

FALL WITH OPEN ARMS (I WILL CATCH YOU): A NOVEL

by

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ABSTRACT

CAITLYN HANNA ROSS. *Fall With Open Arms (I Will Catch You): A Novel.*
(Under the direction of PROFESSOR BRYN CHANCELLOR)

The Angels have Fallen, and life will never be the same.

It has been ten years since the tragedy, but The Fall of Angels still haunts the world, especially those like Tobias Abbott whose mother passed when Angels struck New York. This death turned his father to alcoholism and left Toby to raise his younger brother Elijah.

He accepted this responsibility for years before taking a chance to follow his dreams of music at Montgomery College in Maryland, leaving his brother in their hometown of Moriah, Pennsylvania. Now, years later, Toby receives word that Eli is missing and presumed dead after disappearing six months earlier.

Refusing to believe Eli could truly be gone, Toby returns to Moriah for answers. He travels around town in the hopes of finding some new information that could aid in his investigation, but there are people out there who don't want Toby to find out the truth about Elijah's disappearance. The town's authorities are trying their best to convince them that Elijah is dead. His father has placed a headstone in the local cemetery, marking Elijah's death. The police have dismissed his case. Toby is ready to give up hope when one evening, he sees Elijah. His brother is disheveled and caked in blood and mud but is alive. Toby crashes his car and chases after Elijah, but the accident incapacitates him and lands him in the hospital.

When he wakes, no one believes what he saw was real, but Toby isn't deterred. With the help of his childhood friend Alaina, he's more determined than ever to uncover the truth of what happened to his brother.

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DEDICATION

To my parents. I wouldn't be here without the support you guys have given me.

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Critical Introduction

For my creative thesis as a part of my Master of Arts degree in English, I have written the first seven chapters of a novel titled *Fall With Open Arms (I Will Catch You)*, which follows a young man named Toby Abbott who returns to his hometown after finding out that his younger brother Elijah has gone missing. Almost a decade before the events of the story, a catastrophic event known as The Fall occurred. Strange creatures dubbed Angels fell down to Earth killing thousands, including Toby and Elijah's mother, Deborah. After years of taking care of his brother in his grieving father's stead, Toby left the state of Pennsylvania for college without a word to anyone but his brother, whom he had not heard from in months. By the time their father Abraham finds a way to contact Toby, six months have passed since Elijah's disappearance. Toby teams up with his best friend Alaina to find out what happened to his brother and along the way discovers growth, redemption, and acceptance.

Beginnings

I am great at coming up with ideas for stories, but terrible at following through and writing them. I grew up reading books; needing them like I needed air or water, and I wanted nothing more than to write one myself. I wanted to turn all those fantastical ideas in my head into something that I could share with others; however, every time I tried to write words, they seemed to come out wrong. My idea would slip from my fingers like sand and get lost in the desert of my mind. I could not find a way to transfer the vague ideas from my mind into words, so I stopped trying. I decided to strive for a degree in Psychology instead, though my passion for writing never really left. More than halfway through my bachelor's degree, I decided that I wanted to take the risk and pursue a career in writing. Instead of throwing away the work I did in

psychology, I added on an English minor; after graduation, I decided to continue my education in English through graduate school here at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC). At the beginning of my graduate classes, I was given the opportunity to practice writing fiction. Through these exercises and assignments, I was able to explore a myriad of different ideas for my thesis before finally landing on this one. *Fall With Open Arms* was born out of a short story assignment that I was not particularly fond of but developed into the beginning of a novel that I have grown proud of.

Characters and Setting

In *Fall With Open Arms*, there are two primary political forces whose actions influence all characters. These include The Department of Anomalous Containment (DAC) and a fictional branch of Churches called Delivered Hope, the former of which aims to eliminate or contain the Angels while the latter worship the creatures. The Angels within the story have their own supernatural effects that alter the environment around them, but outside of that, there are no other magical or supernatural elements. The story largely revolves around Toby's search for answers on what happened to Elijah, aided by his close friend Alaina.

The thesis chapters are told in the third-person limited point of view from Toby's perspective, though this is interrupted by visions of memories from Elijah from the first-person present point of view. Interspersed between the chapters are multimodal media in the form of newspaper articles, book excerpts, posters, postcards, and newsletters. My intent with these additions is to expand the world of the novel and to increase suspense.

Outside of Toby and Elijah, several other characters are significant to my story. Throughout my thesis, tension is built up between Toby and his father Abe as Toby is forced to

confront his complex feelings for the man. Abe Abbott, the father of Toby and Elijah, became a neglectful alcoholic after the death of his wife Deborah which left Toby to essentially raise Elijah on his own. Two DAC agents, Agent Carnell and Agent Roh serve as the primary antagonists of the story, along with Delivered Hope Pastor Frances. Alaina Beck is a childhood friend of Toby and is somewhat of an older sister model to Elijah. Alaina is Toby's biggest ally in his search for Elijah, despite the tension between the two caused by Toby leaving Moriah without telling her or contacting her afterward. The local sheriff of the town, Marcus Ornelas, and one of his newer officers Bill Dixon also have prominent roles in these chapters as secondary antagonists.

The setting for this story is in the fictional town of Moriah located somewhere in the Pocono Mountain range of Northern Pennsylvania. While I have never been to the Poconos myself, I spent most of my life in Pennsylvania and many of the descriptors I use for Moriah are similar to places I have been and seen before. Moriah has a population of around 500 people in order to create the feeling that the town is disconnected from the rest of the world, with its closest neighboring city of Johana Ford being forty-five minutes away. Moriah and its surrounding forest are the novel's primary settings of the story though parts of it take place in Johana Ford, a nearby town that has more accessibilities than Moriah.

Craft and Revision

Research

To better characterize Toby and the others in my novel, I turned to research in the form of writing guides in psychology. I used the Kindle versions of the books *The Emotional Wound Thesaurus* by Becca Puglisi and Angela Ackerman and *The Psychology Workbook for Writers* by

Darian Smith. Toby is a complicated character who deals with a lot of grief and anxiety, and I wanted to make sure I represented that realistically and respectfully.

The section of *The Emotional Wound Thesaurus* on childhood wounds was helpful to me. I found the first subsection of this chapter “Becoming A Caregiver at An Early Age,” helpful for Toby who had to step up and take care of Elijah due to their father’s neglect. This chapter really helped me flesh out Toby as a character with the list of false beliefs that someone in his position may have adopted along with the potential fears and responses he might develop as a result of taking on the responsibility of caring for his brother at such a young age. The same can be said for the subsections “Being Raised by A Neglectful Parent” and “Experiencing The Death Of A Parent As A Child Or Youth.” While reading these subsections of the book, I looked for similar or repeated beliefs, fears, and responses that I could incorporate into Toby’s character such as a distrust of authority, hyper-independence, depression and anxiety, and feelings of guilt and inadequacy. To a lesser extent, I also used Puglisi and Ackerman’s book as a reference for other characters like Elijah, Abe, and Alaina who have also had to deal with grief of their own.

The first chapter of *The Psychology Workbook for Writers* looks at the messages fictional parents can unconsciously send to their children through the use of Injunctions and Drivers, with Injunctions being described as things that “tell your character that they’re not an okay person because they’re not allowed to do or be these particular things.” (Smith 6). Drivers are described as “more positive messages and often given intentionally. The messages that drive us to achieve and tell us we are okay as long as we follow their advice.” (Smith 6-7,). This chapter was especially useful in developing the relationship between Abe and Toby along with the relationship between Sheriff Ornelas and Toby. Abe has primarily displayed injunctions in his interactions with Toby growing up, which affects how Toby feels about himself and how he acts

around his father. Sheriff Ornelas has used a more even combination of injunctions and drivers in his past interactions with Toby as he has tried to steer Toby away from trouble while also pushing him to do better as a person. Both of these influences help explain why Toby acts the way he does.

The fifth chapter of Smith's book explores the relationship between family and an individual as part of a system. Family units will support behaviors that are seen as within the norm for the system and discourage those that go against that norm (Smith 24). This is referred to as homeostasis in psychology and plays a prevalent role in Toby's family system in the story. This system is initially disrupted by the death of Deborah, and a new system is put into place with Toby taking on the role of older brother and parent to Elijah. This system is again disrupted when Toby leaves and Abe begins to recover from his wife's passing. This causes Abe to revert to a more responsible parental role, which Toby instinctually resists because it is not what he is used to. I also used the example of possible stages of grief from Smith's ninth chapter as a reference for Toby's reactions to the loss of his mother and brother.

Fiction of Influence

Some of the literary inspirations for my novel are "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" by Gabriel García Márquez, *A Darker Shade of Magic* by V.E. Schwab, *Grief is The Thing with Feathers* by Max Porter, and *The Book Eaters* by Sunyi Dean. I attempted to channel the atmospheric prowess of Márquez and Schwab's writings in my novel by laying out the more fantastical elements of my story in an inconspicuous manner as if they were a normal occurrence or a fact of life. This is shown through the adoption of the D.A.C. where the general public does not have to deal much with Angels as this is delegated to specialized agents. This is also seen through the development of the Church of Delivered Hope and its place amongst society, which

is controversial but limited to small sects around the United States. I also hoped to capture the familial devotion between Toby and Elijah as Dean managed to capture between her mother and son characters in *The Book Eaters*, as well as the emotional atmosphere she created through the conflicts between her main character Devon and her family as she fights to protect her son despite what he is and what he becomes in the end. While Toby and Elijah's relationship is somewhat strained in ways, I wanted to portray the devotion that Toby has in finding his brother, regardless of the potential cost. Porter's *Grief is The Thing with Feathers* also helped me explore how the different members of the Abbott family may have dealt with the grief of losing Deborah in the aftermath of The Fall in more of a narrative format than I could find in the referenced writing guides.

Articles on Craft

Three craft articles that I took reference from during the revision process of my novel chapters are Bret Anthony Johnston's "Don't Write What You Know" article, Alice LaPlante's chapter on showing and telling, and Nalo Hopkinson's Ted-Ed talk on writing descriptively. Johnston's article gave me some useful advice on writing that goes against almost everything I have ever been told about writing. This includes the idea that a writer can deviate from writing what they know and still produce an effective piece of fiction. While my novel does take place in the state I grew up in, many aspects of it deviate from my personal experiences, which concerned me while writing the setting. A line of the article that spoke to me while I was reading was "Instead of thinking of my experiences as structures I wanted to erect in fiction, I started conceiving of them as the scaffolding that would be torn down once the work was complete." (Johnston). By looking at what I know as foundations or scaffolding off of which my writing will grow, I felt a lot more confident in creating a realistic setting for my novel. The fifth chapter of

LaPlante's book *Method and Madness* is centered around something I often feel I struggle with in my writing; showing and telling. I am aware that there are some aspects of a novel that I have to tell—that I cannot simply show—but figuring out which parts should reflect either of these was a difficult process. I did not want to have too much exposition within my pages, but there were some things about the worldbuilding that I could not show naturally within the story.

LaPlante's chapter on showing and telling helped a lot in the process of figuring out where I need to show and where I need to tell. This chapter gives detailed definitions and examples, and I felt as though I understood my own narrative style a lot better after reading it. I expect it will continue to help during the long process of revisions. Finally, I found the video of Hopkinson's Ted-Ed talk titled "How to Write Descriptively" to be helpful when writing descriptions. While many of the things mentioned in the video I already knew, it gave me the confirmation I needed that I was on the right track. I often feel as though I get too descriptive when it comes to how my characters are feeling, but this talk highlighted a lot of the reasons why I write that way to begin with. I want to draw readers in and really make them feel what my characters are feeling.

Alternative Forms of Reference

The movie adaptation of Jeff VanderMeer's book *Annihilation* was a huge inspiration for the Angel's innate effects. As of now, the most prominent example of this is in the second chapter after Toby crashes his car. While the book itself has some fantastic imagery and horror elements, the visuals of the movie are what largely inspired the kinds of mutations that Angels cause to their environments. *Annihilation* (2018), directed by Alex Garland, centers around a group of four women who venture into an uninhabited coastal area known as "Area X" where they find strange mutations in the surrounding area along with unsettling creatures that threaten their lives. The main character is the biologist of the team, called Lena in the movie, and joins the

expedition to try and find her husband, who was part of a previous expedition team. There are a lot of interesting psychological elements in the movie such as depression, self-destruction, and rebirth that I attempted to inject into my own writings.

Another big influence on my work is two Japanese anime and manga series titled, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* by Hideaki Anno and *Trigun* by Yasuhiro Nightow. Both of these works deal with Western religious elements which their respective creators weave into their stories. As someone raised in a Christian household, I find it fascinating to see how they use Christianity as a creative resource. I tried to capture some of the devastation of the Second Impact event in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in my own work. The Second Impact event was a cataclysm where scientists were studying a creature they called an “Angel” in Antarctica and while they were examining it, the Angel woke up and caused a huge explosion that melted the polar cap and altered the earth’s axis. This event had massive environmental and geopolitical effects that nearly drove humanity extinct. While the impact of my Angels was not as severe as those involved in the Second Impact, I tried to capture some of their environmental and political effects in my story's event of “The Fall”. *Trigun* has a being similar to Angels in its universe known as Plants, which are humanoid inter-dimensional beings that humans use as a power source on the barren planet of Gunsmoke. I use the government branch of the DAC to mimic the way Angels are treated on Gunsmoke. In my thesis, the DAC captures or kills the remaining Angels that survived the initial Fall and experiments on them so that their agents can become more resistant to their Angelic powers and learn how to weaponize them.

Conclusion

It has been a long journey to get where I am now, but I am still not done. I plan to do further revisions on the chapters I currently have, as well as turn these thesis pages into a full-length novel with the intent of publishing it. I attempted to tackle the topics and effects of grief, loss, neglect, and guilt within my characters, and I believe I succeeded in doing so realistically and respectfully. As I continue to write and revise, I hope to intertwine these topics with that of moving on, growth, redemption, and acceptance in a way that will be satisfying to read. Fall With Open Arms has changed and evolved dramatically over the course of my last two semesters at UNCC, which has been amazing to see. My work on this thesis has taught me a lot about my writing style and what I struggle with, as well as what I excel in, and I cannot wait to see where this story will take me next.

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The Angels fell on a cold morning in March. Beaming shots of light, like meteors dotting the sky. It was a spectacle for the world to admire. After all, no one thought that those lights hurtling towards Earth would reach the ground.

Our governments assured us of this a week before, when our space programs caught sight of their trajectory toward Earth. They claimed it was a once-in-a-lifetime meteor event from space. Nothing but a pretty light show. Some doubted this, of course, but most celebrated the upcoming event, and those who weren't in the trajectory range traveled in hordes to the areas that were.

