

The Lacey Curse

By: Ethan Jewell

Sunday.

Dominic and his wife, Rachel Lacey, were in Room 112; the room where his father, Raymond Lacey laid motionless after a stroke.

911, what's your emergency?

My Dad! I think my Dad is dying. Oh, my God I think he's dying!

Is there anyone else with you?

My brother Jason and my Mom!

What's your address?

Are you deaf?! He's dying! Just track the call and get over here!

It was understood to both of them that Raymond could hear everything they were saying, but he just wasn't able to respond, and that's what hurt Dominic; the fact that he would never have a full conversation with his father again. So, they just gave him news about their lives. "So... we moved into the new apartment! It's a great place," Rachel said, "Don't listen to Dominic. He doesn't know the first thing about home design, even *if* it may be his job!" They both chuckled.

She continued, "And the new job is nice, being able to go out in the New York streets and interview people for a story instead of being cooped up in a cubicle."

"Mom is doing okay, too." Dominic didn't usually like to mention Roselyn, but for some reason, he couldn't help himself around his father. "She still isn't leaving her apartment, though. I've been telling her to go in the hall for a few minutes whenever I'm not there. I doubt she's following through with my advice. And obviously, Jason isn't much help. He thinks paying for everything is being a good person, but him being her financial backbone is only giving her more

of an excuse to not go outside. He's ignorant! I remember at the old house, if Jason were in his cool guy mood, you'd just smack in the head and say "Knock the shit out of your head and replace it with some sense." If only it were that easy now..."

Suddenly, Dominic was interrupted when Raymond's nurse, Paula walked into the room, "Sorry guys, but visiting hours are over. I'll give you a few minutes." She closed the door and began waiting in the hall.

"Gotta go, Dad. Love you." Dominic got up, leaned over, and kissed him on the forehead while Rachel took his hand. They both headed out the door, Dominic sulking, and Rachel comforting him. The next part of the day: visit Mom, and become enraged at how little progress she made while Dominic was gone.

His Mom's apartment was on the street of Astoria Boulevard in a place that Dominic hated: Queens, New York City. The business alone made his face turn red with rage and frustration. Not to mention how shitty the people were, and how it was where everything happened in his life, which wasn't a good thing to him. And her apartment was far from luxurious: The entire building was grimy, dusty, and all-out disgusting. It was the worst place in the world for Dominic, but still, he had to support Roselyn. She couldn't

refused to

take care of herself, since she was terrified of leaving, so Dominic was kind enough to get her groceries, and Jason helped her with financial things, meaning he just gave her a credit card and she would use it for useless shit she would find online, but of course, that didn't matter to Jason. He could pay the debt effortlessly. But to Dominic, all he wanted was for Roselyn to get her shit back together.

As they walked up the carpeted steps to Roselyn's door, Rachel said, "Now, do you promise you're not going to get mad at her this time? I know you have trouble controlling yourself around her."

Dominic knew he couldn't promise that, so he simply answered, "I'll do my best." He couldn't help but get angry when he saw his Mom. It felt like instinct, a defense mechanism built inside him when he heard any sort of excuse to not go anywhere ooze off her tongue.

He and Rachel knocked on the door and heard all of her locks being undone from top to bottom; there were about ten, each one more complicated than the last. It creaked open only about an inch, and they only saw the left side of Roselyn's face. With a breath of relief, she said, "Oh. It's you two."

"Hi, Mom." Dominic said, "Can we come in?"

Without another word, she pulled the door open from the side rather than the handle and moved out of the way so that her son could enter.

Immediately, Dominic noticed the record player that Roselyn had kept for so many years. It didn't work anymore, but she just couldn't bear to part with it, for whatever reason. "You should get rid of that thing," he said, pointing at it, "You don't even have any records to play." Rachel batted an eye towards him, noticing his playing of devil's advocate

Don't start, she glared.

