, his rancid breath like acid, curling into the atmosphere of the night. He listened to the satisfying shuffle of the bricks as they scrambled shut behind him. It brought back fond memories of snapping bones into—and out of—place.

He lumbered down the street, trying to navigate his way to the nearby market for his meeting. He dug into his pocket, fumbling through the clutter, litter falling onto the street below. A business card finally emerged, spilling used tissues and crumpled Russian bills onto the street as he pulled it free.

He held it under a nearby streetlight so he could read the print. On the front—his name, embroidered in midnight blue against an ivory background. Turning the card around, Haagenti struggled to read the name scratched in ink. The only other decoration was a single drop of blood, smeared and dried underneath the words.

"Michael…" he read, struggling to focus in his drunken state. "...Wilson?"

He put the card to his nose, taking a deep whiff and groaning in satisfaction. He could smell the source of the blood nearby. Its scent was thickened with fear and desperation.

It might not be high-quality, but it'll do.

He continued down the street before pivoting into a nearby clearing that was surrounded by various closed fish stands.

"You here, Mikey?" he yelled into the empty fish market. "I've got places to be. You're not the only one looking to make a deal tonight."

Haagenti had the right to rush. Even though it was the middle of the night, it would soon be filled with fishermen prepping for a long morning of selling their catches.

"Over here," a voice called back from one of the buildings tucked behind a few rows of emptied ice totes that housed fish during the busy mornings. In contrast to Haagenti's, this voice was meager and frail.

"Great, let's get this done," Haagenti replied, moving towards the building.

He coughed, the salty air of the sea clinging to his throat.

"Damn ocean," he cursed. Stopping at a locked beverage cooler near one of the empty totes, his hand pressed against the glass, heat spreading until it melted away. Reaching in, he pulled out a plastic water bottle and gave it a shake, transforming the pristine water into a dark, bold red wine. He chugged it down, then tossed the empty bottle to the floor. "*Ah*, that's better."

Haagenti cracked the door open, revealing a room full of hooks adorned with tuna. The cold air of the storage room caused steam to rise from his skin as he stepped in. The thick, frosty air of the room was difficult to see through, so he shifted the spectrum of his vision, focusing on the heat signatures of the room.

Bingo. He saw Mikey's heat emanating from the center of the room, past the rows of hanging fish.

He walked further into the room, a cough inching into his throat once again, which he proceeded to clear.

"There you are, Mikey!" He saw the middle-aged, balding man hunched over and shivering. "You ready to do this?"

"You've got to get me out of here," Mikey pleaded with Haagenti. "They're probably on their way!"

“I know, I know,” Haagenti said, trying to reassure the pathetic man. “It’ll all be over in a minute. Imagine it, ten years of a new life, where no one knows you are, or what you’ve done, in exchange for—” Haagenti was cut off by a huge swell of mucus, which worsened by the second. “By the Hells, what is up with this air? Why is it so salty?”

“No, you don’t get it!” Mikey beseeched the man. “It’s not the police this time! And they’re not here for me, they’re here for you. You *have* to get us out of here!”

“No, Mikey,” Haagenti replied, a smirk on his face. “*You* don’t get it. If someone’s after me, they’re gonna get a lot more than they’re bargaining for.”

A hiss interrupted their conversation, and Haagenti spun to see a freezer door cracking open on the other side of the room. Mickey shuddered nearby. Inside the freezer stood a man, bundled up, his features hidden beneath layers of clothes

“You used this wretch to get to me? Hiding in a freezer so I couldn’t sense you. Clever,” Haagenti shouted at the figure, a chuckle in his voice. “Humans never fail to amuse me.”

The figure remained static. Its posture bold and unwavering.

“Well, what is it you want, my mysterious man?” Haagenti smirked.

The silhouette slid a hand to its belt, freeing a blade. In a flash, the room filled with heat, flames spewing from the metal of the dagger. The frost coating the tuna dripped as it melted.

Haagenti's cough overpowered his throat.

“What’s wrong?” The figure finally asked, his voice as cold as the freezer they were standing in. “Is the air a little thick?”

“You… where did you get that?” Haagenti snapped, eyes locked on the flaming blade. He turned towards Mikey, wrath engulfing his eyes. “You treacherous little shit!”

He grabbed Mikey by the collar, pulling him close. Heat swelled behind Mikey's eyes until they blistered like plastic over a flame, bubbling and popping in their sockets. Mikey fell to the ground, flailing as his screams pierced the air. Haagenti turned back towards the figure in the freezer, but by the time he did, there was no one there.

"Shit. Where did you—" His words were cut short as a blade sliced through his pinstripe suit from behind. Flames erupted out of his wound, so hot that even Haagenti couldn't handle them. He dropped to a knee, cursing as he scoured the room for any sight of the figure. He covered his mouth, unable to stop his racking cough. He pulled his hand away. Blood soaked his palm.

"Run." A voice commanded from somewhere in the frozen chamber.

Panicked, Haagenti lunged for the door, busting through and falling to the ground on the other side. When he looked back, the stranger was in view, slowly lurching closer with alarming patience. Haagenti scrambled to his feet and sprinted out of the vacant market. Pivoting towards the far wall of bricks, his eyes darted until he spotted the narrow crevice he needed. He felt a weak smile cover his face.

Reaching into his pocket, his relief morphed to dread.

Where's my key?

Dropping to the floor, he clawed through the junk he'd spilled earlier that night. After a panicked moment of uncertainty, his fingers finally closed around his key, tangled in a crinkled tissue. He jammed the key into the hole, but it didn't turn.

Haagenti gasped, struggling for breath. For the first time in his life, cold seeped through his body. The shocking feeling was alien. His hand trembled, reaching for his back, but was unable to grasp something embedded between his shoulder blades.

He spun on his heel. The shadowy figure stood still, face to face, eyes locking onto his.

A once-thought impossibility now stood here in the flesh.

"I… I have to warn my father," he stammered, shock overtaking him. "I have to—"

"Not gonna happen," the impossibility replied.

With one brutal kick, he launched Haagenti against the wall, driving the blade deeper into his back.

—

Haagenti screamed, a sound more animal than human, as flames consumed him from the inside out, eating away at his features until only charred bones remained.

For a moment, the night was silent.

"Great job." From around the corner stepped an umber man in a floral jacket, his hair and beard trimmed with meticulous care. Despite the modern cut, he had an air of mystery that didn't belong to this era. "The saltwater misting into the room was a good touch."

"Big help you were, Barbatos," Callum replied, standing over the steaming remains.

"Mad I made you do the chasing by yourself, Cal?" Barbatos asked, clearly frustrated. "I did my part, I set this whole thing up. A little gratitude wouldn't kill you once in a while, you know."

Callum grunted.

"Good enough," Barbatos remarked. "Now take his key, get his door, and get out of here. I'll get rid of Haagenti and the pervy human he melted in the freezer."

Callum reached for the key embedded in the wall and twisted it. The bricks scrambled away, revealing a plum-colored door. He grabbed the handle, turned it, and hesitated a moment before stepping partway through.

He turned towards Barbatos.

“Thanks.”

“See, that wasn’t so—” the door slammed shut before Barbatos could finish. The bricks cascaded back into place, leaving him alone on the street. “Good talk, Cal. Great work tonight.”

—

Barbatos crouched beside the scorched remains of Haagenti, scooping them into a bag. The distant sound of sirens roared into the night, their red and blue hues illuminating the wharf.

“Oh, perfect,” he muttered, smooshing his face into his hands. “Well, I guess that human’s off the hook. For now.”

Now, what to do with these? He thought, lifting the bag of bones. “I guess I’ll be taking you with me.”

Reaching into his pocket, he removed a key of his own. He slid it into the crevice of the wall, turning it and revealing a burnt orange door.

“You’ve never seen my place, have you, Haagenti?”

Chapter 1: Unsettling Enthusiasm

Like most mornings, Mae awoke to the snoring of her half-pig, half-cat-like dog, Murton. Slouched across the nape of her neck, the small beast made what could only be described as a medley of oinking and purring.

He was out like a light.

"Get off of me, you rat," Mae mumbled, her voice muffled as she lay face down.

She fished her arm out from underneath her pillow, using it to push Murton off. Unfazed by the action, he slid off her neck, body slumped, too tired to wake. He would lie in bed all day if she let him. But as soon as he suspected Mae was getting ready to leave the apartment, all the energy in the world would shoot into him.

Weird, little guy, she thought to herself. *You're lucky you're cute.*

Mae reached over and scratched the sole white spot in a sea of black fur that adorned his belly. Contentment snores rumbled out as she continued to scratch.