News about the meteor's quieted down in the days before the event. Then, on the day of the meteors' anticipated entry into our atmosphere, documents were leaked from the Iranian Space Agency (ISA), the Canadian Space Agency (CSA), and the State Space Agency of Ukraine (SSAU) which revealed startling new information. The calculations of each of these agencies indicated that there was a high chance that the meteors would successfully breach the atmosphere and

cause significant damage to the areas within the crash zone.

Space agencies that were not included within the information leak were heavily criticized by the public, with the statements offered by officials doing little to quell the growing fear. Locals and tourists who had settled into the trajectory zones of the meteor event attempted to leave in droves, with traffic becoming so congested in those areas that many people left their cars and continued on foot.

The Tragedy started when They entered the atmosphere. We could hear the screams of a thousand voices at once. A shrieking, wailing roar of bells and trumpets, from creatures that humans were never meant to perceive. Their songs burned through us like candlewicks.

Our minds were torn apart like tissue paper.

Their suffering slammed through like white-hot lightning.

Thousands of lives were lost during Their descent. Thousands more would be lost at Their impact.

CHAPTER ONE

Toby blew out a breath of smoke as he drove up the winding Pocono road, trees blurring in the corners of his vision. He felt off-kilter, like he was in a dream, because what else could this be but a fucked-up nightmare? His little brother was ~~dead~~ missing.

The call with his dad had been brief and to the point. Elijah had gone missing six months ago. Six months. And Toby hadn't heard about it until then. Not that he had anyone to blame but himself. He was barely past eighteen before he skipped town on a scholarship to Montgomery Community College for a degree in music. Those three years of obsessively striving toward his degree didn't amount to much in the end. He'd ended up homeless, staying at hostels, motels, and sometimes his car during the night while he busked wherever he could during the day.

Toby hadn't contacted anyone in Moriah since he left, outside of the occasional calls to Elijah from his prepaid phone or postcard from whatever city he was currently busking in. And this is how he's paying for it, by finding out his brother went missing six months after the fact. Now he was speeding down an old mountain road at the ass-crack of dawn to get back to the one place he swore he'd never return to.

His fingers burned and he cursed. Toby hadn't noticed his cigarette burning down. He slammed it into the ashtray and reached for another in the front pocket of his duffle bag that lay on the passenger's seat, but all he found was an empty box.

Just what he fucking needed.

He didn't know how he was going to face down his dad without the promise of nicotine to light up his lungs.

Before it felt like if he didn't stop moving, then one day he'd turn around to find himself right back in Moriah, but now it was like the faster he tried to go back the farther away the town got.

After what felt like an eternity, the blur of oaks and pines opened to the center of the town. He didn't bother stopping to marvel at how much it hadn't changed, instead he slowed down just enough that he wouldn't get pulled over by one of the patrol cars that Sheriff Ornelas always stationed recruits near the entrance of town as punishment for failing to make that month's ticketing quota.

The feeling of dread building in him since the call with his dad crashed down on him when he pulled into the gravel driveway of his family home. The small four-square house looked smaller than he remembered. More run down. The grass was overgrown, and old tires and car parts littered the yard from his dad's auto shop. The shutters of the house were sagging down, swollen and warped from time and moisture. The shingles on the roof were crooked and missing in some places. The blue-green sidings were faded, and the pillars on the porch were stricken with peeling white paint. The house was framed by firs, which made the place seem more isolated. He would've thought the place was abandoned if it weren't for the faint fluorescent lights peeking out from the windows.

With a deep breath, Toby stepped out of his car and pulled his duffle bag over his shoulder. The sparrows and jays were composing their dissonant songs in the distance. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine the sound of running water from the river farther into the forest where he and Elijah would wander off to whenever their dad had drunk too much. Toby would make up stories and songs for his brother as they walked. The trees were the arms of giants trying to claw their way out of dirt coffins. The river was a freshwater ocean stretching

downwards for miles, holding in its depth's nymphs and sirens and other monsters that would drag them down into the water if they wandered too close.

Those stories were all fiction though. Little things to scare and excite Elijah so that he wouldn't wander off on his own. Toby wished his reality was as made up as those stories. Something made up by his dad or Elijah to get him to come back home. But if this were a story he wouldn't be feeling the ache in his lungs from nicotine and cold air, or the sting on the tip of his fingers where the cinders of his cigarette had met flesh. Toby shoved his hands into his coat pockets and made his way to the front door.

The door opened to the living room. A wood stove burned against the wall. The curtains were drawn, leaving the room in dim lighting. Toby shifted his feet. There were no beer bottles littering the oval coffee table. No garbage cluttering the floor. No hulking figure sprawled unconscious on the couch. It was a bitter feeling.

How many lost sons did it take before he decided to get his shit together?

A loud hiss came from the kitchen, along with a gruff curse. Toby walked to the entrance to the kitchen. Abe was there, struggling with the ancient coffee pot that Toby swore was bought before he was born.

Abe wore a plaid flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his forearms and a pair of jeans that were stained and worn. He looked like some stereotypical lumberjack with his full beard and heavyset body. Toby's neck itched. He hadn't shaved since he found out about Elijah's disappearance.

Toby's mouth was dry. He'd been ready to confront a neglectful drunk, a miserable widower, but the man in front of him seemed sober and put together. This was a version of his dad that he thought had died a long time ago. Toby didn't know what to say to him.

“You could save a lot of time if you just got a new one, you know.” Toby said.

His dad tensed and then turned around. His beard was well trimmed instead of wild, his hair smoothed back. There were more lines on his face than Toby remembered, etched into his forehead and around the black-brown eyes they both shared.

“That thing’s been on its last legs since I was four.” Toby added, nodding toward the offending coffee maker.

His dad’s face twisted up in a familiar petulant stubbornness. “The old girl’ works just fine. I don’t need some fancy new machine with a buncha bobs and buttons to make a simple cup of joe,”

He slapped the machine with one hand and the coffee maker sputtered, then let out a stream of chunky black liquid from the drip.

“Works just fine, huh.” Toby said flatly. His dad winced and gave a shrug.

The two men stood silently in the small kitchen. On the chipped countertops was a large stack of mail, already opened and tossed to the side. Toby could see a couple of dishes piled in the sink, but overall the room was cleaner than it had been since he was a kid. It made him feel like he was stuck in a time between the past and the present. It set him on edge.

“What happened?” Toby demanded.

His dad let out a heavy sigh, his hands coming up to rub at his eyes “There ain’t much to tell Toby. He went into the forest one day and he never came out.”

“Bullshit,” Toby spat, “Eli knows the forest around Moriah like the back of his hand, and he knows not to go too deep in.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say. He coulda fell into the river or got attacked by some animal. I don’t know. One day he was here, and the next he wasn’t,” he said helplessly.

Toby thought back to the initial call. He spent most of it in shock, but he remembered his dad telling him how the search for Eli had turned up nothing. It had rained the day he went missing and any tracks there had been were washed away before they could track them, and the search dogs couldn't pick up a scent.

Elijah couldn't have fallen in the river. The stories Toby told him about monsters within the water freaked him out as a kid, and even as Eli got older he had a lingering fear of the river. Even if Elijah did fall in the river, wouldn't his body have been recovered downstream by now? And if he'd gotten attacked by some kind of animal there would have been some evidence of a struggle, even if it was just blood or torn pieces of clothing. Toby had made sure that his brother always had bear spray and at least a pocketknife when going into the woods, not that there was really too much to worry about unless too deep in. The coyotes and bears didn't stray that close to town.

He didn't understand how everyone could just accept that Elijah had vanished without a trace. How Abe could stand there and talk to him like nothing was wrong. Arguments and accusations bubbled up in Toby's throat but died at the expression on his dad's face. His brows were pulled together and his jaw was set in the same stubbornness that Toby saw in himself. The realization of it caused a wave of nausea to run through him.

"We tried getting in touch with you as soon as he went missing," his dad interrupted, trailing off while trying to find the right words.

But we couldn't get ahold of you, Toby finished in his head. Of course they couldn't. Toby had given Elijah his old phone before he left and bought himself the cheapest prepaid one he could find. He had wanted a fresh start. Elijah was the only one he bothered to stay in contact with, and even that was spotty once Toby became busy balancing school and work. If he hadn't

checked his old email on a whim, he would have never seen the email from his dad. He would have never thought to have called him. How long would it have taken for him to find out that his brother was missing? Years?

Bile rose from the back of his throat, and he clenched his jaw. This was his fault. He left Elijah behind. He abandoned him, and now he was gone.

“I thought you might want to go through some of his stuff, see if there’s anything you want before I pack up the rest.” His dad said, taking a long drink of his coffee, “We put a headstone down over at St. Jude’s. Next to your mother’s. I can show after work you if you’d like.”

“What?” Toby barked. “He’s missing, not dead!”

His dad sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “Toby it’s been six months. I just wanted to have something for him.”

“So you’re giving up?” Toby demanded, his voice rising.

His dad’s face darkened, and Toby fought to hold a flinch.

Abe had never been violent with them, but that was more because he was usually too drunk to even stand, let alone try to hit them. The only time Abe had ever come close to hurting one of them had been two years after their mother’s death. Toby had skipped school and taken Elijah with him to hang out by an old deer blind in the forest. He didn’t think the school would call his dad. Or the police when it became clear that Abe didn’t know where they were. The sun was setting by the time they made it home to police cars in front of their house. The Sheriff had lectured them about skipping school, but Toby couldn’t remember any of it. All he could remember was the furious look on his dad’s face. The cold look in his eyes and the unnatural stillness in the way he held himself. It wasn’t until after all the police cars left and they were in

the house that Abe went off on them. He screamed at them for being so stupid, for disappearing like that and causing a scene. Elijah burst into tears almost immediately, which only made Abe more mad. He had stepped forward with his hand raised towards Elijah and without thinking Toby ran up and pushed him. Abe lost balance and slipped a beer bottle on the floor, falling back onto the floor. Toby grabbed Elijah by the arm and ran up to his room, locking it behind him as Abe yelled profanities at them from the other side.

It had never happened again. Not to that extent. But Toby would never forget the sheer terror he felt that his dad would hurt him or Elijah. Abe's frustrated sigh brought Toby back to the present.

"You think it was fuckin easy? He's been out there for months Toby. No food, no water, no nothin, all through fall and winter. You think anyone could survive that?" His dad's voice was rough, his voice rising in anger.

Abe looked at Toby and blinked. His face shifted through a flurry of emotions, *frustration-confusion-realization-shame* until he tore his eyes away from Toby's and swallowed, dumping the rest of his coffee down the kitchen sink.

"Right." He said. "Let me know if you want to go see it. I can take you there. Or you can visit by yourself if you want. The headstone is right next to your mother's." After a moment of hesitation, Abe put a hand on Toby's shoulder, squeezed lightly, and left the room. Toby stood there frozen for who knows how long before coming back to himself.

The shoulder holding the duffle bag ached. He clutched the strap of it in his hand and made his way upstairs. Toby's room was exactly as he left it. The fawn-colored walls were covered in posters of his favorite bands and singers. His bed was still unmade, his navy comforter hanging halfway off the bed. The pale wooden desk next to his window had nothing

but a lamp and glass figurines of animals. A blue whale arched as if headed to the surface of the ocean; a black and red fox curled up asleep; and a moss green elk whose color faded near its hooves. He picked up the whale, holding the cool glass in his hands. His mom had started his collection. She had brought this one home when he was seven from the Ocean's Grove auditorium she was visiting for a performance. The night she got home, Deborah sat on the edge of his bed and pulled it out of a small plastic gift bag. She told him facts about whales, and how they sing to communicate with each other. It was nothing special, just little tidbits of information likely read from the back of an info card, but his mom had turned those facts into poems, into fairytales with how she told them. Her voice was hushed and melodious, a wry smile painted on her lips and her shadowed eyes crinkled in the glow of his nightlight.

Toby set the whale back down carefully on his desk and dropped his duffle bag on the floor next to his bed. Looking around, he walked over to the thrifted record player in the corner of the room. He had found it at a secondhand shop at the edge of town when he was sixteen. He saved up for it for months. Skimming what he could from his paycheck after budgeting for food and other necessities their dad was too shitfaced to remember, and he had managed to haggle down to cover the rest of the cost. After that, he started his slow acquisition of records, an eclectic collection of whatever he could find. Elijah used to creep into his room when the weather was too bad to go out and they would put one on, talking or sitting with each other while the records crooned over them. Sometimes Eli would get Toby to cover some of the songs himself with his guitar. Mostly *Doc Watson* and *Ramblin' Jack Elliott*.

The records and their player had a thinner layer of dust covering them. Something in Toby's chest twisted at the sight of it. Elijah must've kept up the habit after he left. Toby had decided to leave it to him, a cheap apology disguised as a goodbye gift.

His guitar still sat in the trunk of his car. He hadn't touched it since he got the call that Elijah was gone. Toby sat at the foot of his bed and pressed his palms into his eyes then fell back. There were so many memories soaked into this house, this town. He didn't know how he was supposed to face them by himself.



The sun was beginning to set by the time Toby woke up to his dad getting back from work. He could hear his dad's footsteps, the floor creaking beneath him as he walked around the house. Abe's footsteps paused for a moment in front of Toby's door before drifting to his own room. Toby waited until he heard his dad's bedroom door shut to get up.

The town's only cemetery was right next to St. Jude's church, a rickety building that hadn't been in service since Toby was small. The Fall had left a lot of churches like that. Desolate and abandoned. The lot was still used for burials, but the church itself was left to rot.

The cemetery was kept up by the caretaker Mr. Wilson. Toby remembered seeing the man on his knees with a bucket and stiff brush, scrubbing the gravestones in the chilly months of fall and trimming the grass in the sweltering summer heat when he drove past the place to work. It left the cemetery a stark contrast to the rest of the grounds, which was unkempt at best and outright dilapidated at worst.

Toby walked through the rows of headstones until he reached his mom's headstone.

Deborah Janette Abbott

1976-2010

Beloved Wife and Mother

The to the right of his mom's headstone was empty, saved for Abe. To the left, a new single headstone was planted, made of blue pearl granite. Toby's stomach turned. He wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans and stepped over to the new gravestone.

Elijah Caleb Abbott

2003-2019

If you have ever gone to the woods with me,

I must love you very much.

Toby's eyes lingered on the inscription. Mary Oliver was one of their mom's favorite poets. She read them to Toby when he was little, and Toby read them to Eli after she passed away. He didn't know who came up with the idea to put her poem *How I Go Into The Woods* on the headstone. It's not something his dad would've thought of. Abe probably didn't even know that it was Eli's favorite. Maybe Alaina told him?

Toby had told Alaina one night about how Deborah used to recite poetry to him as bedtime stories behind a BG's parking lot. He was smoking a joint he got from a kid a couple of grades above him, Liam Hanson, as he told her. Alaina had scrunched up her nose at the smoke and he had laughed at her but put it out.