"I've already told you. It has so much sentimental value," however, it didn't, and Roselyn knew that, but Dominic believed she just needed an excuse to keep garbage.

"We've got some stuff for you." Dominic said, "Some milk, eggs, cereal. Everything you said you needed. And, for a treat, we got you this." he pulled a transparent, plastic box out of the bag, and inside it was a 12-pack of store-bought oatmeal-raisin cookies. "I know how much you

love these.” He placed the grocery bag on the kitchen counter and put the milk and eggs in the fridge, and the box of Corn Flakes next to the sink.

“Thank you, hon.” Roselyn turned to Rachel, “Rachel, how’s the new job?”

Rachel smiled, “It’s great! I love it.”

“And speaking of jobs, Dominic, Jason told me a pretty big client hired you for an architecture project.” Roselyn slowly paced around the small living room, twiddling her thumbs and shaking horrendously.

“Yeah. RomanTech. They want us to design a new corporate office building in Brooklyn. I’ve been working on the model for about a month now.”

“It was nice of Jason to give you a job. I’m sure you learned your lesson. College isn’t just about drinking and partying.”

Just give me a chance, sir.

I’m sorry, Dominic, but my mind is made up. I expect you to be off campus by tomorrow morning.

He knew that Roselyn didn’t mean for her statement to be offensive, but he couldn’t help but wince when he heard it. “I told you, Mom, that’s all behind me. Like I’ve said before, and before that, I’m nine years sober. Here.” He took out the prescription bottle of Prozac. “I got your pills for you, too.”

“I’ve told you, I don’t need those,” Roselyn argued. “I have plenty of reasons to stay here.”

Dominic didn’t answer her. Instead, he changed the subject entirely, replying, “Alright, are you ready?”

Roselyn immediately went pale and backed away to the right side of the couch, “No... no, there’s no way.”

“It was only a minute last time, Mom. I thought our goal was to stay for five.”

“You know I can’t do it!”

Rachel grasped her hand, and rubbed her back assuringly, “It’s okay. The both of us are going to be with you the whole time. Are you ready?”

It took a great deal of strength for Roselyn to nod her head, but she managed.

Dominic was on her left side, and Rachel was on her right, each of them holding her hands as they went, taking it one step at a time.

They reached the front door.

They opened the door.

They stepped into the hall.

Roselyn was silent, which Dominic thought was a good sign, so he responded, “Great job, Mom. Five minutes starts now-”

Immediately, Roselyn began whaling with tears rolling down her face. She slapped their hands away from her, and hurried back inside, carrying on with the twiddling of her thumbs.

Rachel glanced at Dominic again, *Don’t. Start.*

He couldn’t help it. He felt the heat rise up from him, and he spat it onto Roselyn’s face, “What the FUCK Mom?! He stormed into the kitchen, and laid his head on the table, burying himself into his arms. Muffled, he continued, “Do you have any sense? At all?”

Roselyn didn’t say anything back for a moment, but then finally burst out after seemingly holding her breath, “What happened to your father was tragic, but let me tell you the stroke isn’t all that happened. He-”

“For the last time, Mom, nobody hurt him! It was a stroke! That’s it!” As he said this, he slammed his fist on the table, and the silverware from the drawer in front of him jumped up and clanked around inside.

“Just listen! During that time, everything was going wrong! I lost my job, you and Jason got in that fight in the backyard, and then your father was rushed to the hospital! If I leave again, something bad will happen, and you, Jason, or I will be seriously hurt, or worse!”

“Enough with the goddamn superstition!” He yelled at the top of his lungs, and Dominic’s breath grew labored from his rage and frustration. “I have to go.” Before leaving, he grabbed the bottle of Prozac, opened it up, and poured each pill onto the tile flooring, allowing them to separate throughout the kitchen, “Take your meds.”

“Dominic, please, I’m sorry... Domin-” the entrance to the apartment closed off, and he was back in the hallway pulling Rachel along with him.