Mae dragged herself out of bed, her curly red hair jetting out like a Medici collar and opened her closet. She was taken aback by how bare it presented itself, which shouldn't have been a surprise, as the overflowing hamper in the corner should've been an indicator she was running low on her favorites. Not impressed by the selection hanging up, Mae rummaged through her dirty clothes, pulling out and dusting off a pair of maroon overalls. Simple, but effective. *You can never go wrong with overalls.*

The desire to live in the country never called to Mae, she loved the city too much. But the call to dress up like a cute little old farmer? Always on her mind.

She slipped the overalls over a black shirt, worn to the point where the *Revenge of the Sith* graphic was now only a ghostly outline of Hayden Christensen's shadowy eyes. Adjusting one of the straps, she then noticed the mustard stain.

A stark reminder of a recent failed attempt at love.

A few months before, she had invited the bartender of her favorite local brewery to a basketball game. Things seemed to be going smoothly at first, but as she was returning with their concessions, she tripped down the stairs and fumbled the food, splashing mustard onto her overalls. The well-intentioned man attempted to make light of the situation and help her up, but Mae was too embarrassed to listen to the man's words. She snapped at him as she lay there, sprawled out on the sticky floor.

The awkward tension that followed lasted the rest of the game.

As soon as it happened, she knew she had messed up. Her tongue had become that of her father's—aggressive, but unwilling to resolve. Mae wished she could take it back, or even apologize and move on, but the pressure of the unwanted gaze of those seated around them kept her from admitting her wrongdoings.

The man never called back. And worse, she could no longer bring herself to go to her favorite Tuesday night trivia spot.

Mae had been gifted those Pelican tickets after the tax season was over, as a reward for being "Accountant of the Year." She had worked all year tirelessly, hoping that the effort would fill her with a sense of accomplishment. But it never came. Deep down, she knew her job as an accountant for a boat parts manufacturer would never satisfy her.

The only time she found herself content with her work was when she was volunteering and helping others. But most places had told her that her ‘disagreeable’ or ‘excitable’ attitude needed to be toned down, so she eventually stopped going.

I have to do laundry before the party. This is embarrassing.

Mae threw a load of clothes in the washer, so that they could be ready by the time she got back from the farmers market.

She walked out of her room, stretching out the morning aches as she walked to Gabi’s room.

Knock, knock, knock.

“You awake, Gabi?” she asked as she tapped on the door.

A zombie-like groan echoed from the other side of the door.

Buzz, buzz.

Mae reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone; a text from Gabi.

“*Dang*, Gabi, this is going to be a feast!” Mae shouted into the room. “Can’t wait!”

It wasn’t unusual for Mae to get the groceries for Gabi; that was their deal. Mae hated cooking, and Gabi hated leaving the apartment. The two best friends had a solid system, and both of them got what they wanted. The price of groceries was a small price to pay for home-cooked meals.

But today was special. It was Mae’s birthday, and Gabi would be preparing all the food for the party. Mae knew this was no small feat, so she felt extra grateful today, thanks to her friend's thoughtfulness.

Mae slipped on her once-white shoes and shook her keys. The jingling of metal caused Murton to fly out of bed, hitting the floor with a *thunk*, before running over to meet Mae at the door.

***

"Hello, Maeve," a voice called from behind Mae's back.

An involuntary shiver ran down her spine. Unseen eyes traced her frame, and she could feel their piercing gaze. With the door shut and locked, Mae turned to face the leathery old man who beckoned her attention.

"Hey, Frank," she begrudgingly forced herself to say.

Her neighbor, Frank, was an interesting character, to say the least. There wasn't anything intrinsically unlawful about him. He was a quiet enough neighbor. But something about him made Mae's stomach go *"creep."* And her gut was rarely wrong.

Or maybe it was just him being old. And lonely.

The thought made Mae feel disappointed in herself. Because, in truth, she hoped that people didn't think about her like that when she got old.

And lonely…

"Gabriela said she's putting together something pretty special for your birthday tonight."

"Yeah, I'm actually on my way to pick up everything for it right now. So I should be…"

Frank just stood there, staring at Mae with a slack-jawed smile. The lack of eye contact reminded Mae of why she despised the man. Even now, with her body covered in denim, he made it clear by his gaze he couldn't help himself from picturing what was underneath.

Did Gabi say anything about a party? Does he want me to invite him? Because I'm not letting this creep into my apartment. Even if I do feel a little bad for the guy…

“Well, I’ve gotta get going before Murton poops on the floor. Again.” She started to slowly shuffle down the hallway.

Phew. Another close call.

It was counted a success if she could make it out of the hallway before Frank could rope her into helping him fix something in his filthy apartment. Or more accurately, ask for Mae’s help but then decide to fix it himself while she stood there holding his toolbox as he yapped at her for an hour.

For all his faults, she understood him. He just wanted company. And Mae was glad he was better than her last neighbor, who kept using ‘healing crystals’ on Mae from afar, and would then proceed to try to charge her for the involuntary healings.

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As soon as Mae got out of the front doors of the apartment complex, Murton scurried over to the grass, walking in the crab-like fashion he did whenever he had to poop.

As Murton finished getting it all out of his system, he refused to break eye contact. Mae bagged the poop and tossed it in a nearby can.

She then guided him down the Mississippi, taking in the sights of the boats that bobbed in the water. Mae had always loved seeing the big steamboat that docked near her apartment. There was something about the simplicity and sturdiness of the boat that she envied.

As they walked, she pulled her phone out to check the grocery list Gabi had sent her.

Eggs, ground beef, tomatoes, blah, blah, blah. It was a simple list, sans the quantity.

Distracted by her reading, Mae didn’t notice the woman until she walked straight into her, sending Mae sprawling out onto the ground.

“Hey, watch where you’re—” Mae lost her words as she met the woman’s gaze, who was standing over her. The woman’s stance was firm and unmoving.

“Oh my. Are you alright?” The woman asked, the cadence of her voice eerily monotonous. Mae couldn’t help but recoil as the woman talked, her breath reminiscent of one of the marshes she used to fish at with her dad.

The woman’s head tilted, and her jaw quivered, like an animal being forced to sit before its dinner. She crouched down, her hand quick to Murton’s fur, stroking him with unsettling enthusiasm.

“What a handsome… dog.” Her sunken, hollow eyes were transfixed on Murton. “He’s got such a pretty coat,” she continued, her words shallow as she stroked his fur.

Murton, who was usually on his back at the first signs of pets, stood on all fours, his posture frozen.

“Thanks…” Mae replied, unnerved.

“Oh my deary, you look like a mess. Why don’t you let me hold onto your dog while you go and get changed? Your fall has ruined your outfit,” the woman offered. Her smile was wide, but didn’t quite reach her eyes, which lacked focus, like they were staring straight through Mae.

“It’s okay, it’s just a little dust,” Mae responded, not wanting to take the woman up on her offer.

“Are you sure?” The woman asked once more, reaching out to grab the leash.

Mae pulled the leash back in surprise, jerking Murton out of his mesmerized state.

The woman frowned with comical depth and started whimpering.

“Yeah. I’m sure…” Mae slowly backed away from the woman who remained crouched where Murton once stood.

The hairs on Mae's body stood straight up, as the woman's moans continued even as they walked away.

What the actual fuck? Mae thought to herself as she started to move faster and faster down the street.

***

As they got closer to the farmers' market, Murton's nose started to go haywire. He loved the smell of all the different booths. His tail wagged wildly as they approached, as if expecting some of the food might have been prepared for him.

Mae didn't know if dogs could be egocentric, but if they could, Murton definitely thought the world revolved around him.

The pair approached the bistro that stood in the opening of the market, and Mae ordered her usual. A 16-ounce iced honey matcha latte. Her perfect way to start the day. Delicious *and* refreshing. As Mae went to grab her latte, her teeth poking through a grin in gleeful anticipation, something in the corner of her eye caught her attention…

A squirrel. Murton's sworn enemy. More so than the birds that perched on their kitchen windowsill most evenings, taunting Murton with their ignorant bliss.

But this was not your everyday, run-of-the-mill squirrel. This one looked like it was on the verge of death. Its fur was matted and patchy, moving with a slow, jerky gait as if every step caused the creature immeasurable pain.

Murton noticed the moribund creature as well, and his reaction was exceptionally quicker than Mae's.