Toby tore his eyes away from the epitaph and looked down at a wilting bouquet of lilies in front of the gravestone. It was suddenly hard to breathe.

Toby crouched on the ground, wrapping his arms around himself as he stared at the headstone until his eyes burned and his vision turned blurry. Before he realized it he was crying, sobbing, loud and ugly. Toby couldn't hear anything outside of the sound of his wailing. Even the birds went silent. He gasped, shuddering with the force of it, but no matter how much he

gulped at the air he couldn't seem to keep any of it in his lungs. His chest hurt. He couldn't breathe. Darkness sunk from the edges of his vision until it was all he could see.

CHAPTER TWO

When Toby came to he was curled up at the base of Elijah's gravestone, his wet face lying against the dirt. The sky was dim but starting to brighten, and Toby drove himself home in a haze. Once he was back in the safe confines of his room he took a shower and changed. By the time he was done the sun had begun to peak up from behind the trees. Toby stared out his window. He was sore and exhausted, but he knew from experience that he wouldn't be able to fall asleep with the noise in his head.

It used to drive his roommate back in Montgomery insane when he got like this. James would complain about waking up to see him pacing around their room like a madman or scribbling compositions at his desk. He used to say that Toby looked like something from *The Walking Dead* prowling their room. James was also a film major though, so Toby never put much stock into what he said. Regardless, Toby knew he wasn't going to be able to sleep so he threw on a dark red jacket and made his way to his car.

Maisie's Diner was slow during the mornings, most people already being at work. Regardless, Toby kept his eyes downcast to avoid the double takes he got from everyone in town. He'd had a reputation as a troublemaker as a kid, but they couldn't be that surprised to see him should they? It was probably because he was just now coming back, six months after his brother had disappeared.

He regretted coming already. He should've stayed home and- *and do what?* Lie in bed avoiding his dad all day until he wasted away, his body melding to the mattress like something out of a nightmare?

With a deep breath, Toby took a seat in one of the white and red booths closest to the door. The cracked leather squeaked under him, and he picked up a menu. Not that he needed to.

Maisie's hadn't changed their menu since they opened in 1997, but Toby liked having something to distract himself with while he waited for a server. Conversations slowly picked back up around him and the smell of eggs and bacon circulated through the building. If Toby closed his eyes then, for a second, he could pretend that everything was fine.

Hashbrowns sound good, he thought before a familiar accented voice spoke up from his side, "I'd ask if you wanted a drink, but I think I'd end up throwing it in your face."

Toby flinched and looked up to see Alaina with a notepad and pen in her hands. He stared at her, and she crossed her arms, raising her chin to try and hide the hurt on her face. Toby swallowed harshly. He hadn't planned on seeing her yet. He thought he'd have another day to work up the nerve and brace himself before seeing her.

"Hi Alaina," Toby offered weakly after an awkward silence.

"That's all you've got to say to me? Hi?" Her voice was thin and clipped. He didn't know what to say. *Hi Alaina, sorry for abandoning you without a word? Sorry for never calling or sending a letter? Anyway, how have you been?* They had been best friends for years and he couldn't come up with an excuse as to why he left without saying goodbye.

Alaina had always struggled with feeling accepted in Moriah. She moved here with her mother from the Netherlands when she was eleven to live with a relative, Oscar Smit. Her dad had committed suicide following the job crisis that occurred after The Fall so that she and her mother could get his life insurance money. Toby had thought Alaina was mute at first with how quiet she was, but they quickly became friends. The two of them were practically inseparable until he left.

Toby fumbled for the right words, choking out a sorry between the incoherent excuses. His heart pounded and he could feel sweat prickle on his skin. He didn't know what to say and Alaina was staring at him, and *he didn't know what to say-*

"Toby!" Alaina cut in, her hand on his shoulder.

Toby took in shuddering breaths, his face growing hot. Everyone in the diner must be gawking at him, the last Abbott son freaking out in the middle of the diner.

"Are you ok?" she asked. Toby shrugged and then nodded, staring down at the menu. He was angry with himself. She had every right to be upset with him and here he was making her feel bad by being pathetic.

"Sorry," he echoed. He couldn't meet Alaina's eyes.

She pulled her hand back and hesitantly took a seat across from him.

"Me too," she said softly, and he could hear the unspoken continuation, *I'm sorry you found out about your brother like this. I'm sorry you're hurting, even though some of that's your fault. I'm sorry you weren't here.*

Alaina was always good at being kind to him when he didn't deserve it.

"When did you get back?" she asked after a moment.

"Yesterday," Toby answered.

Alaina nodded. Toby couldn't see her hands, but he imagined she was wringing them under the table like she did whenever she was nervous or uncomfortable.

"I went to the cemetery yesterday. Did you pick out the poem?"

"I thought it was fitting. Eli thought the world of you, you know. Even after you left." She said.

Toby swallowed, "He thought the world of you too."

Alaina smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes, "He looked up to me, sure, but it wasn't the same,"

She tucked a strand of white-blond hair behind her ear. It was shorter than Toby had ever seen it, cut off a little below her chin. Dark circles peeked out from behind her makeup. Her eyes darted toward his. She worried her lip and then took a deep breath.

"Toby," she started carefully, "what did your dad tell you about Eli's disappearance?"

"That he went missing in the woods," Toby answered, confused by the sudden question. "Why?"

Her lips thinned. "There's something you should know. Before Eli went missing there were some rumors about an Angel in the area."

"Davy Jr. told his hunting buddies about some weird looking plants growing in the deeper parts of the woods a couple months ago. He and the others were talking about odd changes in the deer's behavior too. Eventually someone sent out a report to the D.A.C. and a couple of agents were sent down to take some tests and stuff but didn't find anything."

Toby's stomach sank, "Why are you telling me this?"

"After those rumors started, the D.A.C. advised that no one go into that part of the woods. Most people in town listened. Some didn't," she continued.

"Did Eli?" He asked, a pit forming in his stomach.

Alaina winced, looking down at her hands. "I told him not to, but he kept going in the woods anyway. Because of that, a lot of people think that the Angel had something to do with his disappearance."

Toby felt numb. "If people think that an Angel had something to do with Eli going missing, then why haven't the D.A.C. said anything?" Toby asked.

If an Angel was involved somehow, then there should've been more coverage of it. More agents should've been deployed to Moriah.

"The two agents that came up originally looked into it, but they said that his disappearance was unrelated," Alaina said. "Not everyone believes it though because they still haven't left Moriah."

Toby's mind raced with more questions, but before he could voice them a short man with a balding head and a potbelly rounded the corner of the kitchen, "Oi, Alaina, you ain't gettin paid to chat up the customers. Get back to work, we need ya to run these orders."

Alaina stood up. "I've got to get back to work. We'll talk later, ok?"

"Yeah. Yeah of course. Thanks Lainey," Toby said faintly.

Alaina shifted on her feet then nodded and walked toward the kitchen. Toby stood up a couple of seconds later, his appetite gone. The looks from people around town held a new meaning now. He needed to think. He needed to talk to his dad.



Toby drove in a daze. He couldn't believe his dad hadn't told him about the rumors. Did he think that Toby wouldn't find out? Or did he just not think Toby was worth telling? He clenched his jaw and pressed his foot harder on the pedal, his grip tightening on the steering wheel. He was so lost in thought that he almost missed the figure standing on the road in front of him.

His breath caught. In front of him stood Elijah, wearing the tan hand-me-down coat that he had gotten from Toby. Elijah was drenched, covered in mud and what looked like blood flecked through with gold. His eyes were dull, but still unmistakably green like their mom's. It felt like time had slowed to a crawl until Toby realized he needed to stop the car, or he might hit

his brother. Toby cursed and slammed his foot on the brake, pulling the steering wheel harshly to the side. The tires squealed in protest, and he lost control of the car, slamming headfirst into the guardrail, flipping over it.

Toby's ears rang. A sharp pain lanced through his head when he tried to lift it. His nose was throbbing, blood pouring into his throat.

The airbag didn't go off, he noticed distantly. It took him a moment to realize he was upside down, and with a groan, Toby fumbled with the buckle of his seatbelt until he managed to hit the release. His head hit the top of the car with a thump and what little breath he had was knocked out of him at the mind-numbing pain that shot through his skull. He twisted so that he was half upright and spit out a mixture of mucus and blood.

He crawled through the open window of the car. It took longer than he felt like it should. His body ached. He was dizzy.

"Elijah?" He called, his voice cracking. Toby had to find him. He had to find his brother. Toby stood up on unsteady feet, stumbling towards where he thought he saw his brother.

"Elijah!" he called again, this time louder. There wasn't any sign of Eli on the road. Could he have wandered into the woods? A flash of tan and red moved in the corner of his eye. Toby followed after it into the woods.

He felt like a newborn fawn stumbling through the woods after his brother. No matter how hard Toby pushed himself Eli was always out of reach. The mossy ground sunk under his feet as if it were trying to drag him under the Earth. The ringing in his ears was twisting into a deafening jumble of notes that may have been a melody if Toby could just parse it out. He couldn't think. The trees were glowing. Veins ran through them, pulsating with a blue-white glow through the bark and into the leaves.

Had they always looked like that?

Toby's foot caught on something, and he hit the ground hard. His hands stung, full of bits of rock and wood. With a groan Toby turned onto his back, staring into the sky. Tree branches leaned towards him. The leaves hummed and whispered in his ears before splitting down the middle, tiny white flowers sprouting from the opening that almost looked like eyes. The sky above him shimmered.

A voice called his name.



I run. There are voices behind me calling my name, and dogs barking. I don't know how close they are, but I can't afford to look back. My lungs burn. I can hardly see through the rain, I can feel the mud shifting under my feet with each step I take, but I can't stop. I have to get to it before they do. They won't hear it like I do. Won't listen.

I stumble to a stop in front of the river. It's flooded because of the rain, and the roar of it almost drowns out the sounds closing in behind me. There's a log that fell across it last summer, but I've never tried crossing it with the water so high. I don't have a choice though. The log feels slick, so I crouch down and crawl across it on my hands and knees. The water rushes upwards, like it's trying to pull me down and I nearly slip off before righting myself and crawling the rest of the way across. I think of kelpies rearing up from the water and grabbing me with their teeth. For a moment, panic paralyzes me.

I hear another voice behind me, calling my name. This one's familiar though, and I can't help but glance back even though I know I don't have much time. My dad is screaming my name against the wind, desperate in a way I've never heard from him. I can see flashlights bobbing in the distance.

I turn around and make it to the other side of the river. I start running again.

All I have to do is make it to the deer blind. If I can get there before they do then—

“Tobias?”

What?



“Tobias, can you hear me?” a voice called out. Toby blinked against the bright lights overhead. The voice continued to question him, but he ignored it in favor of watching the tiles of an unfamiliar ceiling roll by.

“Toby!” another voice yelled. He recognized that one. His dad. He turned his head, blinking blearily at the man. Toby hadn’t seen him like this since he was little. When the news broadcasted that Angels were falling in New York where Deborah and Eli were. They were visiting Deborah’s parents, but Toby hadn’t been able to go because he came down with a bad stomach bug. Abe had stayed behind to look after him. They were supposed to meet up with mom and Eli after Toby got a bit better, but that never happened.

He remembered walking into the living room, his blanket dragging behind him. Abe was staring at the TV frozen. His eyes wide in shock and his face slowly twisted in panic. He wore the same face now. *No*, Toby noticed, *not the same*. He had more lines on his face and his hair had streaks of grey running through it. His dad looked old.

“Dad?” Toby called, his voice sounded weak in his ears.

“I’m here son. I’m here.” Were those tears in his eyes? Toby couldn’t tell. His head hurt. But his dad held his hand as they rolled him into another room.



Toby woke up to the beeping of a heart monitor and the sound of arguing coming from outside the room. His body was sore and heavy, and when he lifted his hands they were wrapped in bandages. He tried to sit up, but a wave of nausea washed over him. He blinked dark spots out of his eyes. He must've gotten a concussion. That's the same thing that happened when one of his classmates hit a baseball right into his head in high school.

Looking around, Toby saw that he was in a hospital room. The white walls were tinted yellow by the overhead lights. The whole room smelled of antiseptic. Toby was wearing a thin paper gown that crinkled when he moved and was covered in a thin linen blanket. They must've taken him to the Franklin B. Morton Hospital over in Johana Ford. It was the closest one to Moriah.

The voices from the outside the room grew closer until they were in front of the door.

"We just need to ask him some questions Abe," a voice said, like it wasn't the first time he had to say it.

"He's laying there in a hospital bed and you want to ask him *questions*?" a voice responded. His dad's.

"It's just procedure, Mr. Abbott. We'll be in and out, lickity split," a younger voice chimed in. It sounded familiar, but Toby couldn't place it.

The door to his hospital room opened, and Marcus Ornelas, the Sheriff of Moriah entered followed by another younger man that Toby recognized as an old classmate of his. Bill Dixon. Bill stood a good half a foot above Sheriff Ornelas, but he was hunched forward like he didn't know what to do with all his lanky limbs. His hair was as just as glaringly red as Toby remembered. Toby felt like he had to squint looking at him.

Sheriff Ornelas had more of a presence. He was in shape for his age and had a full mustache on his upper lip. The Sheriff's eyes reminded Toby of a hawk's. It set him on edge. It brought back memories of when Toby was younger and would get in trouble for skipping school or getting into fights.

Bill was the first to notice he was awake and smiled at him. "Hey Toby, how're you feelin'?" he asked.

Toby glanced at his dad, who had walked through the door a little ways behind the two officers. Toby didn't like to admit it, but his presence made something in Toby settle a bit.

"All right, I guess," Toby finally said.

"That's good to hear, son. We just need to ask you a couple of questions if that's all right." Sheriff Ornelas leaned toward him on a plastic hospital chair.

"Sure," Toby replied, a little hesitant.

"Good, good. Can you tell me what happened? We found your car flipped over by the road, but you were found almost three miles into the forest."

"Three miles?" Toby said in surprise. It didn't seem that long. It only felt like he was running for a couple of minutes.

"Do you not remember?" the Sheriff asked.

"I remember going into the forest, but not that deep," Toby replied, clutching the thin blanket that covered him.

"Why'd you go into the forest?" Bill asked, his eyes darting over to the Sheriff's and then back to Toby.

That was right. "I saw Elijah," Toby said.

He didn't know what he had expected at the declaration, but it wasn't for their faces to pale. The Sheriff was the first to recover, his expression hardening.

"What do you mean by that Tobias?" he asked.

"I mean I saw him. In the middle of the road. He was covered in mud and blood, but he was alive," Toby said. Something came over Bill's face at his description of Elijah. Fear? No – guilt? Bill looked nauseous, shifting his weight backward like he wanted to take off running.

Toby tried to make eye contact with Bill, but the man staunchly avoided his gaze.