When they reached their car, he noticed a slip of paper being held against the windshield by the wiper. Dominic exclaimed through gritted teeth, “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” He reached for the slip, and read the sixty-five dollars owed. “Mother FUCKER!”

Rachel placed her hand on Dominic’s shoulder, and calmly stated, “I’ll drive. Why don’t you just lay down in the back, and remember to breathe-”

“I know how to breathe, Rachel!” He sharply swayed his shoulder away from her and stormed into the passenger’s seat. Rachel, now silently fuming, got in the driver’s seat, placing the ticket in the cupholder next to her.

The sun was setting at this point, and it took them an hour to get back home; another reason Dominic hated New York. The traffic jams were constant, and they always started with

one dumbass. But, after dozens of honks from his car horn and more than plenty of f-bombs directed towards other drivers, they finally managed to get a parking space in front of the building they lived in and get to the beloved new apartment.

As soon as they turned on the lights to their place, Rachel folded her arms, and said sternly, “Did you seriously just do that? I thought we had this anger thing under control!”

“I was perfectly reasonable. *She* is as stubborn as ever.” Dominic responded to her quietly, understanding that he was in fact in the wrong.

“Dominic, how many times do I have to tell you this? She’s old. She probably doesn’t even know what she’s saying half the time!”

“She’s not that old, Rachel. She knows.” Dominic assured, “She knows.”

Silence lingered around them for a moment, and Rachel poured herself a bottle of red wine from the kitchen, the cheapest wine they could find. As she walked back into the living room to sit next to her husband, Dominic peered down at the coffee table and grew exhausted when he saw that the Save-The-Date was still sitting there, toppled up with plenty of half-empty plastic water bottles, and self-help books. He had hoped it would magically disappear, but unfortunately, that wish never came true, and the day was coming faster and sooner than he expected; it would be only a few days until the wedding; about three to be exact. He examined it and saw the dozens of flowers scattered and laying with each other displayed as the background. The text read in cursive:

Celebrate the love of Jason Lacey and Maria Yong on May 12

Dominic sighed and rolled his eyes, “Can’t our going to the last two weddings count as a gift for this one?”

Rachel gently put a hand on Dominic’s arm, “No, it can’t,” She chuckled, “I know how you feel about your brother, but it’ll be a big day for him.”

“Bigger than the other two?”

“Way bigger,” She softly grazed her hand up and down his arm, and got higher up on the couch, now sitting on her knees. “Come on. It’ll be fun. And if it doesn’t work out again, he may give us back his third toaster.”

Dominic laughed and put both his hands on her waist, “God, I love you.” He kissed her, and she kissed him back.

They parted, and genuinely, Dominic said, “I’m sorry for snapping at you-”

Rachel leaned in, kissing him again and again. In between, she whispered, “Don’t worry about it. Just focus.”

Rachel put her hands around Dominic’s neck, who picked her up by the waist, carrying her to their bed.

Monday.

Dominic awoke on the right side of the bed, which was closest to the door, and furthest from the closet. Rachel's head was laying atop his chest, her red wavy hairs poking at his arm, stomach, and face. She was already awake, and she caressed her soft hand around his right shoulder.

"Morning, sleepyhead," she whispered flirtatiously, "Time for breakfast?"

"Yeah, sure. What do you want?" he lifted his left hand away from her bare leg, placed it atop her head, and began playing with her hair.

Rachel sighed happily, "Surprise me," then she rolled over to the other side of the bed for Dominic to get up. He left the bedroom and groggily stepped into the kitchen on the other side of the apartment. He looked into the fridge, and only found a loaf of wheat bread, a dozen eggs, and a bag of apples.

French toast it is, he thought. He grabbed the bread and two eggs and closed the fridge. He placed them on the small counter and opened the cabinet to grab a bowl. Two plates, two bowls, and a set of silverware were just about all the utensils they had. Being newlyweds, they couldn't afford much, didn't have great things, and were on a tight budget. However, Dominic didn't mind. And frankly, Rachel didn't seem to mind it either. They both had jobs that supported their circumstances, and they had each other, which, to both of them, seemed to be everything but a bad wrap.