As Mae wrapped her fingers around the drink, Murton lunged in the direction of the squirrel, pulling with all the strength he could muster. Preoccupied by the latte, and surprised by

the unexpected tug, Mae dropped Murton's leash, leaving him free to charge after the scraggly creature.

Mae's jaw clamped down in horror as Murton chased after the emaciated squirrel, which dodged its way through a crowd of tourists who no doubt had come to the market to enjoy the first of many beignets of their trip.

This is my worst nightmare, Mae thought to herself as she spun on her heel to sprint after her dog. *I'm going to kill him.*

Mae continued to run, wincing at every caught-off-guard yelp that echoed through the crowd. The squirrel, trying to avoid the dog that was hot on its tail, bounded over a nearby vegetable cart. Murton followed suit, weaving through the legs of the cart's owner, causing him to stumble and drop a large squash onto the floor, which exploded in orange carnage.

"Dammit!" The man loudly swore at the dog.

"I'll pay for that in a minute, Mr. Leroy," Mae promised with labored breath as she ran past the man, trying not to lose distance on her dog. "Murton, stop! Bad boy!"

Just as Murton got to the edge of Mae's line of sight, a hand shot out from behind a column, grabbing Murton's leash and pulling him to an abrupt stop before he could latch his jaw around the disgusting squirrel.

A bloody massacre spared. No unsuspecting children scarred for life today.

The hand reached down and picked up Murton, who stopped his incessant barking. Anger flared in Mae's eyes as she turned the corner of the column.

"Murton, I swear to God I'm going to—" Mae started to say, but trailed off as she met the gaze of the man holding him?.

She found herself dwarfed in the man's shadow, his athletic arms holding Murton with ease. Mae studied his contrasting features. His jet-black hair was tousled with a careless charm, but his posture proved deliberate, his shoulder wide with a quiet confidence. Mae found herself locked in a gaze of deep and piercing green eyes. Like something in her mind clicked when they saw them, and lulled all the anger she was about to unleash on her pet.

He held her stare until Murton, the traitorous little beast, attacked his face with wild licks, covering his dark brown skin in a glossy layer of slobber. The man laughed as the dog tickled him, before setting him on the ground.

"Sorry, he's not usually that… friendly," Mae stammered out, heat rushing into her cheeks. She could feel the red tint of embarrassment that swam through her alabaster skin.

"Don't be," he replied. "Dogs can't help themselves. They love me."

I bet, Mae thought to herself. *Should I tell him Murton spends most of his day licking his own butt? Probably not…*

Mae felt her internal monologue fizzle out as she stared at the man again, unable to look away from the sea of color in his eyes. She could feel the weight of his eyes settling on her, like she was the only thing in the world to focus on.

"Oh, uh, thank you, by the way," she managed to express, taken aback by how embarrassingly high her voice came out. She cleared her throat a few times to recenter herself. "Seriously. I think I would've jumped in the river if he had made any bigger of a scene."

The man chuckled, his laugh low and rich, sending a strange flutter through Mae's chest.

"Don't worry about it, it was nothing," he replied. "But this guy's a lot stronger than he looks. Hopefully he doesn't give you this much trouble too often."

He reached down to pet Murton, who was frantically twirling his head in pursuit of the now long-gone squirrel.

"You'd be surprised," Mae said, crossing her arms and leaning as casually as she could. "He's kinda the worst. But I still love him."

"I'm Callum, by the way," the man said, extending a hand.

Mae took it and noticed the restrained gentleness in his grasp

Dang, those are some calluses, Callum, she thought, chuckling at her own pun. *Stupid.*

"Maeve. But all my friends call me Mae," she answered. "And this little idiot is Murton."

"Well, I'm glad I was here to help," Callum said, kneeling down to scratch behind Murton's ears. The dog rumbled in gratitude.

Be assertive, Mae. Boys like direct girls, Gabi's words of wisdom rang in Mae's head. *Well, boys like it when we do anything. It's annoying.*

The idea of turning thirty and still being single scared Mae for some reason. It's not like once she hit thirty, things would actually change, but something about the big three-o seemed intimidating. And if she was being honest, she just didn't want to have to do it alone.

"You know," she blurted out. "Murton's kind of an attention whore, and well, I just got this drink, so my hands are full and I still have to shop for dinner. Would you… want to walk with me while I pick out some stuff?"

Callum paused, and then his smile deepened, which warmed Mae like sunlight breaking through clouds.

"It would be my pleasure. How can I be the most help?"

Son of a bitch, Mae thought. *Gabi was right. It's just that easy.*

“Here,” she said, holding out Murton’s leash, their fingers brushing as he took it. “You can handle him, right? He’s got a pretty good pull.”

Callum twisted the leash in his grip.

“Don’t worry, I think I can handle him.”

Mae’s heart beat loud in her ears, and she swore she could still feel his lingering touch on her hand.

***

Mae and Callum wandered through the market, weaving through stalls that brimmed with fresh produce, fragrant spices, and friendly faces. They walked with a slow gait, neither too eager to get their shopping done in a reasonable time. Callum was savoring this moment. It was apparent to Mae in the relaxed rhythm of his steps, as he ignored the huffs of impatience from passersby around them.

The sounds of vendors negotiating prices and kids pleading with their parents for sweet treats created a hum of life that echoed through the market. Yet to Mae, those sounds disappeared as she focused on Callum’s words.

“And what are you going to do with that?” Mae asked in confusion.

“I’ve actually been experimenting with an old Mexican cookbook from the 1800s,” he started to explain as he paid for a stack of cactus paddles and placed them in his tote. “I picked it up at a garage sale back home in Seattle. And I’ve been meaning to give this nopal salad recipe a shot.”

Callum gestured and talked with a flair of confidence as they walked, like they’d been friends for years. A quality Mae envied. She always felt like first impressions came hardest for her. *They just have to get to know the real me,* she found herself constantly reflecting on after

most of her first-time encounters. But even as she stumbled and stammered her way through the conversation, she still felt hopeful. It helped that Callum latched onto every word she spoke, like it was the most interesting thing she could've said.

That was typically a spurious quality Mae despised, but in Callum, she felt the authenticity.

"Seattle, huh?" Mae asked, half-heartedly studying a clutch of heirloom tomatoes. "So what brings you all the way to New Orleans? Besides our spectacular cactus scene."

"Books," he replied to her sarcasm. "There are a few I've been hunting for years. And I'm getting close. *Really* close."

"Are you a big reader, or something?" Mae asked, digging to find out more about the man.

"I do, quite a bit, but I also run an antiquarian bookstore back up in Seattle."

"Antiquarian?" Mae tilted her head in confusion.

"It just means old. I sell a lot of old books," Callum explained.

"So, like an antique bookstore?"

"Well, technically, antiquarian is more accurate because—" Callum started to say before cutting himself off. "It doesn't matter, does it?"

Mae shrugged, not wanting to point any jabs at Callum this early into getting to know him. She was actively putting a filter up in her mind, trying to make sure she didn't blurt out any unintentionally devious remarks.

"Sorry. I tend to overexplain my thoughts on things that don't matter," Callum admitted. "What about you, though? Are you from around here?"

“Born and raised just a couple of hours away.” Mae did her best to point in the direction she thought was northwest. “But the city, it’s totally different. It’s loud, crazy, and I’m constantly trying to convince myself to leave. But it’s home now.”

“Not where you grew up?”

A lifetime of memories drifted into Mae’s mind, which were finally strong enough to pull her out of the perpetual bliss she was experiencing. Cranking the volume of the living room TV to drown out her dad’s cries, walking to the laundry room to buy snacks from a vending machine for dinner, falling asleep wrapped up in her mom’s dress…

“Not for a long time,” Mae replied, a tinge of sorrow in her tone.

Callum didn’t reply. He just set a hand on her shoulder, squeezing to show her she wasn’t alone. Mae wasn’t going to let those memories sour her day. She had let them taint enough of her life.

“You know, all of this stuff isn’t even for me. Kinda,” she said, clearing her throat. “It’s for my roommate, Gabi. She’s cooking up something special for my birthday tonight. We’re having a little get-together at our apartment. It’s gonna be chill. *Super* chill.”

The words tumbled out of Mae’s mouth in a rush, and she found herself immediately cringing at how awkward she sounded.

Super chill? Really, Mae?

“Happy birthday,” Callum wished her. “You must be a pretty special friend to deserve something like that.”

His words hit like a wave crashing through Mae’s chest, and before she could stop herself, a snort escaped.

Oh my God, a snort? Mae, please stop! She kept pleading in her mind. *You’re losing it!*

But Callum didn't see it the same way Mae did. While she thought he'd be put off by such an act, he found it endearing. Like a boy on the playground who's secretly thrilled a girl thinks he's charming.