"Son," the Sheriff interrupted, "I have to ask. Did you take anything before getting in the car?"

Toby's brows furrowed. "What?"

"Did you take any medications or recreational substances?" Sheriff Ornelas clarified, taking a glance at Toby's dad, who stood arms crossed in the corner of the room.

"Drink anything?" he added.

Toby sat ramrod straight, his face flushing. "What?" he asked, his voice raising an octave. What, they thought he was an addict? That he was making this up?

"No, I didn't take anything. I just left the diner and I saw Elijah on the road!" Toby exclaimed.

"All right son, all right. And seeing him, is that what caused you to crash?" the Sheriff asked.

"I guess. Yeah. I hit the brakes and lost control of the car." Toby said, his jaw clenched. They were focusing on the wrong things. His brother was out there.

"You must've been goin pretty fast I take it." Sheriff Ornelas leaned back, inclining his head towards Toby. Bill was silent beside him, scribbling something down in a little notebook.

“I guess,” Toby said tightly. “That’s not the point though. I saw Elijah out there-“ he started but was cut off by his dad.

“Toby,” His voice warned. Like Toby had said something wrong.

“I did!” Toby’s voice was high and reedy, even to his own ears. “Why don’t you believe me?”

His dad sighed, and Toby felt like a kid. His eyes wet and he blinked harshly. He didn’t need to give them any other reason to dismiss him.

“I know it must be hard, finding out about your brother out of the blue like this. Like your whole world’s shifted, and maybe you really do think you saw him Tobias, but you’ve got to know that-that it’s just not possible for him to still be alive out there.” the Sheriff said to him in a soft voice, like he was trying to soothe a wounded animal.

Toby wanted to punch him in the face.

He did see Eli, didn’t he?

“It’s not your fault, what happened to Elijah, you know.” The Sheriff trailed off trailing with a sigh and got to his feet. “If you need someone to talk to, or anything else, you let me know. Ok, kid?”

Toby didn’t respond. His dad stood aside the door as the two men walked out, Sheriff Ornelas clapping a hand on his shoulder as he passed him by.

Toby couldn’t look his dad in the eye. Didn’t know what to say to him. The image of his brother silently standing in the middle of the road was still seared into his mind. It was hard to believe that it could’ve been his imagination. He knew it didn’t make sense. Was it really a hallucination?

Toby opened his mouth to say something. To apologize? His mouth was dry, and he couldn't will the words to come out.

"Get some rest." His dad finally said. Toby glanced up, but his dad wasn't looking at him. He was staring at a point in the wall behind him.

"They wanna keep you overnight to be safe. I'll pick you up in the morning."

Toby nodded, not caring if his dad saw or not. His dad was halfway out the door when a thought occurred to him.

"What about my guitar?" He asked. It was still in the trunk, he hadn't taken it out of the car yet. A spike of anxiety ran through him.

His dad stopped and looked back at him, almost incredulously.

"I don't know. I'll check with Marcus." He said. Toby bit the inside of his cheek and laid back down in the bed, staring at the popcorned tiles lining the ceiling.



I walk carefully through the woods, only stopping once in a while to pull out my book on Flora and Fauna in the Northeast. I kneel down to look at a flower, but I can't find it in the book. It's not something I've seen before, but it looks like a combination of Juncus scirpoides and Amelanchier obovalis with its shrub-like appearance with purple-red berries beginning to bloom from the green-white flowers. I cut one of the branches with a pocketknife and carefully place it in my backpack to take home, I can look it up later to see exactly what it is.

It is quieter in the woods than I'm used to. It sets me on edge. There could be a mountain lion or a black bear nearby. My bear mace is firmly attached to my belt loop, but I get ready to head back home anyway. I barely take a step before hearing something. Some kind of groan, I

think. It was probably just a deer, or something stuck in a trap. Mr. Davies's kid liked to set them up, even when he wasn't supposed to.

I walk towards the noise, pushing past a clump of Spicebush and Wavy-leaf thistle. The groans are getting louder now, but they sound odd. Like the low hum of a cello –one continuous note drawn out. I hesitate but I've already seen it. My heart stops and I freeze. I don't think it's noticed me yet, but I don't know how long that will last.

It's tall. Tall enough to make the tree behind it look juvenile. It is sprawled on the ground, layers and layers of wings sprawl out like a blanket of feathers. It hurts to look at, like looking right into a lightbulb. Its chest is sunken in, and I can see branches winding around its ribs, with wispy white flowers growing from them. It's beautiful. It's horrible.

I must make some kind of sound because all of a sudden the groaning hum stops, and countless eyes open up from its skin, all swiveling to look at me.

CHAPTER THREE

The drive home was silent. Toby's dad picked him up in his rusty pickup truck that morning and they hadn't spoken a word since. Not, that Toby minded. His head was still swimming with questions and doubts. His sleep the previous night had been restless, interrupted by odd dreams he couldn't quite remember and the nurse who checked in on him every couple of hours.

Toby leaned his head against the car window, letting the glass bump against his head with every crack and pothole they drove over. The buildings and busyness of Johana Ford started to fade into the forested mountains and rough roads of Moriah. Johana Ford was a larger town thirty minutes or so from Moriah. Once he got his own car, Toby would drive Elijah down to the town during holidays. It took a decent amount of budgeting, especially when Christmas rolled around. They would have a little celebration at home around an old plastic tree Toby had gotten from the side of the road, and then a couple of days after Christmas Toby would give Elijah some money and drive him out to Johana Ford where the two of them would shop around the outlet mall and buy each other little gifts to exchange later that night over some discounted spice cake.

The last time they had exchanged gifts like that was before Toby graduated.

"Get ready to lose this year. Again," Toby had said smugly, nudging Eli's shoulder.

Eli rolled his eyes, and nudged Toby's shoulder back harder, "Yeah right. I know for a fact that I've got you beat this time old man."

Toby let out a noise of outrage. The audacity. He'd been pulling the old man card ever since Toby had turned eighteen, "I'll have you know that I'm in the throes of my youth. And insults aren't going to change the fact that my gift will be the superior one."

Eli laughed, short and quick, "We'll see about that."

His smile was sharp and wide, something not many got to see. Toby had huffed but didn't comment as they made their way down their gravel driveway to their house. Something in his chest ached at the sight of it. Eli was only a couple of inches shorter than him now, but Toby didn't think he'd ever be able to look at him and see anything but his little brother.

Their spirits dimmed somewhat entering the house. Abe was passed out on the couch with the TV blaring some rerun of an old comedy show. Beer bottles covered the coffee table and trash littered the floor. The fake tree in the corner of the room seemed out of place, still draped in too much tinsel and old ornaments.

Toby had jerked his head to the stairs, hoping to hide the irritation he felt, and Elijah nodded and went upstairs. Toby walked to the kitchen, keeping his steps light. Their dad was a pretty heavy sleeper, especially when he drank, but Toby didn't want to risk him waking up and ruining their celebration.

He beelined to the pantry where he hid the spice cake under a half-full bag of tortillas and behind a box of Eli's Lucky Charms. It wasn't a large cake. Only about six inches wide drizzled in sweet glaze with a sprig of mint in the center of it. He could've probably gotten a bigger one for cheaper at BGs, but the cakes over at Lana's Layer's bakery were so much better. It's where their mom used to buy Toby's birthday cakes.

Toby grabbed the cake and some dishware and went upstairs. The handles of the large paper bag hanging on Toby's arm were starting to dig into his skin, but it was easy to ignore the mild pain when he thought about what Eli's reaction would be to his gifts. He'd had to get creative this time, but he was confident that Eli would love them.

Their gift exchanges always took place in Elijah's room since it was the furthest away from the stairs and their dad's room, being at the end of the hall. Once Toby reached Eli's door he nudged it a couple of times with his foot until Elijah opened it for him with a grin.

"Cake first or presents?" Toby asked as he stepped into the room, placing the cake, plates, and silverware down on Eli's desk and moving the paper bag to his other arm.

"Hm, let's do presents first this year," Elijah said, grabbing his own bag off of his bed.

"All right," Toby said, pulling a quarter out from the pocket of his jeans, "heads or tails?"

"Heads."

Toby flipped the coin, letting it land on his palm then quickly slapping it onto the back of his other hand.

"Tails. Looks like I'm going first." Toby smirked, gesturing to the bag on his arm. He sat down on the round blue and green rug and carefully set the bag in front of him.

Elijah huffed but followed suit, sitting crisscrossed on the floor before reaching for the bag. The first thing he pulled out was a small package wrapped in a surplus of tissue paper. Elijah gave him a flat look, but the corners of his lips betrayed his amusement. After unwrapping the yards of tissue paper, Elijah held the new glass figurine in his hands. This one was of a sparrow, dark reds and browns colored the glass, spotted through with white and black. Elijah held the little glass bird, gently bringing it closer to his face so he could admire the detailing on its feathers.

"I thought these were only for birthdays," Elijah said, an unspoken question lingering after.

Toby shrugged, "I know, but it was a limited edition, and I didn't want to wait until February."

The half-truth tasted sour on Toby's tongue, but he swallowed back the bitter taste. He didn't even know if he'd get into any of the colleges he applied for yet. There was no need to ruin the day by mentioning the possibility of him going away. Toby would find another time to tell him, a better time.

Elijah placed the figurine carefully to the side and then reached into the paper bag again. This time he pulled out a large hardcover book that was on top of two wooden slats shut together with leather straps. The book was dark blue, and when Elijah opened it up he was confused to find the pages completely blank. He looked up at Toby, an eyebrow raised in expectation.

"I know you've gotten pretty into botany and stuff, so I thought you might want to make your own herbarium," Toby said, leaning over and tapping on the wood slats.

"This is so you can press whatever plants you decide you want to put in it and there are some plastic covers for the pages at the bottom of the bag along with some archival glue."

He could see Elijah light up as his mind went to work. No doubt cataloging all the different plants he wanted to bring back from the surrounding woods.

Elijah seemed to remember Toby was still in the room, dialing down his excitement.

"Well. These are pretty cool I guess." He said lightly, as if he hadn't been fawning over his gifts moments ago.

Toby barked out a laugh, "Only pretty good huh? You think you can do better?"

Elijah grinned, "I know I can," he said, standing up to retrieve the paper bag he put on his bed.

Returning to his spot on the floor, Elijah placed the bag between them with a flourish that made Toby chuckle.

Toby reached into the bag and pulled out another, smaller bag. This one plastic that was folded over something bulky and rectangular. He raised his eyebrows at Elijah as if to say, *Seriously?* before opening it up and pulling out a dark teal cassette player.

“Is this a Walkman WM-FX177?” Toby asked in shock. Toby had always loved having analog forms of music. He had been looking into getting his own Walkman online, but all the prices he found were way too expensive for his budget.

Elijah blinked, “I guess? I got it from Mr. Wilson when I was helping him clean up his attic and I got repaired it from the tech repair shop at the outlet.”

“How the hell did you afford that?”

“I saved up some of the money I got from doing chores and stuff at Mr. Wilson's place along with the money you gave me.” Elijah said smugly, “There are some cassette tapes in the bag too.”

There were three tapes of Laurie Anderson, Bill Evans, and Twisted Sister under where the Walkman was in the plastic bag. An eclectic choice.

“So,” Elijah said, “did I win?”

Toby snorted, but couldn't help but smile, “Yeah, fine. You win this year.”

A particularly deep pothole roused Toby from his memories, his head hitting the car window with a painful thump.

He closed his eyes. He could see Elijah's face as clear as day in his head. It wasn't exactly the same as when he saw Elijah on the road. No, that Eli was pale and tired and haunted in a way the one in his memories was not. Didn't that make it more real though? Toby had been gone for years, Eli wouldn't have stayed the same. If Toby had imagined it, then wouldn't he have imagined the phantom of the Elijah he knew?

He *did* see Elijah. Didn't he? It felt real to him, the image of his brother's pale face covered in mud, looking at him scared and tired. He'd been wearing that tan jacket over a washed-out Oasis t-shirt with black hiking boots. Toby remembered seeing that one of the laces had come untied. At least, Toby thought he remembered it. He didn't know anymore though. How was he supposed to peel apart what was real and what his mind made up?

Toby opened his eyes as the truck came to a stop. They were back at the house. He followed his dad out of the truck and into the house mechanically. Like one of the broken engines that littered the yard and his dad's garage. He came to a stop in the living room.

"Why didn't you tell me about the Angel?"

His dad jerked in surprise, spinning around to stare at Toby with a haunted expression.

"What?" he asked.

"You didn't tell me about the rumors of an Angel in the mountain. That some people think it might've ki-" Toby swallowed dryly, "taken Elijah."

His dad's face slowly turned from shock to anger, and Toby fought the urge to stiffen up. To shrink in on himself.

"Who the 'ell filled your head with that shit?" his dad demanded.

"I overheard it while I was out." Toby said. "It doesn't matter where I heard it. How could you not tell me?"

"You didn't need to know. They were just some rumors spread by that Davy boy. There're no fuckin Angels in Moriah."

A burst of hurt bloomed in his chest, but was quickly overcome by bitterness, "I didn't need to know?" he laughed, and it sent flashes of throbbing pain through his head.

"Toby-" his dad started, but Toby cut him off.

“You think-you think that what? That you were the only one who suffered when mom passed away? What about me, huh? I didn’t just lose her when she died, I lost you too. I was the one who took care of Eli, made sure he ate, got him to school, looked after him when he was sick. I deserved to know that a fucking Angel could’ve been involved!” Toby’s chest heaved and his head throbbed.

Toby remembered the frantic calls to his mother and her family. They had made it out of the initial crash zone, but not out of the Angels' radius of effect. Toby remembered how Abe had spent days trying to find out what happened to them before getting the name of the hospital they were at. Toby remembered seeing his brother lying in a hospital bed with a large tube sticking out of his mouth. His eyes were covered in bandages, but Toby could see the blood spotting through the white polymer. They wouldn’t let Toby see his mom, but he snuck away from his aunt into her room while she and his dad weren’t looking. She was covered in bandages from head to toe, and so many tubes were stuck into her that she looked like some kind of monster. He had stood frozen at the end of her bed until she let out a pained moan, and then he ran out crying.

“That’s enough Toby.” His dad said, all the anger draining from him.

He wouldn’t look Toby in the eye, and a part of Toby felt a sick satisfaction from the guilty slope of his shoulders. Toby could feel more bitter words piling up in his mouth, poised to strike where he knew would hurt most, but his dad was already turning away.

“Don’t go fillin your head with pointless rumors.” he said pausing at the foot of the stairs. “Your guitar ’s up in your room.”

Toby clenched his hands. He wanted to keep going, keep fighting and hurting but his dad wouldn’t even give him that. His fingers twitched towards his front pocket, remembering only halfway in the movement that he didn’t have any cigarettes on him. By the time he looked up, his

dad had already gone up the stairs. Toby could hear his footsteps creak on the old wooden floor before a door shut at the end of the hall.