The bread was dipped in the sticky yellow egg scramble, and sizzling on the pan by the time Rachel came out of the bedroom wearing her underwear and Dominic's dirty Led Zeppelin

t-shirt. It was too big for her 5'10" body, and Dominic smiled when he saw her coming in wearing it.

"What's wrong?" Rachel asked, chuckling.

Dominic shook his head, "Nothing."

She sat down at the counter on the middle stool, "French toast! You know me so well."

Dominic laughed as he slid the egg-coated slices onto the plate next to the stove. "Bon Appétit." He carried the plate to her and handed her a fork and knife. "I still think it's weird how you don't like syrup on it."

"Oh, fuck you." She laughed.

Dominic saw the clock on the microwave, which read: 9:45 am. Suddenly, his heart sunk. "Shit."

"What?" Rachel asked through a mouthful of toast.

"What day is it?"

"Monday-" Rachel realized why he had asked. "Oh, Dominic, I'm sorry. I completely forgot."

"Fuck! I'm so late!" Dominic ran back to the bedroom, opened the tiny closet, and frantically tossed everything around the top rack, where his clothes were. *The blue shirt is fine. Fuck, I don't have time to get dressed. Just wear the shirt you slept in, put on a button-up, and pants. And go commando. That's all you have time for.* So he grabbed a pair of flood-waiter dress pants from the top shelf and put on the button-up blue shirt. As he ran out of the bedroom, he asked Rachel, "Where's your purse?"

She pointed to the couch, and Dominic grabbed it, pulling out her hairbrush. It took him five strokes to get everything down, then tossed it intentionally onto the couch, but it fell to the floor. “Okay, bye, I love you.” He kissed Rachel on the forehead.

“Love you,” She called as he hurried out the door.

When he made it to his car, his phone vibrated in his pocket, he picked it up and saw a text from Jason that was sent twenty minutes ago.

Where the fuck are you? We can't wait for you anymore. The meeting is starting.

Great, he thought, the project is going to be sent to someone else, and then there I'll be, completely fucked. He pulled out of the parking lot and turned right towards the Lacey Architecture building.

Dominic rushed out of the elevator and into the corporate lobby, where Jason's secretary, Susan Branch sat. She looked up at Dominic, who was now standing in front of her desk, completely out of breath.

“Dominic, you're late.” She said as she looked him in the eyes, withering.

“I know. I know. Just, I'm not *too* late, am I?” He stared hopefully and bit his lower lip.

“Jason's trying to convince them to stay.”

“Is it okay if I go??”

“Yeah. Go right ahead.”

With a sigh of relief, he raced down the hallway and found the meeting room, where Jason, well-dressed and built, with his long black, slicked-back hair and stubble beard, the client Marsha Roman, and other employees were in, conversing.

“Listen, I understand how upset you are,” Jason assured, “I’m right there with you. But I promise you, Dominic will be coming in with the model in just a min-”

Dominic shoved open the door and threw himself down onto a swivel chair next to Jason. “Dom!” Jason said. “So you’ve decided to join us.”

“Yeah,” he responded, “I was-.”

“Busy?” Jason scowled at him.

As Dominic slowly adjusted himself up to the table, he uttered annoyingly, “Yeah. Busy.”

“I see you tried for a more... casual approach to this meeting,” Marsha scanned Dominic up and down in disgust. He examined his dress ware and noticed his shirt was still unbuttoned, and it revealed his stained, dirty, gray Rolling Stones t-shirt he had slept in the night before. Instead of buttoning it, he simply covered up the t-shirt with the two halves of his dress shirt.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I was-”

Jason put his elbow onto the table, and his hand on his forehead, “Just... show Ms. Roman the model.”