"It's not a big deal or anything," she said, quickly fanning herself with a hand, as if it could dispel the warmth that crept up her neck. "But if you don't have any plans tonight… maybe you could stop by. Meet some of my friends who live around here. You could even let me spank you in a board game or two."

Callum's grin widened, and for a startling moment, Mae worried that he might start laughing.

"Oh, you misunderstood… this." She feared he'd say.

"I'd love that," he answered instead. "I'd love that a lot. Just let me know where and when."

Mae ripped into her bag with startling speed, digging through viciously until she pulled out a folded New York Times Crossword. She tore a piece off the edge, ripping through the puzzle. *It's okay, it's a Saturday. I wouldn't have finished it anyway.* Scribbling down her address and phone number, she handed it to him, her hand stuck in his as she set the scrap in his grip. His touch was warm and steady, and her heart stumbled in response.

"It's at seven," she said, meeting his eyes one last time. "If you can make it."

He held the small slip of paper as if it were something precious, his thumb slowly brushing over her handwriting.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Chapter 2: Carved Plump

"Oh, cariño," Gabi said before punching Mae on the shoulder. "I'm so freaking proud of you."

Ouch, Mae thought, rubbing her shoulder. Gabi might've been small, but her punches were mighty. But no matter how often Mae admitted that to Gabi, she always wrote it off.

"It was nothing," Mae lied. *It was everything.*

To some, chatting up strangers and asking them out was just another part of life. But it wasn't for this pair. In the past two years, Mae had asked out exactly one person, which resulted in faceplanting public humiliation.

"Told you, you didn't need me," Gabi said, tucking a dark, loose hair behind her ear.

"No! You still have to go out with me if this doesn't work out," Mae retorted, pointedly waving her finger in Gabi's face. "You know I don't have anyone else to ask!"

This was true. Mae didn't have anyone else this close in her life besides Gabi. But neither minded not having any other close friends. Both of them had grown up on the outskirts of popularity, so having one best friend who loved them unconditionally meant more.

For months, Mae had been begging Gabi to go out with her to try to meet someone, but Gabi repeatedly refused to stay out past seven. Every evening after work, Gabi would cocoon herself in a blanket and crash on the couch, spending the night watching k-dramas and shows about vampires trying to fit in with high schoolers. Gabi loved routine, and she loved her solitary time even more. She'd made it clear, she never felt like she was missing out on romance. It would take away from her own time. Although she didn't mind if Mae stayed in with her, they could be alone together. That, she'd said, was acceptable.

Mae never pushed too hard because she could understand Gabi. At the end of the day, she had lived the same way for most of her life. But lately, her heart had been yearning for more. For a purpose beyond these apartment walls and beyond comfortable friendship.

"You don't need anyone else," Gabi insisted. "Look at you. You're the whole package!"

Gabi said it with such conviction, Mae believed her.

And why shouldn't she? Mae had spent the last few years working to push herself into the person she wanted to be. More responsible, active, and not afraid to venture outside of the apartment. Hell, at this point, Mae could even feel muscles starting to form underneath her skin.

Real muscles! She would randomly rediscover. It was a strange feeling being stronger now at thirty than she'd been at twenty.

"Shit," Mae said in panic, looking at the clock on the kitchen wall. "We have to get ready! There are only four hours left until people start showing up."

"You clean, I'll cook. Then just focus on getting beautiful, babe."

Mae nodded with enthusiasm.

Let's do this.

***

Mae tore through the apartment like a cyclone, cleaning cracks and crevices that hadn't seen the light of day since the duo moved their second-hand furniture in. She was determined to make this place *spotless.* She wasn't going to let Callum's first impressions of her home be that of a disheveled pigsty.

Sweat dripped down her back as she continued to scrub the apartment. Looking around, satisfied with how pristine the apartment looked, Mae collapsed into the couch and rested her

eyes. She inhaled, filling her lungs with the smell of freshly sanitized surfaces and well-seasoned Puerto Rican food—Gabi's specialty.

Mae knew that Gabi had struggled to connect with her parents growing up, whether it was their constant nagging about her work ethic or disagreements about her lifestyle. However, the one thing they could agree on was food. After her grandfather passed away, Gabi's family was given his personal recipe book, which was filled to the brim with dishes from his hometown. Her family had treated the book like a religious text, with Gabi its most loyal disciple.

Gabi had admitted that she feared when she moved out, her family would slowly drift away, but luckily, her knack for cooking Puerto Rican food kept them in constant contact. She was grateful to her grandfather for keeping her family connected, even if the purpose of that connection was to fatten their bellies.

I should deep-clean this place more. Mae took a deep breath. The apartment felt so much bigger without the patches of dirty clothes and tableware scattered throughout.

"It smells divine," Mae told Gabi as she opened her eyes.

"And it'll taste even better," Gabi assured her. Her dark hair and amethyst nails were laced with dried and cracking flour, which she said she was hoping to scrub away before the party started. "Now, stop drooling and get showered. I can smell you from here."

Mae understood Gabi was joking, but only half-heartedly. After Mae's frantic cleaning, she smelled like she had crawled out of a two-hour gym session. Mae stood up and sauntered towards her room. Her aching body begged for a nap, but now wasn't the time.

She opened the door to her room and saw Murton passed out on her bed. Mae couldn't help but envy the creature, lying there in blissful sloth, ready to sleep away the day until the party started. Whenever she hosted, she tried locking him away to spare her guests his constant

begging for food, but he always found a way out. *Always.* Whether it was someone opening the door to see the dog or him managing to snake out on his own, he was an escape artist, and no prison could contain him.

Mae turned on the shower, stepping in immediately. She gasped as the cold water woke her exhausted body, slowly loosening it up as the water warmed. She took deep breaths, letting the water cascade down her back and wash away the hours of manual labor. She lathered her loofah with her go-to body wash, which smelled like a marriage of lavender and jasmine, and grime and sweat washed down the drain.

After indulging in an extra-long shower, Mae stood in front of the mirror, meticulously parting her bangs. She had recently cut them herself, doing her best to recreate the iconic look of Nicole Kidman in her favorite movie, Practical Magic.

As a kid, her mom let her pick it up on a trip to a thrift store, and she would watch it every night as she drifted off to sleep. Even now, as an adult, she had a Pavlovian reaction to any Nicole Kidman or Sandra Bullock movie and would find herself getting drowsy at the sound of their voices.

Mae constantly worried that others would find out and ridicule her for her blatant plagiarism of Gillian's closet and styling efforts. But day by day, she started to care less. Something about getting older made those worries seem more and more ridiculous.

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Even with the party starting to wind up around her, Mae found herself pulling out her phone every minute, not engaging in conversation. Distracted by the time and lack of texts. She wiped her hands on her pants, frustrated with how much they were sweating.

The room filled with a couple of coworkers Mae seldom talked to and trivia teammates she felt obliged to invite, but was mostly occupied by Gabi's expansive family. Grateful for their attendance, they gave the illusion Mae had a lot of friends. The Guzmáns couldn't believe Gabi had made a friend on her own, so they welcomed Mae into their lives with open arms. Love poured out of the family like wine from a carafe. Their sounds of celebration filled the room with unapologetic joy.

Where is he? She thought to herself, not wanting to manifest that he wouldn't show up.

The party only officially started about thirty minutes ago, but she had hoped Callum would get there early so she could give him a tour of her apartment. *And why can't my hands stop sweating?*

The uneasiness that refused to settle reminded her of waiting in a lobby before an interview, when the nerves just wouldn't go away.

Gabi continued to slave away in the kitchen, putting the final touches on all the savory pastries that had just finished baking. Mae noticed that Gabi tried to ignore her cousins' pestering in the kitchen. She had taken a minute to tidy up before the party started, but Mae hoped she didn't put in too much effort, as she was already once again covered in grease stains.

Mae couldn't stop tapping her foot in anticipation, so she decided to move towards the couches and sank into the cobalt recliner that sat on the edge of the carpet. It was her go-to spot for movie nights. It had that worn-but-comfy feel that you couldn't get from new furniture these days.

Someone was foolish enough to leave it outside on the curb with a giant "FREE" sign taped to its back. Mae wished she had seen it earlier, because they moved it in the day after a storm, so it was soaked by the time they got it into the apartment. Mae and Gabi had struggled to

get the massive piece of comfort through their front door, but luckily, Frank offered to remove their door, and they were able to slide it through. He had owed them a few favors, after all of Mae's trips into his apartment to "help," so it was nice finally cashing in one of those favors. They had to wait a couple of days for the chair to dry out, but by the time it did, the couch was worth all the effort.