Toby waited until his dad left for work to approach Elijah's room. Toby was hoping he could find something that would help him figure out what happened to Elijah. The door to his brother's room creaked open, and after a moment of hesitation, Toby stepped inside. It was different than he remembered. New posters covered the pale green walls. Eli's bed was sloppily made, the old patchwork quilt that used to be their grandmothers was rumpled carelessly over the top of his pillows. Before he left Elijah's walls had been covered with posters of his favorite superheroes, but now the only posters Toby could see were about botany or music. They looked like something Toby would have picked.

His backpack peeked out from underneath the bed looking like it had been thrown to the side and forgotten about. It was strange, for as long as Toby could remember Eli was always pretty good about keeping his room tidy. *How else had Eli changed since he left?* The question settled uneasily in his chest.

On his nightstand was an empty mug, a branch of wilting flowers, a dark blue folding lamp, and a small glass figurine of a dog. Toby used to have a figure of a koi fish with red and orange melting into each other like watercolor paint. Elijah had always been fascinated by them figurines, constantly bothering Toby about getting one for him too. In hindsight, Toby knew that Elijah just wanted to be like him. As a moody fifteen-year-old though, it felt like Elijah was trying to intrude into something special that Toby had shared with their mom.



Toby had already been in a bad mood when he got home from school that day. He had gotten detention in Mr. Garrison's math class for being late again. Like it was his fault his dad wouldn't drive them to school. Toby had to get up early enough to make them both breakfast and pack something for Eli to eat for lunch. Then he had to wake Eli up and make sure he was dressed and ready for school. Once they had finished, Toby had to walk all the way over to the elementary school ten minutes away from his high school to make sure Eli made it to school on time. Mr. Garrison didn't give a rat's ass about that though.

Toby had asked Alaina to walk Eli home from school while he stayed back to write some stupid reflection essay on why he shouldn't be late and how he was wrong for trying to explain why he was late.

As soon as he got home he stomped up the stairs to his room, not worried about the noise. His dad was at work, and Toby threw open his bedroom door. He tossed his backpack onto his bed and turned to face his desk when he froze. Elijah's panicked green eyes meeting his own brown ones.

Rage quickly filled Toby as he stomped up to his brother, "What the hell are you doing?"

Elijah was gripping his grubby hands on Toby's figurines of a Koi fish and a dragonfly.

"I just wanted to play with them a little." Eli muttered, hunching his shoulders up defensively. The act only made Toby angrier. Elijah *knew* he wasn't supposed to go into Toby's room without permission. Couldn't he do one little thing after everything Toby's done for him?

"I told you not to touch those!" Toby stepped forward, attempting to grab the figurines out of his brother's hands.

Elijah's brow furrowed and he pulled them closer to himself. "It's not fair! I'm not gonna break them or anything, you jerk!"

Toby didn't answer, grabbing the hand that held the dragonfly and prying it away. Toby quickly set it on the desk behind Eli before reaching for the koi fish still held in his brother's grip.

"Let. It. Go!" Toby gritted out, as Elijah struggled in his grip. At some point Eli had lost his balance and ended up falling sideways onto the floor, the figurine breaking upon impact.

They both froze, staring at the colored pieces of shattered glass.

Toby could feel his pulse in his ears, and he turned a furious glare at his brother.

"You little shit!" he yelled, his hands balling into fists. That figurine was the last gift he'd gotten from their mom, and now it was ruined. Toby wanted to scream. He wanted to hit something.

Elijah was still lying on the floor, his lower lip wobbling at Toby's voice.

"Get the hell away from me." Toby said tensely, ignoring the way his brothers' eyes filled with tears and he got up and ran from the room.

Toby hardly spoke to Elijah the following days, and when he did have to say something, it was short and terse. He'd go through his routine of getting Eli ready for school in almost complete silence. Eli had tried to apologize or start up conversations on their walks to and from school, but Toby was resolute in his anger.

This lasted three days until one night Toby woke up in the middle of the night having to use the bathroom. It wasn't until he was on his way back to his room that he heard something from behind Elijah's door. Toby had paused, his curiosity overwhelming the bitterness he still felt, and he pressed his ear to the door. Elijah was crying. Sobbing, more like it, though he was clearly trying to stifle it. Probably afraid of waking up dad.

Or him. Toby thought, ice running through his veins. He yanked his head away from the door. A part of him wanted to open it, to comfort Eli like he usually would, but would Eli even want to see him right now?

Guilt filled his chest and Toby walked back to his own room. The next morning he made sure to be extra nice, waking up early to make pancakes with melted butter and sugar sprinkled on top since they didn't have any maple syrup. He had even added the last of his own chocolate stash to Eli's lunch as a treat. Elijah was clearly confused by Toby's sudden change in attitude, and his wariness made something in Toby curdle.

That same night after dinner, Toby went to his room and picked up the dragonfly figurine. It was one of his first. His mom had brought it back from a business trip from Chicago when he was six, and he remembered being fascinated with the swirling blues and greens that the glass contained. Even without the figurines, Toby still had plenty of memories of their mother. Eli wasn't so lucky. He was seven when The Fall had occurred, and his memories of their mother were blurry at best. The only way he really knew their mother was through Toby.

With some resolution, Toby took the figurine and went to Elijah's room. Elijah had jumped up from his bed when Toby walked in, stuck half-between running up to him and staying back. It had hurt, but Toby didn't let it show on his face. He deserved it.

Toby walked up to him slowly, pulling his hand out from behind his back and holding the figurine out to Eli's.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," he said. It wasn't the only thing Toby was sorry for, but he didn't know how to explain why he'd gotten so angry.

Elijah took the dragonfly slowly from Toby's hand, cradling it close. "I'm sorry I broke the goldfish."

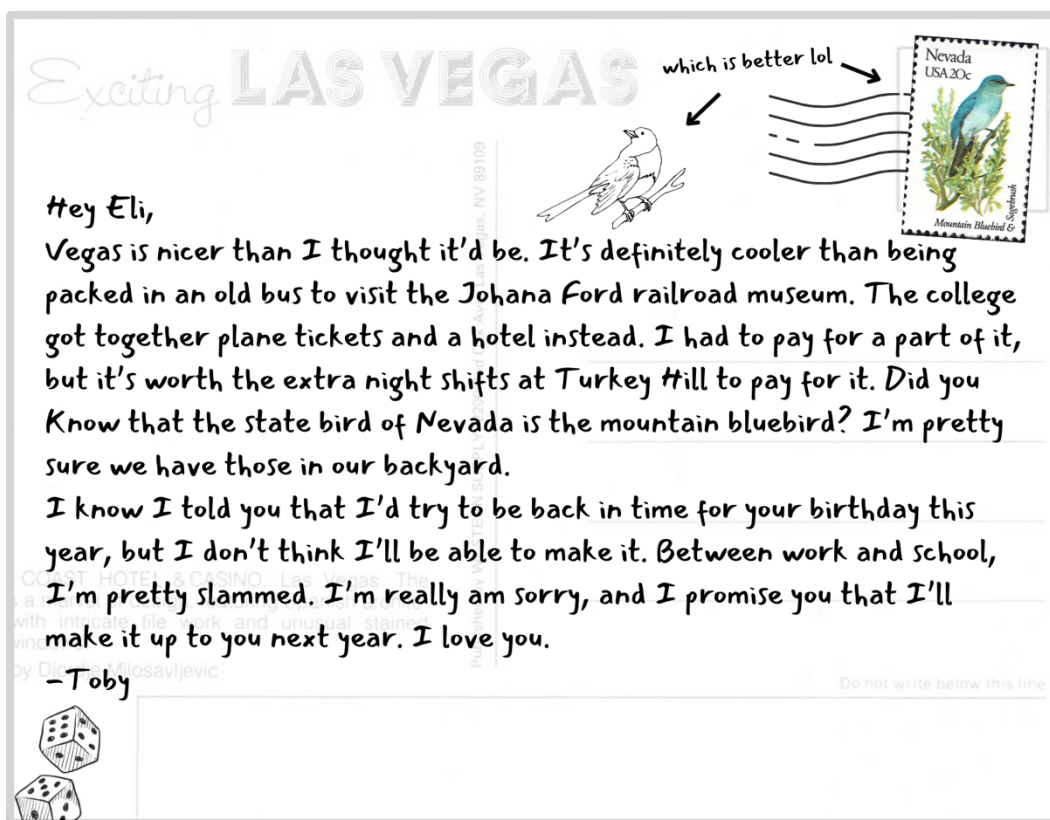
“It’s ok. I’m sorry for being a jerk the past couple of days.” Toby said.

“I’m sorry I played with them after you said not to.” Silent tears were running down Elijah’s face now and Toby could feel his heart break.

Without another word, Toby pulled his brother close and buried his face in Eli’s hair as they both cried. After the tears had dried, Toby had sat Elijah down and, in broken fragments, told him why the figurines were so important to him. After this, Toby made a habit of buying Elijah his own figurines on his birthdays.



Pulling his eyes away from the figurines, Toby walked to the far side of the room where he saw Elijah’s desk with a corkboard hung over it that had pictures of them together or of nature scenes along with the postcards Toby had sent him pinned to it. The most recent postcard was from when Toby was in Vegas. He ran a finger over the faded card, the gloss wearing off at the edges where it was clearly handled too much. Toby had dreaded picking it out. Picking it out meant sitting down to write, and sitting down to write forced him to face how much of a piece of shit he really was.



He had meant it, at the time. Already planning different ways to surprise him on his next birthday. He would save up for something big. Something Eli would love enough to maybe look past the fact that Toby hadn't been back in three years. And then he graduated, and all his lofty aspirations of composing and playing music professionally were crushed under harsh reality. He was left living out of his car, busking music from place to place just to make enough money to eat. Toby dropped his hand from the postcards. He stopped getting postcards from Elijah after he graduated and started traveling. Toby had made sure to call him more often on his prepaid phone to make up for it, but when money started getting tighter Toby stopped being able to afford the minutes, and phone calls were saved for special occasions.

Elijah's desk was covered in books. The journal Toby had gifted him for his herbarium lay on the top, opened up to a page showcasing a branch with white flowers and a drawing of reddish berries next to it. Under it were other botany books. A book about foraging and medicinal

plants, a glossary on plant identification, and a book on the rising science of plant intelligence. Toby skimmed through them with a spark of fondness. His little brother was never a bookworm, per se, but when he was interested in something he'd go all into it. Others were a bit more surprising. Books of poetry by Walt Whitman, Robert Hass, and Alice Oswald. Toby recognized a few of them as books of their mothers that he passed down to Elijah when he couldn't afford a proper birthday gift.

After skimming through the drawers of the desk and finding nothing, Toby walked over to Eli's bed and pulled his backpack out from under it. Inside were folders of old homework, but crumpled in the back was a newsletter for the church of Delivered Hope. Toby's eyebrows furrowed. Delivered Hope was a church of fanatics that worshipped Angels as divine prophets here to lead them to a new era of humanity. He had no idea why Elijah would be interested in these freaks.

In another pocket of Eli's backpack, Toby found his brother's laptop. It was dead when he opened it, so Toby fumbled around Elijah's nightstand for the charger and plugged it in. Once it turned on he opened up the web browser to find it full of tabs on Angels. The biology of them, their effect on the environment, and some random conspiracy posts on where the Angels had come from.

His head hurt. He couldn't deal with this right now. Toby shut the laptop and stepped towards the window, cracking it open so that a cool breeze drifted through. Nothing was making sense. He needed to get more information, and there was only one person that he trusted would tell him the truth.

FEBRUARY 2018—ISSUE 58

Delivered Hope

A NEWSLETTER FOR OUR COMMUNITY



“Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.”

REVELATION 5:11

THIS MONTHS HIGHLIGHTS

Walk for Hope: Come and join us as we walk around The Department of Anomalous Containment in protest of the recent murder of the Albany Angel at 10:30 am on Sunday March 5th. Water and snacks will be provided!

Young Hopes: The Young Hopes camping weekend will take place in Rockefeller Park on March 17th through the 19th. Make sure your child's permission slip is filled out and handed in to Gloria Frances by the 13th.

Guest Sermon: On the 22nd renowned author and preacher Duncan Redding will be visiting us for a sermon followed by a book signing for his recent book “The Truth behind The Angels: What The Devil Doesn’t Want You to Know”. Bring a copy or buy your own after the service!



The Truth of Angels

WRITTEN BY MATTHEW CALLOWAY

After The Fall and The Impact of 2009, many Christians felt lost as to what their descent meant. Why had God's Angels take so many lives? What did it mean for those who were left behind?

The world was torn apart by grief and confusion, but those who Kept faith could see the truth. The End had been a long time coming with how faithless the world had become, and God had sent down his Angels as a punishment. And as a possible path toward redemption. The Angels took the worst of the world, the sinners and the heretics that were beyond redemption. The government, and its newly elected Democratic President, would have us believe that the Angels are just extraterrestrial creatures that fell to Earth by accident.

They would have us blind our eyes to the truth despite it being right in front of us. The Angels appeared on Earth with a multitude of glorious white wings, interspersed with God's watchful eyes. Their stature is tall and genderless, and their faces empty of features. They came down with the voices of trumpets and chariots, as was depicted by John in the book of Revelations. Even the name they are called, "Angels" lend to the truth. They are our deliverers, our last hope to save our immortal souls. I myself was present in the city of Cleveland when The Fall occurred, and bore witness to the Angel's song as they fell. The memory of which is burned forever in my mind. The sound of it nearly drove me mad and left me in a coma for months. God showed me that my faith was weak, and now I aim to strengthen it, not just for my own soul but to save the souls of others.

And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

REVELATION 5:9

CHAPTER FOUR

Toby waited inside the old church on a pew for Alaina to arrive. Being this close to Elijah's grave again made his stomach twist, but there wasn't anywhere else he could think of that would be private enough to have this conversation. The white walls were peeling, paint curling away from the wood like flower petals. Light shown down from cracks in the roof and through the stained-glass windows lining the walls on his sides. Before The Fall, this place would be used for church services, funerals, and weddings, but afterward, the place was left to slowly decay. Delivered Hope had a newer church a couple of minutes out of town that they peddled constantly through pamphlets and newsletters, but only a few people in town had ever really bothered to attend any of their services.

Ivy crept up the wall behind the stage, curling around the decrepit figure of Christ hanging from the cross. It was chipped and warped in a way that almost made the figure unrecognizable if he didn't have the context behind it. Toby was never one for church, even before The Fall, but there was something beautiful about the church's decay. He wondered if Elijah came here after he left. He would like it, Toby thought. It was the perfect place for stories. Nothing felt real there.