“The... the-”

“The model? Or sketches? Whatever you have, we want to see it!”

Dominic’s heart sank. The model was in his apartment, in his office. He was in a hurry, and he had left it there. He didn’t answer Jason for a moment.

“You do have the model, right?” Jason glared at Dominic, warningly.

“I... I- I do, but-”

“But what, Mr. Lacey?” Marsha Roman spoke up, but Dominic didn’t answer. “The deadline was today, Mr. Lacey. I expected it done- today! You are the most-” she took a deep breath. In through the nose, and out through the mouth, “I think it’s time... I continue my business... elsewhere.” She got up towards the door and walked into the hallway as Jason followed.

“Ms. Roman. Please! This was just a fluke! We can still do this! We can still get it done! As the CEO of Lacey Architects, I can promise you-” The sound of a ding from an elevator was heard, followed by silence. Jason slowly walked back to the meeting room, where everyone sat, horrified, wondering if they would keep their jobs at that moment.

“Everyone, go back to... something. You’re excused.” Everyone, including Dominic, stood up, and walked out the door, muttering in dismay. Dominic was going to be the last employee out the door, but Jason blocked his tracks. “Except. You.” Jason held his hand out, and Dominic backed up. “Take a seat,” he said. Dominic sat down.

With a deep breath, Jason continued, “Do you know why I gave you the job you have now?”

Dominic shuffled, “For a second chance?”

“That’s right,” Jason paced down the front of the room slyly, “A second chance, because you didn’t do so hot in college, did you?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“You didn’t do your school work, did you?”

“No. I didn’t”

“And so, with the constant hangovers, class-skipping, and the biggest fuck-up of your life, the Dean made you leave.”

“Yes. He did.”

“And, as your brother, I felt for you. I saw the potential in you. I gave you, as you call it, a second chance. And, second chances don’t come around that often, do they?”

“No. They don’t.”

“However, you ignore that. I gave you that second chance, and just like any chance, any opportunity... YOU FUCK IT UP!” Jason grabbed the chair in front of him and slammed it down on the floor. A loud thud occurred, and one of the swivel legs snapped off. “I’m going to suspend you, Dominic. No pay. One week. And I don’t want to hear one complaint out of your sorry, nasty mouth. Do you understand?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Good. Now, Rachel’s probably waiting for your tiny dick to doddle on back. Do me a favor, and support that whore you call a wife while you still have a job.”

Dominic’s heart skipped a beat when heard his brother say that word. *Whore. Whore. Whore. Don’t start. Don’t start-* “So, my shift is over?”

“Yes.”

Dominic stood up and looked up at Jason’s significantly taller height. “So then let’s talk off the record. As brothers, not workers,” Dominic was now inches away from Jason, “I swear on your grave, if you ever say something like that about Rachel again, you will see me in your fucking nightmares.”

“Really. Then I’ll be waiting.” Dominic stood there for a moment, and a smirk ran across Jason’s face, as if to say, *I dare you to do something*. Instead, Dominic stormed out of the room, and back down the hall towards the elevator.

He pressed the button to go down and looked to his left in the direction of a couch where clients or interviewees waited. On the middle cushion sat a woman. She was beautiful, and frankly, almost hypnotic. She wore a wedding dress and had dark, tired bags under her glowing, ocean blue eyes. On her neck was a bruise stretching across her cold, beautifully pale skin. She stared at him, emotionless, yet arousingly.

“Dominic? Is everything okay?” he blinked and turned back to see Susan sitting behind her desk.

“What?”

“Your elevator arrived,” he saw the doors had opened, revealing an empty, fluorescent square space. He looked back at the couch, and the woman was gone.

“Oh. Sorry. I was-” he sighed, and waved at Susan. “Have a good day.”

“You too,” she responded, and she waved goodbye as the door closed in front of Dominic upon stepping in.