This had become Mae's comfort spot.

Next to Mae, a teammate from her trivia team chatted away. Fatima was trying to tell Mae about her dad's new crawfishing boat, but Mae was zoned out. She caught every few words that were said, but she wasn't actively listening. She just nodded along, pretending to be interested. Fatima had been known to talk for hours on a one-way call, so she wasn't worried about spacing out.

Mae heard a knock on the door, and her ears perked up, her posture correcting itself.

"Come in!" Someone yelled from the apartment. Eyes locked on the entrance, she saw it open, Callum walking in and standing under the doorframe as he took off his shoes.

A strange burp caught in Mae's throat, and a sound she had never made escaped her mouth.

"Who's that?" Fatima asked, her eyebrows raised.

She started to get up from her seat on the couch, but Mae moved faster, shoving Fatima back into her seat.

"Nobody!" she yelled at her, running towards the front of the apartment.

Mae had been to brunch with Fatima and her mother before, so she knew how much pressure Fatima was under to find a 'nice, successful boy.' Mae refused to let Fatima snake

Callum away from her as she had done with the prizes their team had won on various nights. Besides, it was *her* birthday, and she *really* liked Callum, so she was allowed to be a little selfish.

Mae slowed down to look casual as she approached him.

"I love your sweater," she said to Callum, trying to take his attention away from Gabi's uncle, with whom he had struck up a conversation upon entering.

"Thanks," he replied. "Since I'm always traveling, I don't do the party scene too often. I felt like I had to break out my best. Oh, and I brought this for you!" He handed over a small box, gift-wrapped in out-of-season Christmas wrapping paper. "I made it myself."

Mae quickly snatched the box out of his hands, ignoring the shoddy wrapping. Her love language was receiving gifts, but it wasn't the contents she cared about. She just enjoyed the simple delight of having something to open. It made her feel special and gave her a youthful excitement that most of her peers didn't seem to understand. Or rather, they seemed to have lost the thrill of not knowing what was inside.

"You don't have to open it right now if you—" Callum started to say, but cut himself off when Mae immediately tore into the paper, sending bits of cartoon evergreens sprawling all over the floor.

Mae didn't know what to expect. What do you get someone for their birthday before you've even gone on a first date?

A bracelet? Some tickets to a show? A book? Her mind raced with guesses.

But she never could have guessed what she was about to pull out. Just small enough for Mae to be able to clutch it in one hand, it sat around three inches wide. She turned it over and inspected the carving.

Frizzled, white hairs stuck out of a felt hat that sat on the top of its wooden head. Under its beady eyes, cheeks had been carved plump and painted a light, rosy red. It was almost so ugly it was cute.

Almost.

The more Mae looked at it, the more she wanted to throw it out the window.

"Look, I know it's not the prettiest. But it's called a kobold, and it took me almost three hours to make, so you're legally obligated to put it on your shelf for at *least* two weeks." Callum joked, pointing to the bookshelf that was next to them. "I read about them in this Germanic folklore book I picked up in Heidelberg. They call them 'hausgeists' and they're supposed to look over your house."

"He's very… how do I say this?" Mae responded, continuing to try and find something positive to say about the creature.

"Ugly?" Callum asked, rubbing his head.

"He's horrendous!" Mae added. But the fact that Callum had made it himself made it precious. She clutched the doll tighter, feeling the uneven surface beneath her fingers. "I love it."

"Yeah, I'm not the best artist," Callum admitted. "Which is why I also got you this."

He pulled out a small stuffed ghost, handing it to her.

"It's for Murton. Hopefully, this will keep him distracted a bit."

Mae squeezed the toy, and a somber *"Boooo…"* echoed out of it.

"He'll love this!" she exclaimed.

Murton had a knack for destroying toys that made noise. Once he heard a peep, he became hell-bent on ripping them open to find the squeaker inside. Even toys made for big dogs stood no chance. He was vicious. Mae appreciated the gift, though, because she had a hard time

justifying buying toys like this herself. Especially since they'd have to be thrown away after a couple of hours of play.

A question formed in Mae's mind.

"Wait, I thought kobolds were those weird little lizard guys from D&D?" she asked. "Gabi's always talking about her online campaigns."

"That's actually very interesting. So, originally, kobolds were—"

"Food's ready!" Gabi shouted from the kitchen.

"Hold that thought," Mae requested, holding up a hand. She set the kobold carving on the bookshelf next to them. "Let's get some food first."

The pair walked into the kitchen, grabbed plates, and started piling them up with Puerto Rican pastries. Mae was impressed by the selection her friend had put together. She could see the abundance of effort it took and was grateful. Gabi might've been more reserved, but when she put effort into something, she poured her whole heart into the preparations.

They walked over to a now-abandoned couch and plopped down. Gabi joined a minute later and sat next to Mae.

Callum took a bit of the food, his eyes widening as the flavor soaked his tongue.

"Damn!" he shouted. "These empanadas are insanely good."

"Wow, wow, wow," Gabi said, furiously blinking, making a scene to look taken aback. "These are *not* empanadas. They're pastelillos!"

"Oh, sorry," Callum replied. "I'm Callum, by the way. Thanks for having me over."

He reached out, shaking Gabi's hand. Both of them had greasy hands, but neither seemed to mind. "So, what's the difference?"

“What’s the difference?” Gabi asked, her face contorted in disbelief. “The crust, Callum. *The crust!* If my dad hears you say that, he’ll throw you out the window before you can finish your sentence. You’re lucky Mae has such a big crush on you. Otherwise, I’d really let you have it.”

Mae almost choked on her food. Her face started to heat up in embarrassment, darkening to match the hue of her hair.

“Well, they’re super good,” Callum responded, unfazed by Gabi’s loose tongue. “I don’t get to enjoy a ton of homemade meals, so this is *genuinely* one of the best things I’ve eaten in a long time.”

“Well, obviously it is,” Gabi said, relaxing and appreciative of the compliment. Her chin pointed higher into the air, his words elevating her confidence. She turned towards Mae, “I approve. Good pick.”

Mae, who wanted to change the subject quickly, turned towards Callum.

“You said you don’t eat a lot of homemade meals… not big into cooking?”

“I travel a lot for work,” Callum answered. “And I usually don’t have a kitchen in the hotels I stay at. I’m also, admittedly, a pretty lousy chef.”

“What’s up with that?” Mae asked. “You said you were in town for a book. Is that common for bookstore owners? To be traveling around all the time.”

“Well, not exactly,” he replied. Callum ran his fingers through his hair, unsure how to answer. “But the books I acquire are usually *unique*.”

“Unique?” Mae asked, leaning forward, her interest piqued.

“A lot of my clients are very interested in the occult,” he answered. “So the books they’re looking for usually take some hunting to find.”

“Like ghosts and stuff?” Gabi said, food flying out of her mouth as she talked.

“And stuff,” Callum replied.

“Cool,” the two women said in unison.

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The party started winding down to a halt, and most of Mae and Gabi’s friends were already home for the night. Mae and Callum had spent most of the night talking, with a couple of breaks spread throughout for Mae to crush her guests in a variety of board games.

Mae took in the sight of the party’s aftermath. Dirty napkins laid crumpled up, drained cups crushed and tipped over, and a few party poppers littered the floor, their streams spilling out onto the carpet.

Where did they get those? Mae thought to herself, knowing she didn’t provide them.

Mae let out a sigh, and her legs grew heavy as she felt the adrenaline from the party leaving her. A mixture of content and tiredness stirred within.

“Want some help?” someone asked from behind.

Mae jumped in surprise. Her mind had started to zone out at the daunting task in front of her. She turned around to see Callum holding a trash bag.

“That would be amazing,” she said, a smile gleefully plastered on her face. “Thanks, Callum.”

The two worked side-by-side, picking up and throwing away trash left on the floor by inconsiderate guests. Mae caught herself stealing glances at Callum every time he moved into her peripheral vision. She couldn’t decide if she wanted him to notice her glances or leave them unseen.

Callum walked into the kitchen, snagging one more pastelillo and shoving it into his mouth before opening the cabinet under the sink and grabbing a container of wet wipes. He wiped down the puddles of sticky soda scattered around the floor.

"I'm really glad you invited me," Callum said, tossing a wipe in the trash. "It's been great getting to know you a little more."

Mae felt her heart beat against her chest.

"Me too," she agreed. "I'm glad you came. It meant a lot."