He blinked away from fractals of light against the floor and pulled out his phone. Alaina was late, which was unusual for her. He wondered if she'd show up at all. He wouldn't blame her if she didn't. She was nice enough at the diner, all things considered, but he hadn't exactly given her a lot of reasons to be there for him. Toby hadn't told her he was leaving, too afraid that the guilt of leaving her as well as Eli would change his mind.

Toby was shaken from his thoughts by the creak of the church's wooden doors. Soft footsteps thumped up the aisle until they stopped next to his pew, and Toby looked up at the soft

face of Alaina. The stained glass cast her pale face in purples and pinks and reds like she was some abstract painting.

She sat down next to him with a huff and the moment broke. Alaina was human again. Her blonde hair blocked her face from view, but he could see the vague outline of her fists clenched in her coat pockets, though he couldn't tell if it was out of anger or due to the cold.

"Hi." he offered, suddenly unsure of how to proceed. She pulled her hands out of her coat pockets and folded them over her lap.

"Hi? You show up after four years of radio silence, nearly die the day after arriving, and all you have to say to me is hi?" she asked, her words measured but gaining volume towards the end.

"I'm-Sorry?" Toby choked out, not knowing whether or not he meant his apology as a question or a statement. He hadn't realized she'd already heard about his accident. Though in hindsight, it was probably too much to expect the officers who found him to keep their mouths shut on the matter. The whole town must know. He didn't like the thought of that.

"Sorry?" she laughed incredulously, "You almost died Toby, do you even care?" Alaina's shoulders were hunched, and her hands grasped each other like she was trying to hold herself together. Toby felt cold. A pit formed in his stomach. Did she think he crashed on purpose?

Toby wiped his hands on his jeans, "I'm sorry Lainey," he started, brows furrowing as he tried to find the right words, "I didn't mean to crash. I-I was just upset, and I thought I saw something in the road."

She already thought of him as a suicidal mess, he didn't need her thinking he was crazy too. Tears were welling up in Alaina's eyes, and Toby's own widened in panic.

“You—absolute—asshole!” she cried. “I thought-I thought it was my fault. Because I told you about those rumors and then-I’m sorry,”

“It’s ok, I’m ok, don’t cry.” he said, hesitantly wrapping his arms around her, relaxing when she didn’t push him away. She had a tendency to cry when she was upset, but he hadn’t seen her cry like this since they were kids. The last time she’d been this upset was in eighth grade when Nate Brown said something about her dad offing himself because he didn’t want to deal with her anymore. Toby was furious when he heard it, and instantly jumped Nate. It took two teachers to pull Toby off of the boy.

“I’m sorry Lainey, it’s not your fault. Promise.” he tucked his chin over her head. She felt smaller than he remembered. He couldn’t help but wonder if that was because of him. After a while she pulled back, wiping under her eyes with the edge of her sleeve.

Toby felt as if his heart was being choked by the same ivy that hung from the walls. He didn’t have the right to ask anything of her, but he didn’t know who else to turn to. He needed to find more information on what happened to Elijah.

God, he was the worst.

“I wanted to ask more about what you mentioned at Maisie’s. About the Angel.” he said.

She nodded slightly, sniffing as her forehead scrunched up in concentration, “I don’t know that much, just some of the rumors from the diner. It was probably nothing, but I didn’t want you hearing about it from someone else if your dad didn’t tell you.”

“I know, but can you tell me more about the rumors in detail? Anything would help.” Toby asked.

“Like I said, Paul Davy talked about strange changes in the forest and stuff. Kayla Lauber said that her boyfriend Phineas Shaw – he transferred over from the Johana Ford police

department – has been ordered to patrol the North Woods area to make sure no one goes in it. I don't really know what you're looking for Toby."

Toby bit his lip, he honestly didn't know what he was looking for either. "Are there any other rumors relating to Eli?"

"Uhm, I know a lot of people think that he was taken, or killed, by the Angel because he kept sneaking into the forest. After he went missing some of his classmates also talked about how he'd been acting odd. Kind of spacey and cagey. There were also rumors that he got involved with Delivered Hope."

"Why do people think that?" Toby asked in surprise. He saw the pamphlets in Eli's desk drawer, but he didn't think that Eli would actually go to a place like that.

"A couple weeks after he went missing someone from the church came up looking for him. Your dad was pissed when he heard." she said.

His dad knew? And didn't tell him? Toby didn't know why he was surprised at this point. "If people think an Angel was involved, then why hasn't there been more news on it?"

"The agents who came here said they didn't find any evidence of an Angel during their investigation, so after a couple weeks everybody kind of calmed down and brushed the whole thing off as a false alarm."

That made sense. There hadn't been a confirmed Angel sighting since the Albany Angel was killed years ago. Most of them died on Impact. The ones who didn't were quickly rounded up by the D.A.C. for containment. Still, something wasn't adding up.

When he didn't say anything Alaina slowly added, "The D.A.C. agents who came down are here. You might be able to ask for more information since you're Eli's family?"

Her tone carried traces of bitterness that stung something in Toby's heart. Alaina was there a lot for them while Toby was trying to raise Eli after their mom's death. Their aunt didn't live close enough to help out much, and they didn't have any other family nearby, so when their dad started drinking more it fell on Toby to pick up his slack. He managed for the first couple of years, but he's not sure he would've been able to without Alaina's support. She might as well have been family. She was the one who stayed after all.

Toby broke her gaze, staring down at the cracks in the floorboard below, "Come with me?" he asked. He looked again at the figure of Christ on the wall in front of him, brushing away the knot in his stomach.

She blinked at him, a little tired but relieved, and her whole body slumped down.

She gave him a smile. "Of course."

Toby would find out what happened to his brother. No matter what.

CHAPTER FIVE

Alaina didn't work during the weekends, so she picked Toby up at his house on Saturday morning. The sun had settled into its resting place in the sky, offering a bit of warmth against the chilly March air. Toby put out his cigarette at her arrival. She'd never liked him smoking. Back when he was sixteen and nicking them off of Mr. Hanson during his shifts at the general store she'd admitted it reminded her of her dad. He'd made it a point to not smoke around her after, though it wasn't enough to get him to kick the habit.

He met her halfway up the driveway to the house, eager to get going. He hadn't gotten much sleep since he left the hospital. The few times he had managed to drift off were filled with strange dreams he couldn't remember. He felt exhausted, and it showed when he looked in the bathroom mirror that morning. The skin under his eyes was dark like a bruise and his eyes were wide and manic. His face was pale and sickly. In the florescent lights of his bathroom, he looked like a corpse fished out from the water; pale and stiff, with his hair hanging limply against his face.

He had tried to make himself more presentable, showering and changing into some of his nicer clothes, but he wasn't sure how much it helped. Alaina still looked at him with thinly veiled concern, but blessedly didn't comment on his looks. He didn't want to give her a chance to change her mind and start asking him questions about how he was doing. Her concern would only grate against his already frayed nerves.

Toby flipped on the radio, fiddling with the stations while she drove. He settled on classical, letting the light notes of the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra wash over him. It wasn't a long drive to Moriah's police station, but his anxiety still mounted as the seconds drew on. He was starting to second guess bringing Alaina along. Toby didn't want her to get lumped in with

him if things went poorly. Her waitressing job at Maisie's didn't exactly pay much, and her family's only other source of consistent income was from her mom's Etsy shop where she sold hand-sewn clothes and blankets. The two of them lived with Oscar Smit in his house, but he'd stopped working in 2016 after a logging accident at work left him without legs from the knees down. He didn't want to jeopardize Alaina's income, especially since he knew how much her family depended on it.

By the time they pulled into the parking lot in front of the police station, Toby was trying his best not to panic, not to make up some excuse to Alaina or push her away so he couldn't end up fucking up her life any more than he already had.

He wanted another cigarette. This was a horrible idea.

The cops already thought he was on drugs or something during the accident, why did he show up like this? He looked like shit. They were going to brush him off even more—

“-oby. Toby?”

A hand landed on his shoulder, and he flinched.

“Are you ok?” she asked, her large green eyes looking at him like he was something fragile like he was going to fall apart under her fingers. He took a deep breath and pushed his thoughts away to the back of his mind to deal with later. Or never. Probably never.

“Yeah. Sorry. I haven't been sleeping well lately. Just a little on edge is all.” he told her, conjuring up what he hoped was an assuring smile.

Alaina still looked doubtful, but some of the tension left her face.

“Are you sure you want to do this today? We can come back another time.” she said.

“I'm fine.” he blurted out, maybe a little too quickly if the look Alaina gave him was any indication. “Really, I am. I need to do this I-just. Maybe you should wait in the car?”

“What? Why?” she asked.

He shrugged, avoiding her eyes and staring at the surrounding cars. There was one that stood out among the rest, plain black with a nasty scratch along the side. “I’m not really the best person to be seen with right now.”

She gave him a flat look, her lips thinning. “Tobias Abbott, I’m going to say this once, and only once.” she started, and he stiffened at her tone of voice. “I’m not going anywhere. You are my best friend, maybe a shitty one sometimes, but it doesn’t matter. As long as you need me, I’ll be here. Got it?”

He looked at her incredulously, an uncomfortable mixture of guilt and warmth in his chest. God, he didn’t know how much he’d missed her until now.

He blinked back the growing pressure behind his eyes. “Yeah. I got it. Thanks Lainey.”

She smiled at him, her eyes crinkling, “Of course. We both know how hopeless you are without me.” she teased.

He choked out a laugh and hopped out of the car, trailing behind her to the doors of the police station.

The lobby of the station was quiet. The sounds of keyboards clicking and papers rustling under the rhythm of The Rolling Stones playing from the speakers filled their ears. The tiled floor was clean but clearly worn and cracked in places. The walls were a shade of yellow that cast the whole building in a sort of sickly glow that Toby thought was meant to be sunny or upbeat. The air smelled like stale coffee and greasy food. It made Toby’s stomach turn a little. Maybe he should’ve had more than a cigarette for breakfast.

Alaina led the way to the receptionist's desk. The counter of the desk was covered in small plastic plants and a bowl of Werther’s candies. Toby recognized the receptionist as

Gertrude Merrywright, an older woman who taught him piano for a while when he was younger. She had bright, red-framed glasses and a sagging face that reminded Toby of a bulldog.

She would bring casseroles and other meals after his mom died. She stopped when his dad started getting defensive about it. Toby only remembered him muttering something about handouts and charity cases. His dad ended up canceling his piano lessons soon after.

She did a double take when she saw him and then smiled at him widely. “Oh my goodness, is that you Tobias?”

Toby returned her smile awkwardly. He’d forgotten that she worked here.

“Yep, it’s me. How are you doing Mrs. Merrywright?” he asked.

“Oh please honey, we’re both adults, call me Gertrude. And I’m doing just fine. What about you? I know it must be hard comin’ back here given the circumstances.”

Toby’s smile turned a little more forced. “I’m doing alright. Thank you for your concern. I was actually wondering if we could speak to the D.A.C. agents that are stationed here if that’s possible.”

Gertrude gave the pair an even look. The same look she’d given him when he was taken into the station after beating Nate Brown bloody. Like she knew he was out for trouble, but that nothing she said would stop him from finding it.

The woman let out a weary sigh, shaking her head slightly and grabbing the landline from its stand, “Mr. Carnell, Ms. Roh, there are some people here who’d like to talk with you if you have the time.”

Toby gave her what he hoped was a reasonably grateful look. She was always a straightforward woman. No need for excessive justifying or excuses as to why he wanted to speak to the agents.

“Mhmm, alrighty I’ll let them know. Thank you.” she hung up with phone and typed something down on her computer with her bright red nails. “They’re talking with the Sheriff right now, but they’ll be with you shortly if you two are alright to wait.”

“We are,” Toby rushed out, “-able to wait, that is. Thank you,” Toby told her, injecting as much sincerity as he could in his words.

He and Alaina walked over to a line of chairs next to a small table of outdated magazines covered in a thin layer of dust and a water cooler. The chairs were a stiff plastic that Toby slid down every few seconds before righting himself.

Toby was about to make a comment to Alaina about them when a head of familiar red hair walked through the station doors.

“God, how long is he gonna have me on traffic duty? We don’t even have traffic here.” Bill ran a hand over his hair as he complained as he leaned over Gertrude’s desk for Werther.

Gertrude didn’t spare him a glance, “Beats me honey. Just wait it out and Marcus will forget whatever’s got his pants in a twist.”

Bill let out a groan at that and swung around towards the water cooler, and by association, Toby and Alaina.

He stared at them with wide eyes for a couple of long seconds before tilting his head back towards Gertrude.

“Hey-Uh Gertrude? What’re Toby Abbott and Alaina Beck doing here?”

“I don’t know hun, why don’t you ask them?”

Bill's face scrunched up in a grimace, his eyes darting between Alaina’s unimpressed stare and Toby’s tired one before settling on Toby’s.

“Right, ok.” Bill muttered, more to himself than to either of them. “So, what brings you guys to the station today?”

His demeanor was almost enough for Toby to crack a smile. He’d never been that close to Bill in high school, but they’d gotten along well enough when they did interact. More importantly, though was how Bill reacted to Toby saying he saw Elijah back in the hospital. Maybe he could pull some information out of him.

“How’ve you been doing Bill?” Toby asked.

“Me? I’ve- been fine.” Bill shrugged, “If anything I should be askin’ you that with you being, you know,” he motioned his hand towards Toby, “just outta the hospital and all.”

“I’m all good. Just a couple of bumps and bruises, luckily. I couldn’t help but notice you seemed kinda off when you visited me though, so I wanted to check in and make sure everything was alright with you.”

Toby’s goal was to fill him with guilt. They weren’t close enough for anything else, and it’s not like he could say much more with Gertrude still sitting at her desk. If Toby could plant the seeds though, then he might be able to get something out of Bill later.

Predictably, Bill’s face fell, and he pasted on a tight smile. “I’m fine, sorry. Just-not used to things like that happenin’ in Moriah, you know?”

“I get it.” Toby nodded, ignoring the confused side eye from Alaina. “I’m sorry to have caused so much trouble for you guys right as I got back. It’s just been hard. Not knowing what happened to Elijah.”

Toby didn’t have to fake the emotions in his voice, and he could see Bill tense up in the corner of his eye as he did his best to project the image of a sad grieving brother.

“Right.” Bill said, his voice cracking. “I-”

“I’m not playin around Eric, this has gone on long enough.” a voice interrupted from the hallway to the left of Bill, causing the man to jump.

Toby couldn’t fight off the spike of annoyance that shot through him. He was barely getting started with his guilt trip. That annoyance quickly turned to anxiety when Sheriff Ornelas walked around the corner. He had hoped he would’ve been able to avoid the Sheriff.