Dominic wanted to apologize to Roselyn, and he had gone straight to her apartment to do so. As always, he knocked on the door, followed by the clinking of several locks, the door opening slightly so she could check who it was, then the door fully opening, revealing gross furniture, and wallpaper peeling off. It felt as though history had repeated itself, as that’s how it went every time he went to his Mom’s place, but this time, he was slapped directly in the face by a waft of a horrible stench.

As he pulled his shirt up against his nose, he cried, “Christ! What the hell is that?”

With Roselyn always shivering and fidgeting nervously, she answered, “Damn rats in the bathroom. I guess they died in there overnight since the smell wasn’t in here yesterday when you

dropped by. Just keep it closed for now.” She sat down on the couch, maintaining a straight posture.

“Remind me not to go in there,” Dominic chuckled, but Roselyn didn’t respond.

Instead, she looked at him, with wide and hopeful eyes, and said, “Sit. Please.”

He sat down at the couch, still holding his shirt by his nose, and explained, “Mom, I’m sorry for what I did yesterday. I…” He took a small breath, “I just want you to get better. To see my and Rachel’s apartment, to go to Jason and what’s-her-name’s wedding-”

“Maria,”

“Right. But most of all… I just want you to come and see Dad.”

She gently and reassuringly put her hand on top of his, “Oh, sweetie, I know it’s hard. It can’t be easy for you. I understand that. But I’m okay. I’m making progress. I took one of the pills last night, and one this morning. That is *progress*, right?”

“Yeah,” Dominic said as he smiled. He didn’t even notice his shirt fell from his face. He was just so happy to hear she took the antidepressants. “I’m just looking out for you. And if you think you’re doing better, then that’s good to hear.”

“Thank you, son. I’m sorry too. I know it’s hard for you.”

“But anyway, you don’t have a bathroom right now, I guess. Have you been going to the neighbors?”

“Oh, of course not! I don’t know my neighbors! But I’ve got it covered!” she looked behind the couch, inviting Dominic to do the same. He turned to the back of the three cushioned couch, and saw a bucket filled with…

“Mom?” he said calmly, hoping not to upset her since he knew he would upset Rachel if he exclaimed it any louder, “Is that your…” He couldn’t continue the sentence. He coughed and

retched once he heard the buzzing of a fly landing on a log of fecal matter floating in the urine. He stood up from the couch, sped into the kitchen, and slipped on something small and round. He looked down at the floor and saw every single pill still lying on the tile. He turned to her, sitting up on the floor, “You didn’t take your pills. Did you?”

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, she uttered softly, “Please don’t be mad.”

“Mom, you said you were okay! You said that you-” Dominic stopped, and got up. “I’m not mad. I’m concerned.” he paused for another moment, “I need to call Rachel.” He passed the kitchen and walked down the end of the hallway and next to Roselyn’s bedroom door, careful not to slip on any more of the medication. He pulled his phone from his pocket and called Rachel’s phone on speed dial.

“Hello?” she said. He was thrilled to hear her voice.

“Rachel,” Dominic sighed, and held his hand against his forehead stressfully, “I need to talk to you. It’s about Roselyn.”

“What’s wrong? You didn’t get in a fight with her again, did you?”

“No. I apologized for that. But she isn’t getting any better. I think... I think she needs to come to stay with us. Lord knows Jason can’t be bothered with this shit.”

Rachel sighed, “I’ve said this before, Dominic. She’s old. She’s confused-”

“She is shitting into a bucket!” Silence loomed on the other end.

“She’s not using her bathroom anymore?”

“Some rats died in there. And believe me when I see she’s not lying about that. I smelled it for myself. She isn’t in a condition to take care of herself anymore. She lied to me about taking her pills. She can’t be on her own.”

Rachel took a deep breath, and responded, “Okay. If it’s to help her, then okay.”

“Great. It’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too.” The call ended, and he walked back into the living room, and saw Roselyn still on the couch, sobbing.

“I heard it,” she said. “You’re making me leave?”