There was a moment of comfortable silence that draped the room as the two found themselves staring into each other's eyes. Mae usually hated silence. It created an awkwardness she could hardly bear. But with Callum, it felt different. It was the kind of coziness that made her feel like they could curl up on the couch together and be perfectly fine not talking for hours.

Callum took a step closer, his voice delicate.

"I've been wondering if maybe you'd want to hang out again sometime. Just the two of us?" he asked.

Mae's smile widened, and her pulse quickened.

Thump, thump. Her heart raced. *Thump, thump.*

She hoped she didn't look *too* stupid with a preposterously large grin.

"I'd like that," she answered. "I'd like that a lot."

"Great." Callum's eyes drifted from Mae's eyes to her mouth, and back to her eyes. "How about Sunday? I'm always on the lookout for good brunch spots. Plus, that'll give us the rest of the day."

"To do what?" Mae asked, excited at the idea of spending more time together.

"No clue yet. But I can't wait to find out."

Mae could feel a giggle forming in her throat. She worried that when she talked, it would escape.

"It's a date."

As they finished tidying up, Mae couldn't help but feel like a new chapter in her life was starting to unfold. Sometimes you could tell when your whole world was going to be flipped upside down, and Mae was ready for the fall.

Maybe thirty won't be too bad.

***

"Oh, he *totally* wanted to kiss you," Gabi lectured Mae. "That was definitely the sign."

"Shut it," Mae replied, a little embarrassed. "We haven't even gone on an *actual* date yet. We were just chatting." Mae started to pick her nails. "Besides, what if we really do have something special? I don't want to rush it or anything."

"You don't have to rush anything if you don't want to," Gabi reassured. "That just means more nights in with me binging 'Civil War Vampire Brothers' and drinking wine floats."

Mae thought about that.

She did, admittedly, enjoy her nights in with Gabi, watching trashy teen romances and drinking wine. But lately, she felt herself getting antsy on nights in. She was tired of sitting in her favorite recliner all by herself. She was ready to go on adventures with someone and try new things.

And the more Callum talked about his job, traveling the world, the more she imagined herself at his side.

I wonder if he's ever been to London, she thought to herself.

Ever since Mae was a kid, she had always dreamed of visiting. Louisiana never felt like home; she always felt out of place. In her mind, she belonged somewhere in the English countryside, packed away in a small but cozy cottage. Curled up by a fire in the depths of winter, with a warm cup of hot chocolate in her hands.

"You're right," Mae agreed. "Next time I see him, I'm gonna make a move."

Murton barked at the front door.

"You have to go poop? Now?" Mae complained with a long groan. "It's so late, dude. Can you not be annoying for *one* day?"

Mae clipped Murton into his harness and grabbed his leash from its hanger.

Knock, knock, knock.

A confident rhythm tolled from their door.

"It's fate!" Gabi shrieked. "I bet it's Callum, back to give you an 'extra-special' birthday present." She teased, theatrically raising and lowering her eyebrows.

Why did I change into my ugly middle-school boy pajamas? Mae scolded herself.

"Okay, stall him for a minute. I'm going to go and put on my cute PJs."

Mae picked up Murton and sprinted to her room.

"You're staying here," she ordered the dog as she set him on her bed. "Hold your poop in for like ten minutes."

Mae slid across the floor, falling to her knees in front of her beaten-up dresser. She ripped through her clothes, throwing different pieces on the floor, until she held up a set of light blue pajamas. They were Mae's favorites, decorated with various citrus blossoms.

She had bought them on a recent trip she took to the Florida Everglades for work. She might've hated her everyday nine-to-five, but she loved the biannual trips they would take as a

team to Miami to visit their company headquarters. It was a fun escape from the monotony of her job.

Mae got changed as fast as she could, peeking into her bathroom to make sure her bangs were presentable before she saw Callum. She made her way out of her bedroom and into the living room, where she saw…

Frank? Goddamnit, she cursed in her mind.

"Can I get you something to drink, Frank?" Gabi yelled from the kitchen.

"No. I am okay," Frank replied, his tone missing his usual upbeat attitude.

Mae sat across from Frank in her favorite recliner. As reluctant as she was to engage with her neighbor, she sensed that something was amiss with the man.

"Everything alright, Frank?" Mae asked, concerned.

"Yes. I am okay. I am right as rain, Mae," Frank replied. He spoke in a strange cadence, like a computer that couldn't comprehend pacing. "But the inspectors are in my apartment, so I just needed to step out for a moment. Where is your dog? Where is Murton?"

"He's just in my room. I should probably take him out to go to the bathroom. He was barking a second ago."

"Let me take him out for you!" Frank offered excitedly.

"It's okay, Frank. I'll do it in a minute."

There was something wrong with Frank.

His eyes were cavernous, like he had just finished an excruciating day. Mae couldn't put her finger on it, but she could feel something was up. When he spoke, his words made her skin go cold and clammy. Like watching a horror movie on a hot summer's day. It wasn't the usual, innocently creepy vibe he gave off. This was something else.

Mae took out her phone to distract herself and noticed the time; it was nearly midnight.

"Wait, what are inspectors doing at your apartment so late?" Mae asked with uncertainty, a little nervous for the answer.

A sharp screech suddenly blared from the front of the apartment.

Gabi shoved a finger in each ear, like a kid in a fire drill, and rushed from the kitchen to the doorway. She searched for the source of the noise, pulling the hand-carved kobold off the bookshelf. Gabi shoved the screaming doll in a drawer, trying to muffle the noise.

"Okay, your new boyfriend makes some freaky-ass stuff," she remarked, shaking her head as if coming out of a discombobulated state. "You have to text him and ask what the hell that was."

Without saying a word, Frank shot up from his seat and started marching towards Mae's bedroom.

"Hey, Frank. You can't just go into my room!" Mae shouted, trying to stop him. "That's my personal space. It's private!"

Frank ignored Mae's demands and opened the door to her room.

Murton sprinted out, running between Frank's legs, and ran straight to Mae. To Mae's surprise, he jumped straight into her hands. Usually, Murton was so pathetic at jumping that Mae would have to give him a hand to get up on the couch.

Geez, where did that come from? She thought after catching the mutt midair. Murton was shaking uncontrollably, so Mae wrapped her arms around him, kissing him on his head.

"What the hell, Frank?!" Mae asked, her frustration boiling over. "Get out of my apartment, before I *make* you!"

“He’s got such a pretty coat,” Frank said, hunger bleeding through every word, his eyes locked on Murton.

Then, it clicked.

Mae realized why Frank was sending a shiver up her spine tonight.

“You… you and that lady…” She tried to say, but her mind couldn’t form full thoughts. “You… know each other?”

But it wasn’t just their words that unnerved Mae. It was the mannerisms. Mannerisms that she had never seen in Frank—beady and hollow eyes, a sickening tone, and the monotonous flow of their words.

Mae stood there, frozen, as her brain struggled to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Murton barked as Frank slowly crept closer, but Mae didn’t react. Her legs firmly planted.

What’s happening? She wondered, her mind racing as if she was at the start of a disorientating nightmare.

Murton wriggled out of Mae’s statuesque grip and jumped to the floor. He started to run towards Gabi, but as he did, Frank reached into his back pocket and pulled out a short metal wire. In a smooth, swift motion, he flung the wire at Murton, and it wrapped around his legs, dropping him to the ground.

“Murton!” Gabi shouted.

Gabi started moving towards the dog, who writhed on the floor, trying to break free from the constraints that mysteriously lengthened and wrapped tighter. As she got closer, a low, guttural moan echoed out of Frank, causing her to retreat.

Bang! The front door slammed open, the wood splintering near the handle. Callum charged into the apartment, his posture filled with fury. Before anyone could react, he sprinted

toward Frank, tackling him to the floor. They hit the floor in a *thud*, and Callum rolled on top of Frank, pummeling him with unrelenting rage. His fists connected one after another in a sickening rhythm, and Frank just accepted each punch with a laugh. It was a jarring and hollow laugh that made Mae's stomach lurch.

"Callum, stop! What are you doing?" Mae pleaded with her new friend, worried he was going to kill her elderly and fragile neighbor, causing Callum to turn towards Mae.

In an instant, Frank broke free from Callum's grapple and grabbed him by his sweater. He threw Callum across the room, as if he weighed nothing, and Callum crashed into Mae's partially open door, causing it to fracture on impact.

Frank scuttled across the floor on all fours, moving with startling speed. He jumped to his feet, far more agile and fast than any elderly man should be. As he straightened, his bones cracked and popped, like a body unfolding after years of neglect. He snatched Murton off the ground and tucked him underneath his arm.