“I understand your concerns Marcus, and rest assured Amy and I are doing everything we can to wrap up our investigation.” another voice said from behind the Sheriff. It was from a man with close-cut black hair that was streaked through with white. He wore a white dress shirt with a navy-blue vest over it that had a grey pocket square in the chest pocket along with a pair of slim framed reading glasses. His slacks were a light grey and his shoes were a shiny black leather. Toby had never seen the man in Moriah before. It must have been one of the D.A.C. agents.

Sheriff Ornelas mumbled something Toby couldn’t make out before the man caught sight of him and Alaina and froze.

“What are you two doing here?” the Sheriff asked, his eyes quickly narrowing.

Toby opened his mouth to answer when the D.A.C. agent spoke up from behind the Sheriff, “Ah, you must be Tobias and, Alaina was it?” he asked.

Toby felt like a deer in the headlights if the headlights had the combined power of the sun. Every muscle in his body was locked into place.

Luckily, Alaina spoke up, “Yes, hi. You must be Agent Carnell, right?”

The man smiled and a shiver ran down Toby’s spine. His teeth were perfectly straight and white, but something about them looked sharp. Like the edges of a knife.

“You can call me Carnell. If you two will give me a moment I’ll take you back to my office so we can talk.”

“The hell you need to talk to them for?” Sheriff Ornelas interjected.

“Well, I’m not sure yet Marcus. They’re the ones with the questions.” Carnell cocked his head, his voice taking on an almost smug tone.

Sheriff Ornelas glared at him in return giving Toby and Alaina a sharp look and then turned to Bill, who had pressed himself against the front of the receptionist desk with his eyes firmly on the wall clock hanging on the wall facing the hallway.

“Stop loitering and get in the back. You’re on desk duty until I say otherwise.”

Sheriff Ornelas ignored Bill’s noise of protest and stormed to the back of the station. Bill gave Toby a quick glance and muttered a goodbye as he followed his boss back.

Agent Carnell turned to watch them leave before turning back to Toby and Alaina. “Well, you can follow me down this hallway here and my partner and I can try and answer any questions you’ve got for us.”

Alaina smiled politely and stood up, tugging Toby by the arm as she did so. Toby tried to shake off the pinpricks of panic that were stabbing into his head with little success, but he managed to keep moving behind the two as they made their way down the hall which seemed more claustrophobic as they went on.

Toby didn’t understand why he was feeling like this. If anything, he should be looking forward to getting answers about his brother’s disappearance and the rumor about the Angel, so why did it feel like he was walking himself into the lion’s den?

Before he knew it they were standing in front of a door opened up to a small office area that looked like it was previously used for storage or something. Old cardboard boxes sat stacked against the wall opposite a large wooden desk that was covered in papers and used coffee cups. A

couple of chairs were placed in front of the desk that looked only slightly more comfortable than the ones out in the lobby.

Toby's heart was beating fast enough that he was starting to wonder if he was having a heart attack at twenty-two. A woman stood behind the desk with stern looking brown eyes and straight black hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. She was sharp angles and long limbs. Carnell was saying something in the background, but Toby couldn't hear it anymore.

He felt trapped. His ears were ringing and the panic in him was growing. He didn't understand why. What was happening to him? This panic, this fear, didn't feel like it was his own.

As soon as that thought crossed his mind, the two agents turned towards him and a screeching pain pulse through Toby's head.

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The Daily News

JULY 23, 2011

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO ALIEN THREAT:

NEW AGENCY FORMED IN LIGHT OF "THE FALL"

DEPARTMENT CREATED TO COMBAT ANGELS
BY MAGDELINE YOUNG | STAFF WRITER
THE DAILY NEWS

SCRANTON, PA—At the NATO summit in Belgium, world governments finalized a plan to combat the Angel threat. A new intergovernmental agency, the Department of Anomalous Containment (D.A.C.), will be formed and begin patrolling as soon as next month.

President Obama laid out plans for the formation of this agency on Friday, in response to the September fifth attack on the employees of the Black Mountain Industrial Complex. The Complex has been shut down following the Las Vegas Impact event, but was set to reopen this January. It is believed that attempts to restore machinery woke up sleeping angels in the complex, causing the death of twenty seven employees and the hospitalization of three.

Two similar tragedies in Canada and Mexico spurred this intergovernmental effort. In an interview Dr. Abram Barlow, a Harvard Professor of Ecology working in tandem with President Obama to create the agency stated, "the D.A.C.'s goals are simple: To capture these alien creatures and figure out how they work. This second part is important because we don't know when, or if, we're going to experience another "Fall". I know a lot of people would

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prefer we replace Containment with Elimination, but they've got to understand that in order to protect ourselves from further threats, we need to understand how these creature's work. And to do that, we need them alive, at least for a while." (continued on pg. 2).



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CHAPTER SIX

Everything was white.

Toby's head pounded like something in it was trying to escape. His chest felt like it had burst open. Bile rose up his throat.

"Toby?" A familiar voice called, cutting through the haze of pain. Alaina was looking at him with that worried look on her face again. The D.A.C. agents were staring at him, but the thought of looking at them made the panic and pain start swelling up again.

"Sorry." Toby choked out, clearing his throat.

"I'm ok. Just a migraine. Haven't been sleeping well." he babbled, dragging his eyes away from Alaina's downturned mouth to stare at the empty space behind Carnell's head. Guilt clogged his throat, a feeling he had been growing intimately familiar with since he came back to Moriah. He'd worried her again.

"Are you sure you're alright son? I know you just got out of the hospital." Carnell said, eyeing Toby curiously.

Toby made a face but before he could try and force words out of his mouth Alaina spoke up, "Oh, how did you know?"

"It's a small town. News travels fast." The woman behind the desk spoke. Her voice was light and brisk, like a winters breeze.

"Especially when you're working in a police station." Carnell said with a wry smile.

"Oh, well. I'm fine. Thanks." Toby's words came out in splinters, and he had to suppress a wince. He wasn't going to get anywhere spitting out fractured sentences.

Carnell hummed, still observing Toby in a way that set his teeth on edge.

“Oh, how rude of me. Tobias, Alaina, this is my partner Agent Amy Roh. Roh, meet Tobias and Alaina.”

“It’s a pleasure.” Roh said, nodding towards the two of them.

“So,” Carnell clapped his hands together, “what can we help you two with today?”

Toby swallowed past the lead in his throat. “I had some questions about my brother’s disappearance, and the rumors that an Angel was involved in it.”

“Ah, I should have guessed.” Carnell leaned against the desk. “As you said, everything you’ve probably heard about the Angel are only rumors. We haven’t found any solid links to suggest that one had any connection to your brother’s disappearance.”

“I know it’s been a while since the investigation and you’re probably right about the Angel’s involvement being rumors but everything’s still so new to me. I just want to understand what could have happened to my brother.”

Toby’s arms wrapped around himself, and Alaina placed a light hand on his arm and then turned back to the D.A.C. agents. “Any information you could give us would be great. He-we both-just want to be able to get some closure.”

Toby had to bite back a smile. They were both so good at playing the sad, troubled kid with a dead parent. They didn’t even have to try since it wasn’t fake. It had gotten them out of trouble a lot as kids. Well, it had gotten Toby out of trouble. Alaina was always better at avoiding trouble than he was. Now they got to play the ~~dead~~ missing brother card. Toby’s nails pressed into his arms, any amusement gone.

The agents exchanged a look and Carnell sighed, picking up a file from under a stack of papers on the desk. The stack leaned precariously and Roh shot out a hand to catch it, giving a

flat look to her oblivious partner. Carnell pulled out a pair of reading glasses from the front pocket of his vest.

“Elijah Caleb Abbott, correct?” the man asked, flipping through the file in his hand.

“Yes,”

Agent Carnell nodded slightly, then continued. “He was reported missing on the 16th of September this year after failing to return home from school. Police received reports that an Angel could be involved in his disappearance because of your brother's growing involvement in the Delivered Hope Church along with the timing of the incident.”

“Can you expand on what his involvement was with the church?” Alaina asked.

Carnell grimaced. “Unfortunately, the members of Delivered Hope weren’t too keen on sharing information with us. All we knew is that he had some contact with the Pastor there, but his alibi checks out.”

“What did you mean about the timing?” Toby asked.

Carnell let out a sigh and shut the file in his hand before Roh spoke up from her spot behind the desk. “We started receiving reports of a possible Angel sighting in the area a month before your brother disappeared. The most recent reports saw it heading up the mountains North of Moriah.”

“I’ve heard a couple of people talk about how the plant life in the forest has started acting unnaturally. And I know someone who swears they’ve seen something inhuman out there in the woods.” Alaina said, carefully avoiding saying *who* she heard these things from. Toby couldn’t tell if it was because she picked up on the unease he was feeling or because she didn’t want to cause any friction with anyone in town.

Roh stared at her. “Can you elaborate?”

“Uh-um. I’ve heard that plants are growing strangely. Out of season. And that they look strange, like different kinds of plants are merging together.”

“And you say that someone saw something in the woods?” Carnell interjected. He was also staring at her. Locked like predators catching sight of their prey. It made the hairs on the back of Toby’s neck stand on end, and from a glance he could tell that Alaina was disturbed too.

When was the last time they blinked, Toby wondered.

“I just overheard someone mention that they saw something while they were hunting. Something big and bright, like a bolt of lightning. He-They didn’t get a good look at it, but they said it didn’t look like anything they’d seen before.” She stumbled over her words.

“Hmm. Well, we’ll be sure to look into that. It was probably just someone drinking too much and getting worked up over nothing.” Carnell said.

“You wouldn’t happen to remember who told you this, would you?” he asked.

“No.” Alaina said. “It was just something I overheard while I was working. I don’t remember who said it.”

“A pity.” Carnell sighed. “But the changes in plant life are easy enough to explain. We caught wind of a well-known pharmaceutical company dumping their chemical waste here in the mountains that we think is what caused the plant life to start mutating in unusual ways.”

Toby bristled. He was pretty sure that the glowing leaves and whispering weeds he saw after his crash weren’t caused by some pharmaceutical drugs. A part of him considered bringing up the vision of his brother before the crash, but he quickly dismissed it. There was something about the agents that was putting him on edge, and it wasn’t like they’d believe him.

“And there’s really nothing else on Eli’s disappearance?” Toby asked, diverting the attention away from Alaina, who slumped in relief.

Carnell shifted, glancing back at his partner who started typing something on a clunky laptop. Toby must have made a face because Carnell gestured to the stacks of files on the desk with a wince. “The files system on the computers here isn’t compatible with our own databases, so we’re still working on transferring all the relevant materials.”

“Doesn’t help that half of them are still analog.” Roh sighed.

“There’s a lot of other information on your brother’s case. After Elijah failed to return home after school your father reported him missing. An official report was filed the morning after failing to find him the previous night. The police here in Moriah interviewed a couple of witnesses who said they saw Elijah go into the woods a little after school ended, but other than that nobody’s been able to find anything.”

“What was he wearing?” Toby asked.

“According to the report he was last seen in jeans, a faded grey t-shirt, a tan field jacket, and black hiking boots.”

Toby felt like the wind had been punched out of him. It was the same as when saw Eli. There had to be something more though. Something they weren’t telling him.

“What about his backpack?” Toby asked. If Elijah had really gone missing right after school, then his backpack should’ve been with him. Not in his room.

“Excuse me?” Roh replied.

“You, you said that Eli went missing right after school, right?” Toby started, trying to keep his heart from beating out of his chest.

At the agent’s nod, he continued. “So he had his backpack on him too?”

The two agents stared at him. Toby had been avoiding looking at either of them directly in the eyes the whole time he was there, but now he couldn’t help himself. In this light, Carnell’s

deep-sea eyes seemed to have some sort of sheen to them. One that was matched by his partners. It was hard to describe, but it almost looked like there was something shining right under their irises that cast a faint glimmering film over them.

The screeching from when he first entered the room was back. He desperately wanted to turn away, to break their gaze, but he couldn't. Toby bit his tongue until he tasted blood, the pain of it barely enough to keep him from being swallowed up by the panic again.

Carnell gave him a slow smile. "Yes. He had his backpack with him."

He said the words slowly, like he was weighing them on his tongue before releasing them. Something about the way Carnell said it made it feel untrue, but why would he lie about it?

Toby nodded and stood up, muttering some form of thanks to the pair. Distantly he heard Alaina do the same as they made their way out. He couldn't look at them anymore though. Toby wanted—no needed—to get out of there.

He came hoping for answers, but instead he was just more confused. Toby's grip on what was real and what was fiction was getting blurrier. Someone was lying to him, had to be. He didn't know whether it was the Sheriff or the D.A.C., or his dad. What he did know, was that he did see Elijah that day of the crash. And that Elijah's backpack was right where he left it in his room.



Toby didn't speak during the walk out of the police station. The sun shone bright in his eyes, a searing white that offered little warmth.

"I'm sorry we didn't find anything about Eli." Alaina said softly once they had gotten into her car.

“We did.” Toby replied blankly. He was still unsure about it, but it was undeniably something.

“What do you mean?” Alaina asked.

“They said Eli left after school,” Toby started, “*with* his backpack.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“But Elijah’s backpack is in his room.” Toby said, looking at Alaina, waiting for her to put the pieces together.

She turned to him from her place in the driver's seat. “I don’t understand,”

“Either those agents are lying to us for some reason, or someone lied about seeing Eli before he disappeared. Either way, something’s up.”

She stared at him for a second then took a deep breath and turned away and resting her head on her arms draped over the steering wheel. He gave her a moment. The cut of loss was still new to Toby, but Alaina had been here since Elijah went missing. For her, he must have been ripping open an old wound already scabbing over. He needed her on his side though.

“What are you trying to say? That someone has been covering up Eli’s disappearance or something?” She asked, her voice faint.

“Maybe.” Toby said. The thought had crossed his mind, however briefly, but he’d written it off as paranoid.

Alaina didn’t say anything for a while. “What about your dad?”

“Huh?”

“If Eli was home after school then why didn’t your dad mention it? How did he not know about the backpack himself? Has he not gone into Eli’s room since he disappeared?” she asked.

Toby's stomach turned. "I don't know," he said. His dad had completely slipped his mind. Could it be possible that his dad knew something about Eli's disappearance that he wasn't telling Toby?

"He could've been at work. Or Eli could've gone out his window." He could have easily gone out to the roof and jumped onto the shed at the back of the house. From there it wasn't a far drop to the ground. Getting up would be just as easy if he propped the ladder under the awning against the shed to get back up. Toby had done it enough times himself.

"Either way dad probably wouldn't have gone in his room. He wouldn't even use his own room after mom died until Aunt Clarise came and packed up all her things." he said.

Toby didn't think his dad had anything to do with Eli's disappearance, but he was sure that his dad was keeping something from him.

"What now?" Alaina finally asked.

Toby frowned, an uncomfortable knot of anxiety forming in his stomach that had nothing to do with his recent revelations. He really didn't want to do this.