“No. I’m not making you. But, I think it would be good. You want to get help, right?”

“Yes. You know this. I do. But I-I-I can’t! Dominic, I can’t! I can’t go out there! LET ME STAY! I WANT TO STAY!” Her yelling led to excessive and roaring waves of tears.

He rushed over to her and held her gently by her shoulders behind her. Calmly, he responded. “I know. I know. We’ll start with the door, okay? We’ll walk slowly to the door. After that, you can tell me if you want to keep going. How does that sound?”

Through sniffles and shaky breaths, she nodded wildly.

“Okay. Let’s just make standing up the first step.” Roselyn wrapped her arm around Dominic’s neck, and he supported her weight and helped her stand up.

“That’s good. Great job.”

“What did you minor in? In college?” Roselyn asked although she knew the answer.

“I majored in graphic design. I minored in counseling.”

She nodded again, “You should’ve kept at it.”

He chuckled, “We’re up to step two now. Are you ready?”

Another nod.

“Okay. We’re going to start with our left foot, then our right. We can repeat that pattern until we make it to the front door.”

Slowly, Roselyn lifted her left foot, then plopped it down a small bit further.

“Now the right foot. Right foot. Then the left foot again. Right foot. Left foot.”

“Right foot. Left foot. Right foot. Left foot,” she repeated the chant with Dominic as he guided her to the entrance.

“Good,” Dominic felt himself tearing up. “You’re doing great, Mom.”

Roselyn’s throat swelled up as she continued the chant that Dominic had started, “Right foot. Left foot. Right foot. Left foot.”

It took some time, but they eventually made it to the entrance of her apartment, and neither Dominic nor Roselyn was aware of the stench in the closed bathroom anymore.

“There,” Dominic assured, “I’ll open the door. Then we can take a break. How does that sound?”

“That sounds nice.” Roselyn’s free hand shook as violently as it could as the door uttered the soft and high creak. Her breath suddenly quickened, and she let out a squeal, followed by an attempt to break away from Dominic.

“Hey. Mom. Mom, it’s okay. You made it this far. Just remember. Right foot. Left foot. We’re going to keep going now.”

“I can’t.” Her eyes were wide with shock and trauma.

“Yes, you can. I know you can. Repeat after me.”

Roselyn lifted her left foot while holding her breath, and placed it into the hallway. She was outside of what she called home. And she hated it. She screamed again.

“Mom, just stop for a minute. Your foot is outside, and nothing is happening. Nothing bad is happening.”

“Nothing bad is happening,” Roselyn repeated, and she put her right foot out the door. She was outside.

“Now,” Dominic continued, “We’re going to go down the hall. Just a step at a time. Right foot. Left foot. Right foot. Left foot.”

Dominic led Roselyn to the end of the hall, then continued slowly. Right foot. Left foot. Right foot. Left foot...

... Right foot. Left foot. They were at the entrance of Dominic and Rachel’s apartment, while he still was holding on to Roselyn ever since getting out of the car. Dominic knocked on the door as he calmed Roselyn, assuring her that everything was okay.

The sound of footsteps led up to them before they watched the door swing open, and Rachel stood there. “Roselyn,” she walked into the complex hall, and hugged her, “It’s so good to see you!” She threw her arms around her, and Roselyn reciprocated hesitantly.

“Do you have the guest room ready?” Dominic asked.

“Yeah. Roselyn, do you wanna follow me while your son gets your things back at the place?”

“Y-yes. Thank... Thank you, Rachel.” Roselyn stepped into the house reluctantly, and slowly followed Rachel to the spare bedroom.

As Dominic turned around to go back to his Mom’s apartment, he heard Rachel say to her, “How would you like a little tour before you get settled in?”

Roselyn responded that she would love a tour, and then the door slammed shut behind him as he went down the stairs, out of the lobby, and towards his car.