"Murton!" Mae screamed, but the name barely escaped her lips as she looked into the eyes of her terrified dog. Against all of her instincts, she took a step forward, her hands reaching outward. "Murton…"

Frank's eyes flicked towards Mae, and something gleamed in their depths. Something malevolent.

Then, Frank ran, the room exploding in motion. Frank barreled toward the window that Mae stood near, causing her to dive out of the way. He moved impossibly fast, bursting through the window, glass shattering around him and cascading to the floor.

Gabi ran to the window and peered out, Mae joining her. The two saw Frank standing on the pavement, frantically looking around, Murton still clutched in his arms. Murton continued to struggle against Frank's constraints, sending a desperate howl into the night.

A yellow taxi van raced around the corner and screeched to a halt near Frank. Its side door slid open, and Frank leaped inside, disappearing into its dark interior. The door slammed shut, and the taxi's tires squealed as the van peeled away, disappearing into the labyrinth of the city's streets.

Mae's breath raced. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. She placed her hands on a nearby cabinet, as they started to tremble violently. The cold night's air blew through the broken window, but she didn't feel it as adrenaline raced through her veins.

Murton was gone. After standing there for a minute, completely shell-shocked, her eyes darted towards her room. "Callum!"

Chapter 3: A Parade of Impossibilities

"Wake up, Callum!" Mae yelled at the unconscious man who was lying next to her shattered door, shaking him by the shoulders. "Wake up! Frank stole my dog!"

Callum groaned, his dark waves disheveled as he stirred in a comatose state. For a moment, guilt twisted in Mae's stomach, but it was soon dispelled by anger as she imagined a terrified Murton stuck in a taxi with Frank.

"We're gonna kill Frank!" Gabi shouted, right before slapping Callum across the face. Mae knew she had always wanted to do that. Gabi yearned to abuse the trope every time they saw it in a movie.

Callum's eyes went wide in surprise, taken aback by the sudden strike. "Ouch," he muttered under his breath. "Can you give me a hand up?"

Gabi and Mae each held out a hand, grabbing Callum off the floor. He winced in pain as his shoulders tugged upward.

"You alright?" Mae asked.

"I'll be okay," he grumbled, the strain in his voice betraying his words. He tried to stretch his shoulder, but found it hard to turn as a sharp pain shot into his back. "Is my shoulder cut?"

Mae turned him around to inspect his back, gasping at what she saw. A jagged piece of wood, a few inches long, was jutting out near his scapula.

It wasn't anything *too* serious, but seeing the embedded wood pinged Mae with shame. Callum had come to her aid and gotten injured fighting her elderly neighbor.

"I've got to admit, it looks a little nasty. You've got some of my door sticking out of you. We'll drop you off at the hospital before we head to the cops to tell them about Murton."

Well, that was good while it lasted, she thought to herself.

Defeat rang in Mae's mind. She had grown accustomed to the flaky nature of men. If they found themselves embarrassed too early on in a relationship, they'd flee as if one stumble was enough to pull them away from something special. Something about their ego made them unable to be seen as weak, even for a moment.

So, how could Callum not pull away?

He had come over just to be thrown around like a rag doll by a senior citizen. That was enough to crush any man's worth of self.

"The cops won't be able to help you. They're already too infected," Callum responded. "But I can. First, I'll need you to yank that wood out."

"Infected? No offense, Callum," Gabi said, ripping the wood out without any hesitation, before stuffing the cut with a kitchen towel. Callum jerked, jaw clenched to smother the sound of his pain. "But you just got beaten up by a drugged-out Frank. As much as I despise pigs, I think we should round them up for this one."

"Frank wasn't on drugs, Gabi," Callum replied.

"Yeah? Then how do you explain that freakish strength?"

"It's… hard to explain," he said with a shrug. "You might not believe me if I told you."

Mae looked around at the damage Frank had inflicted on their apartment. "Frank just jumped out of a three-story building with my dog before hitting the ground and running away. I think our minds are about as open as they're gonna get."

Callum's hands knotted together restlessly, twisting one over the other as he contemplated what to say.

"Frank wasn't Frank. He's possessed," he said, hesitating. "By a demon. That's why my kobold started screaming when he got into your apartment. I attuned it to react to their presence."

“I knew there was something off with that thing!” Gabi shouted. “And with Frank! He always gave me the creeps.”

“Actually, the possession had to have just happened. I searched the apartment with the kobold before the party, and nothing triggered it. And Frank was himself when I bumped into him in the hallway. Earlier today, did you notice anything out of the ordinary? Smell anything strange?”

“Yeah, actually, I did. This morning, there was a woman who *really* wanted to hold onto Murton,” Mae answered, thinking back on the woman who smelled like a swamp. “And she was speaking just like Frank was tonight. She gave a weird ‘uncanny valley’ vibe.”

“It was probably the same demon,” Callum replied. “When we first talked, I could smell it on you, which is why I searched the apartment. Sorry for being late, by the way, I wasn’t trying to be cool, I just wanted to make sure you were safe.”

Mae found herself blushing.

It was a reasonably sincere excuse for being late. But could she really take Callum at his word? He wasn’t merely asking her to believe in him; he was asking her to believe in a whole new reality. One that morphed her understanding of the world into something beyond comprehension.

Even if she had cursed Murton daily, occasionally rooting for his demise, he was still loved deeply. His annoyances were just that. Annoyances. At the end of the day, she loved him with such ferocity that she would do anything to get him back.

“So, what do we do next?” Mae asked, convinced that even if this ended up a farce, and it wasn’t an act of the paranormal, Murton was still gone. And that was real.

“That’s it?” Callum asked, eyebrows furrowed. “You’re just going to go along with it?”

“Even if this does sound a bit far-fetched, what can I do about it?” Mae said, dusting off her pajamas. “I saw what happened with my own eyes. And I’m *going* to get Murton back.”

“I’ve always believed in these kinds of things,” Gabi said, her eyes alight with newfound passion. “Plus, I watch a lot of *Supernatural,* so I’ve been preparing for this moment since I was a pre-teen.”

“Guys, I’m not sticking you into this mess. I’m already in deep enough,” Callum said, trying to deter the two. “I’ll get Murton and bring him back.”

“He’s *my* dog, Callum. We’re going with you,” Mae insisted, shoving a finger into his chest.

“Look, it’s not that—” Callum tried explaining, but got cut off by Gabi mimicking Mae, jamming a finger into his chest too.

“Yeah! He’s *our* dog, Callum!” She argued.

“Well, I guess this could be… No. I shouldn’t,” Callum’s fingers tapped against the side of his leg excessively, his eyes tracing invisible probabilities in the air, like he was contemplating a complex equation. “But then again—”

“If it helps,” Mae said, cutting off Callum in his state of debate. “I know where Murton is.”

Callum’s eyes snapped back to reality. “It most certainly does,” he answered pointedly.

Mae pulled out her phone, frantically closing embarrassing tabs, before handing it over to Callum.

“Looks like they’re moving fast,” she said, pointing to a map that surrounded New Orleans.

“Geez, they’re already at the Irish Bayou exit,” Gabi said, examining the little photo of Murton that drifted across the screen. “No way we catch them in my beater, they’re driving *way* too fast. Plus, we’ve got to get you to a doctor first.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Callum said, rolling his shoulder with a wince. “And besides, we don’t need to catch up to them. We just need to wait for them to stop.”

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Mae and Gabi each carried a small duffel bag as they walked through the streets of the French Quarter. Mae couldn’t help but admire the architecture of the city as they made their way down the empty streets. Colorful buildings were stacked next to apartments constructed of brick. The diverse identities of each shop and home gave the streets a personality that one couldn’t find anywhere else.

Callum looked, how Mae assumed he felt, weathered and beat up. He blended in with the handful of drunks that stumbled on the uneven pavement, trying to find cars they shouldn’t be driving.

“I know you said we didn’t have to take my car,” Gabi grumbled, exhausted from the long night clinging to her words. “But we’re not gonna catch up to them by walking.”

“Don’t worry, Gabi, I know a shortcut,” Callum responded, his eyes searching for something in the dark.

“A shortcut? But we don’t even know where they’re going yet,” Gabi whined.

“But we know they’re going *somewhere,* which is why we need to go to my shop first.”

Confused by conflicting information, Mae paused. “But I thought your shop was in Seattle?”

“It is,” Callum answered, not slowing down to explain as he continued his march through the streets.