"We need to go to Delivered Hope and see if they'll tell us anything."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The drive to the Delivered Hope Church was a quiet one. Toby had fiddled with the radio for a while before giving up and letting it play some pop station. Music wasn't helping him right now.

Like it ever had, he thought bitterly.

Toby had tried to make the days leading up to his departure good ones. He took Elijah bowling, went hiking with him early in the morning, did whatever the kid wanted when he could. He had hoped that those happy days would cushion the news that he was leaving. It didn't feel like it really helped though.

Toby had put off telling Elijah he was leaving until the day of.

He'd tried to bring it up earlier, but every time he did his throat would seize up and none of his words would come out right. He didn't want to see the look on Elijah's face. Of abandonment, of accusation. Maybe if Toby had told him earlier it would've been ok. Maybe if he hadn't been such a coward. Now it was too late.

It had been early. Earlier than Toby usually woke up. He had finished carefully packing everything he wanted to bring with him into his car. The cup of coffee in his hands had long gone cold, but he took a swig of it anyway when he heard Eli start down the stairs.

"What're you doin' up so early?" Elijah asked, sleep still coating his voice. Toby had a tendency to sleep in on the weekends when he could, so it was unusual for him to be up by the time Elijah came down.

"I've got to tell you something." Toby said.

Instantly, Eli straightened up like someone had dumped icy water on him. Toby already wanted to take the words back.

“What is it? Are you ok?” Eli asked.

Toby clenched his hands around the mug in his hands tight.

“I got into a college.”

Elijah gave him a look, “Congrats?” he said slowly, like he was trying to figure out what the big fuss was about.

“It’s in Montgomery.”

Elijah's brows wrinkled. “Like, Montgomery Maryland? That Montgomery?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” Elijah looked down at his feet with a look Toby couldn’t read then looked back up at him with a strained smile. “That’s great! When do you plan on going?”

Toby looked down at his mug. “Tonight.”

He didn’t want to look up but forced himself. He watched his brother's face shift from incomprehension to shock, to hurt, before Eli turned his face away from him.

Eventually Elijah took in a shaky breath, turning back to face him. “Ok.”

“What?” Toby asked.

“Ok. It’s-It’s ok. I’m happy for you. Really.” Elijah said.

“I’m sorry Eli.”

“No, I get it. I don’t want you to be stuck here forever.” Elijah forced out a laugh.

Toby didn’t know what to say, how to make this better.

“You better call. And send me lots of postcards and stuff.” Elijah said.

Toby’s fingers twitched. He wanted to do something, but he didn’t know what. Should he keep apologizing? No. If Eli wanted to act like everything was fine, then Toby could at least give him that.

They'd spent the rest of the day inseparable. Toby sang all of his favorite songs and made up every story he could think of. Eli was a little old for those kinds of things, but he didn't argue. Just stayed pasted to his side until the sun had started to set, and Toby had to leave.

With a sigh Toby reached for the radio again, switching the station away from some upbeat pop song and cycling it through the other stations.

"-Understand this: you are not merely disliked, but loathed by the Almighty Lord, who deems you unworthy of any glimpse of heaven. His eyes, purer than the purest light, cannot bear the sight of your sin-stained soul. In His sight, you are more repugnant than the most loathsome creature on earth. Consider your offenses, for they are grievous beyond measure. You have spurned His love, trampled upon His grace, and rebelled against His sovereignty. Your transgressions far exceed the defiance of any earthly rebel against their ruler."

"Geeze turn that off would you?" Alaina said, her nose wrinkling at the deep words of the Pastor through the radio.

"Yet, even in the midst of your depravity, The Angels still His hand from wiping the slate of creation clean. It is through Their mercy, that only thousands of us were wiped away during The Fall. Let us not cower in the face of Their divine Judgement, instead let us bare ourselves to their mercy, so that we may find ourselves cleansed."

"Is this a sermon from Delivered Hope?" Toby asked, squinting at the console as if it would somehow tell him the answer.

Alaina rolled her eyes, "What else could it be? Just more bullshit justifying The Fall and condemning anyone who believes otherwise." She reached over and turned the volume dial until the pastor's words were nothing but vague mumbles in the back of his ears.

Toby only hummed in response.



It was a little around noon when they finally pulled into the Delivered Hope Church. It was fairly inconspicuous looking at first glance. The main building was made up of tan bricks and a grey slated roof with large windows spanning across the front. It was surrounded by an iron gate, likely to keep trespassers away. Toby heard about people protesting and vandalizing churches praising the Angels a lot when they first popped up. There were more rules and regulations in place now to prevent that in support of free speech and freedom of religion, but it was still a fairly common occurrence.

Behind the main building and still contained within the iron gate were four tall apartment complexes stacked in neat rows. They were tan with deep red tiling on the roofs. A lot of the church's members lived inside the premises because of all the controversy surrounding the church. They'd even created a sort of store system where certain members of the church would get food and other goods from corporations that supported their beliefs or from donations received from the various tithings and distribute it among the other members. Most of them never had to leave the compound.

Toby had no idea why Elijah would want to come there.

"Alaina, do you have any idea how Toby managed to come here by himself?"

"Mr. Wilson drove him around a bit. Your dad got really mad at him for it after he found out." She said.

That made sense. Elijah had always done sort of jobs for the man, and Mr. Wilson seemed to have a soft spot for Eli. Or maybe the man was just lonely. Either way, Toby would have to talk to him later.

Alaina pulled into the parking lot of the church and parked the car. Neither of them spoke as they made their way through the church doors. A few people milled about, talking amongst themselves, and sometimes giving the pair a smile as they made their way to the center of the room, where the information desk was located. The church was busier than Toby would have thought for a Saturday, but then again he didn't know how busy the church usually was.

The inside of the lobby was as plain as the outside. Dark grey nylon carpet covered the floors. The room itself was wide, and the sparse sections of dark green furniture didn't do much to make the room feel less empty. The walls were beige, with paintings of Angels hung upon them. Not traditional paintings of angels that churches had before The Fall, but artistic depictions of the Angels that they knew today. Most of them were unbelievably tall beings of white or light gold. Their limbs stretched out too long to look natural, and their faces unmarked by any physical descriptors that humans would have. Many of them had six or more wings, and eyes peering out rings around their heads or through the feathers of their wings.

The most prominent of the paintings was the torso of an Angel, two of its hands outstretched in a plea for mercy, another two clasped together in prayer. Its eight wings were half wrapped around it, pale opal eyes staring out impassively from them. Its face was blank. Just smooth white skin plastered over its head. The only clothing it wore was a golden laurel and chest piece.

Toby suppressed a shudder and looked away. At least the painting was of one of the more humanoid-looking ones. Toby had seen images online of one of the rare ones that consisted only of arms interlocked tightly together into a ball with eyes staring out from the cracks and another with three animal-like faces, all with gold glowing eyes and bowed legs ending in hooves. There were videos online of people trying to kill some of the surviving Angels right after The Fall

happened too. It never ended well. Always in blood. Red and gold mixed together. Toby didn't know how anyone could worship those things.

Toby was pulled out of his thoughts by a man's voice.

"Hello brother, sister." a man nodded at them from his place behind the information desk. "How can I help you two today?"

The man was tall. He looked to be in his somewhere in his early thirties, but his hair was already thinning. His teeth were lightly yellowed, and his skin was pocketed with acne scars. He looked like a bizarre middle ground between young and old.

"Uh. Hi, I had some questions about my brother. I heard he used to come here sometimes to talk with the Pastor?" Toby asked, his voice pitching the sentence up into a question. It was his idea to come here, but he hadn't thought much about what he would say.

The man behind the desk — his name read Philip on his nametag — gave the two a tight smile. "I'm sorry but it's against the church's policies to give out information on our members."

"Listen, my brother went missing half a year ago and I'm just trying to find out what happened to him. Please, if there's anything you can tell us." Toby said in a rush, hoping to salvage the conversation.

Philip's smile turned a little more sympathetic, but it was clear he wasn't budging. "I'm very sorry, but unfortunately I can't help you. If you'd like, I can pass a message on to our Pastor for you."

Toby's shoulders slumped, he couldn't say he was surprised these kinds of churches were pretty reserved to outsiders, but his failure still stung.

“Thank you.” Alaina spoke for him, “his brother’s name is Elijah Abbott, and any information your Pastor can give us on the time before he disappeared would be very appreciated.”

Philip froze, his eyes wide. He turned to Toby. “Elijah? You said Elijah Abbott?”

“I-yes do you know him?” Toby asked. He didn’t know what he expected coming here, but the look of shock and, *was that awe?*, on the man’s face was baffling.

Philip looked at Toby with the same look, cut through with something he couldn’t place, and stood up. “Give me one moment please.”

Philip picked up the receiver of a black landline phone and turned away from them slightly, speaking hushed words into the receiver. Toby couldn’t make out what he was saying, and a look from Alaina told him she didn’t either.

They stood there awkwardly for a couple of minutes, watching the few people in the lobby meander in and out before Philip finally hung up the phone and turned back to them.

“Pastor Frances will be here shortly.” Philip told them, smiling with a sort of nervous energy.

“Uhm, thank you but why is he coming?” Alaina asked.

“For someone as special as our Brother Elijah, Pastor Frances will want to speak to you directly.” Philip said.

“So Elijah was part of the church?” Alaina asked. Toby was thankful she asked. It spared him the discomfort of asking himself.

“He wasn’t exactly a member.” Philip started before giving up and waving his hand.

“Pastor Frances will explain it better than I ever could. If you don’t mind you two can wait on one of the couches until he arrives.”

Toby was glad of course, to potentially gain some new information, but the reality that Eli had something to do with people who worshipped the things that killed their mother was disturbing.

It didn't seem like they'd be able to get any more information out of Philip, so they made their way to the closest grouping of furniture. Toby dropped himself down in a plush armchair that felt like it was swallowing him whole. Alaina took a seat on the loveseat next to him, looking more comfortable than Toby.

Toby shut his eyes. Waves of pain had come and gone since his little episode at the police station. He didn't know how long they waited there until a low voice cut through his calm.

"You must be Tobias." The voice said softly, looking at Toby. He was an older man with dark skin and faint back and white hair dotting his scalp. He was dressed in khakis and a light green button-down shirt. He wasn't particularly tall or well built, in fact, Toby could see his belly poking out from slightly from his shirt. By his appearance alone, he looked like he could be any suburban dad at one of those pre-Fall church services, but despite this, his presence was larger than his appearance would imply.

"And you would be?" the man asked, looking towards Alaina with a gentle smile.

"My name is Alaina. I'm a friend of Toby and Elijah's." She answered him. "Would you happen to be Pastor Frances?"

"I indeed would be." Pastor Frances said, his eyes crinkling in the corners.

The man sat down on a chair across from Toby. He leaned forward from his seat, his elbows placed on his knees. "So," he started, "what would you like to know?"

"Anything." Toby said. "Anything you can tell us about Elijah would be great."

Pastor Frances leaned back and clasped his hands together on his lap in thought, “He was a promising young Prophet. I can’t say I know much about him personally though. He came here a handful of times with questions about Angels, which I, along with my brothers and sisters here at the church did their best to answer, but he didn’t share much about his intentions I’m afraid.”

“What do you mean, a prophet?” Toby asked. He had never heard that term in relation to one of these kinds of churches.

“You were unaware of his gift?” The Pastor asked.

“I-what do you mean, gift?”

“He was chosen by an Angel, blessed with its song. He was gifted a divine mission, to listen and share its message with the world.” The Pastor said, his voice taking on the same impassioned quality that Toby had heard from the radio sermon.

“What. Does that mean?” Toby choked out, trying his best to keep his patience.

Pastor Frances smiled in a way that made Toby's hackles rise. Like he was pitying Toby, a sting made worse by the fact the man was clearly being genuine. “Walk with me.” Pastor Frances said, standing up and gesturing the two to follow him. The three of them left the lobby through a door at the end of the building, exiting out into the back of the compound. Members of the church dressed in plain white and red clothing stared at them as they passed. It made Toby sick to look at them.

“Your brother was tried, those years ago during The Fall. A righteous judgment enacted by our divine messengers, and he was found worthy of discerning the truth behind Their songs. I personally was of the belief that he could have changed the world one day, for the better.”

Toby’s stomach turned. So what, his brother surviving The Fall meant that he was worthy of-what? Vanishing at fifteen? And what did that say about their mom? Was he saying that she

was unworthy of life, that she deserved to die? Toby had to fight to keep a snarl off his face as the Pastor continued on.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what happened to Elijah, though. After a while, he just stopped coming. We here at the church tried getting in touch with him multiple times, to no success. We only learned about his disappearance a couple of days after the fact when it was televised out of Moriah.”

Toby didn’t know where to even begin digesting that. Outside of the general cryptic bullshit the Pastor was spouting, it seemed like he was back to square one. He clenched his teeth.

“What kinds of questions did Elijah ask?” Alaina asked, “About the Angels?” she clarified upon seeing both Toby and the Pastor turn to her.

“Oh, the usual. Questions about Their intents, Their origins, about the changes They inspire within nature. We corresponded a bit over email as well, I can get Philip to forward those to you if you’d like.”

Alaina opened her mouth to say something, but Toby cut her off. “How was he?” he asked. Pastor Frances started at him.

“How-how did he look? When you last saw him-was he alright?” Toby clarified. He hated the way the Pastor was looking at him. There was something in his eyes, in his voice that made Toby think that the man wasn’t as benevolent as he was portraying himself, but he ~~needed~~ wanted to know how Elijah was.

“He was doing well, as far as I know. A little skittish, but eager to learn more about our Saviors.” Pastor Frances said.

Toby mumbled out a thanks, feeling far too vulnerable. He couldn't be here anymore. Toby couldn't deal with the way the Pastor was looking at him, like he was something to be caught and pinned to the wall like one of his Angel paintings.

Toby excused himself while Alaina rattled off her email and Toby's old email.

Outside, Toby pulled out his lighter and a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it with shaky hands. His body relaxed as soon as the burn of the nicotine entered his lungs. The more he tried to look into what happened to his brother, the less he felt he really knew.

He let his head fall against the brick wall behind him, blowing out a cloud of smoke that twirled and shifted in the wind. Coming here right after the police station was a mistake. He didn't even know what he felt anymore. Uneasy? Angry?

Those feelings would make sense, it was certainly what Toby thought he should feel, but everything had drained out of him the moment he stepped outside. He was so tired.

Toby was about to stomp out his cigarette and see what was taking Alaina so long when he caught sight of a black car parked a couple of yards away, outside the iron gate. Something about it seemed familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. As he stared at it, the car pulled out into the road and left, but not before Toby caught sight of a silver scratch alongside its back door.

Toby's heart dropped to his stomach. He knew why that car was familiar. It was in the parking lot of the police station.