He might have been new to the city, but Mae noted how he walked with conviction, as if he’d lived here for a lifetime. He pivoted, crossing the street, and pulled the handle of an iron fence. Its creaking hinges echoed into the night.

“And it’s the best place to go, if you’re not sure where you’re headed.”

“Well, that doesn’t make a whole lot of sense,” Mae replied. “Wait, I know where we are.”

“We used to go here all the time,” Gabi said, running a reminiscent hand along the building’s front. They were next door to Reuben’s Bistro, a safe haven for Mae and Gabi when they needed a place to study in college.

“We should come back sometime,” Mae replied, looking through the front windows with nostalgia. “But why did you bring us out here, Callum?”

“Sometimes it’s better to show than tell,” he said, a sly grin across his face as he backed into the dark alley, disappearing into its depths.

Mae followed Callum into the dark, with Gabi close behind, grasping onto the overalls Mae had slipped back on before they ventured out.

Callum surveyed the eastern side of the alley, using his hands to investigate a small section of the brick wall. Its surface was weathered, uneven from years of patchwork maintenance, the original reddish hue faded with time. Cracks ran through the mortar, and a few bricks jutted out awkwardly. Callum’s fingers searched the wall with practiced precision, his hands tracing their surfaces.

His hand caught on a particular groove. From beneath his sweater, he drew a necklace, a key adorning its end. He slid it into a hole indented at the center of one of the bricks and twisted. An unseen lock answered with a click.

The bricks surrounding it scuttled away, like moles slowly recoiling from light. They cracked and groaned as they reconfigured themselves, revealing an elegant wooden door on the other side. It was a rich, dark purple, inlaid with beautiful ivory.

Mae ran a hand along its surface, admiring its expert craftsmanship. The wood was warm and breathed beneath her touch, like laying a hand on an animal. Resting but alive. It filled the alley with an air of magic, its aura dense.

Mesmerized, she muttered, “It’s beautiful…”

Curiosity gnawed at her, and reason pushed back. *You know what’s on the other side,* she couldn’t help but think. She had been to Reuben’s hundreds of times. She knew its interior like she knew her own apartment, able to navigate it blindfolded. There was nothing on the other side of this door except a room full of syrups, extra cups, and napkins.

She turned towards Callum, who looped the key back around his neck. Without a word, he nodded towards the handle; an invitation to open it.

Mae’s fingers wrapped around the handle. She went to slowly creak it open, but after a turn of the handle, the door flung open, the dark space on the other side inhaling the Louisiana air.

“Quickly, you two,” Callum shouted over the sound of air flooding into the room, gesturing Mae and Gabi through the door.

Gabi draped her hood over her head as they ran through, holding on tight, as the wind followed. Callum trailed behind, pushing the door against the air that fought against him. He slammed it shut, closing them in the pitch black.

Gabi's nose flared. The smell here was different. It was filled with the intoxicating aroma of old parchment, with the fresh scent of evergreens cutting through. It was a stark contrast to the humid air outside. The sound of rain tapped against unseen glass.

"Did it start raining?" Gabi asked, her hands in front of her, trying not to crash into anything in the dark. "I didn't feel anything outside."

"I think it was already raining when we got here," Callum flicked a light on, then threw his hands out in a flourish. "Welcome to Seattle!"

Gabi and Mae stood back to back, twirling as they took in the sight of the vast atrium filled to the brim with rows of bookshelves and tables. Warm, amber light blanketed the room and weaved between the bookshelves, their shadows leaving them standing in what felt like a jungle canopy floor. At the center of the room was a circular desk, a large globe probed with different pins standing in the middle. Lively plants draped over the desk counter and hung from the ceiling, giving color to the otherwise subdued and muted room. It was a librarian's dream.

"No way," Mae whispered, her voice drowned out by the dancing of the rain. This wasn't right; they weren't in Reuben's. But then again, tonight was already a parade of impossibilities. "Demons are real, so why not a magical bookstore?"

"This is insane," Gabi muttered, her eyes darting around the room. "It's like we walked into the TARDIS or something." She laughed, a giddy, child-like sound that echoed through the room. She cleared her throat, "It's bigger on the inside," she said in her best Capaldian accent.

Mae whipped her phone out. “He’s still on the road,” she said with frustration as she watched Murton’s photo flying down the highway. “When are they—”

Her words trailed off as she turned around to see Callum, who was leaning against a table. His sweater draped around his neck, as he reached around to his back and stuffed his wounds with dirt. He had a body that was carved from a lifetime of labor. It wasn’t just chiseled like a statue, it was strong and reminiscent of the oak trees that grew in the labyrinth of brick that is New Orleans. Unchanging in a world that never seemed to settle around them.

“That doesn’t look too sanitary,” Mae remarked, before turning around to hide her vermillion face.

“Don’t worry,” a smooth voice whispered into her ear. “It’s magic.”

Mae jumped, flabbergasted by the unexpected words. They were Callum’s.

How did he do that? She thought to herself, pulling a hand to her chest. Callum had moved like a cat, his footsteps quick but silent on the otherwise creaky floor.

“So, what’s the plan?” Gabi asked. “What do we do when they stop?”

Callum slid his sweater back on, answering like it was simple. “This is a rescue mission. We take my shop to wherever they stop, grab Murton, and get out before anyone notices.”

“And we kick Frank’s ass,” Gabi added, kicking and chopping the air as she made her own sound effects.

A smile formed on Callum’s lips. Amusement, like Mae often felt from watching tourists fumble around the French Quarter. “You don’t want a fight with demons, Gabi. We got lucky that Frank was only there for Murton, and for some reason, wanted him alive. He didn’t spare us because he thought he couldn’t kill us. He just didn’t want to draw any attention. Management doesn’t like that.”

His words made the air denser. Gabi, for once, didn't have a snappy reply. The realism of the situation started to settle in for the two. This wasn't one of Gabi's shows that they could pause if things got scary. If they went through with this, they were going to be thrown into the midst of a world they didn't completely understand.

Mae recognized that look on Gabi's face. It was the same face she made when the world around her suddenly became overwhelming. She was getting ready to 'power down.'

"Then let's make sure we're in and out before anyone notices," Mae spoke up. She stood next to Gabi, taking her hand and squeezing it. Even if the thought of adventure enticed Gabi, Mae knew that the unknown scared her even more, which is why she wouldn't let her feel alone in the face of fear.

Gabi squeezed back as a sign of thanks.

"You guys should get some sleep," Callum suggested behind a covered yawn. "Demons don't need to sleep, but we do. Come on."

"No way, Callum," Mae replied. "Murton's out there right now, on the move. We have to get back on the road. We can't just sit around waiting for him to stop."

"Even if we caught up to them right now, Mae, it wouldn't matter. I can handle a vanful of demons on a good day, but right now, with my shoulder… I'm sorry, but it's just not possible. I need a few hours for it to heal."

Mae tapped her foot against the floor and bit her lip. "Fine," she reluctantly agreed after a moment of awkward tension.

Callum led Mae and Gabi grudgingly up a set of stairs on the other side of the bookstore. Once they reached the top, Mae turned around, taking in a bird's-eye view of the shop. She

couldn't help but feel like she was taken back in time. The store looked like something out of a history book, preserved and ageless.

"You can stay in the guestroom," he said, pointing to a door at the end of the hallway. "There should be towels under the bathroom sink if you want to shower. And if you need me for *anything*, don't hesitate to knock."

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The springs of the mattress squeaked as Mae bounced on the edge of the bed. There wasn't much in the room—a bed, an armoire, and a door that led to a small bathroom. The walls were covered in old wallpaper, its segmented edges frayed and flaking. The white of the printed lilies of the valley that embellished the wallpaper was faded and dull.

Gabi ran a finger over the armoire.

"Looks like he doesn't get a ton of overnighters," she said, wiping dust onto her pants. She tossed her bag, which contained a few days' worth of clothes, into the corner.

Mae dug into her bag, removing a charger and plugging it into the wall and then her phone. She didn't respond to Gabi, her eyes transfixed on the app as Murton continued to zip down the highway at startling speed.

Gabi picked at some flour that was left in her hair from the party.

"I think I'm gonna hit the shower."

"Okay," Mae responded, lying down on the bed, not taking her eyes off her screen.

The drip of the shower coalesced with the rain that pounded on the roof, hypnotizing Mae. She fought her fatigue, trying to stay focused on the little image of her dog. She blinked her eyes with force, trying to reawaken them.

Sleep claimed her not a minute later, though it couldn't hold the restless woman for more than half an hour at a time.