He was back at the apartment, and he immediately smelled the horrid scent of the rats in the bathroom. It was somehow even stronger than before. He sighed and hoped that Dominic was

getting pretty tired of driving back and forth. He was ready for a good night's sleep, and to spend time with Rachel. Just sitting on the couch together, watching a movie, and eating popcorn. That was all he wanted at that moment. It had already been such a long and stressful day, so it would be nice to feel her resting against him. Suddenly, he remembered his interaction with Jason.

Shit, he thought, I didn't tell her. I'm gonna be home for a week with no pay! How are we gonna pay rent this month? What is she gonna say? Dominic quickly excused himself from his thoughts. *It'll be okay. Everything will be fine.*

He walked down the hall to Roselyn's bedroom, where he would start the packing. For this trip, he would pack simple things. Things you would need if you were going on vacation: clothes, toiletries, electronics, and medications. First things first, however, he needed boxes. He looked under the bed and conveniently found about three big, empty plastic tubs, with the lids placed on top. He grabbed them all, and placed them on top of the bed, then walked over to the closet to grab her clothes. He took about twelve shirts, five pairs of jeans, all of her socks, and all her underwear.

He went to her nightstand and grabbed her deodorant, the medicine, even though she probably won't take it, and other small things she may need. He thought about stepping into the horrid bathroom to grab other toiletries, but he couldn't bring himself to do it, so he compromised with himself that they would get her a toothbrush.. Many of the other necessities he had at home, so he reckoned to leave them where they were. With everything tucked away and cradled in his arms, he wandered back to the bedroom to put them in the box.

Everything fit in one box, and he was thankful for that, as he didn't have enough room for all three in his small Chevy. The last thing he wanted to pack for Roselyn was her iPad, which she only used for reading cheesy romance novels.

He picked the tablet up off the nightstand, and the bright light illuminated over his face. It was for some reason already unlocked. Once his vision had gotten used to the light, he saw that it was open on a picture. A very simple picture, yet sentimental for Dominic's family. It was a picture of Roselyn and Raymond standing together, hand in hand in front of the house they lived in when Dominic was young. He saw himself playing on his own on the porch of the house, which meant Jason was the one taking the photo

He wiped a tear from his face as he looked back on the memories, and a lot of them were good, however, it was the last month of his father being with him that was the worst. He remembered the fight he and Jason had gotten into, and Jason had nailed him across the head with a wooden bat, causing his head to crack open. He spent a week in the hospital because of that. Then, his Dad had the stroke, from which he never recovered. And finally, Roselyn lost her job just as they were drowning in hospital bills. He never looked back fondly at those moments, and he pushed them out as often as he could, as far back as he could.

Dominic's eyes studied the picture a while longer, and he looked to the left corner, where a clothing line stood in place. Nothing was on it besides a single wedding dress.

What the fuck? Dominic mouthed. The dress wasn't supposed to be there. There was supposed to be nothing on the line, yet there it was, clear as day. He grew uneasy, but he couldn't take his eyes off of it. He wanted to solve the mystery of what it was doing there. The dress suddenly began to ripple, as if caught in the wind, slowly from bottom up. Dominic let out a small scream and dropped the tablet onto the floor. He slowly picked it up again and saw the black screen upon it. The tablet had died, when he saw it being fully charged.

Suddenly, the sound of a loud, singsong voice grew from outside the bedroom, and Dominic recognized it immediately.

Lydia, oh Lydia, say have you met Lydia? Oh, Lydia the tattooed lady! She has eyes that folks adore so, and a torso even more so-

Dominic quickly put the tablet into the plastic box, closed it, and carried it out of the bedroom, and into the kitchen, where it grew even louder.

On her back is the Battle of Waterloo, and beside it, the wreck of the Hesperus too-

He set the box down on the counter and walked in front of the window to the right of the kitchen entrance, where the record player was. On it was a record of the song, with the needle placed not on top, but alongside it. Dominic backed away and hit his back on the counter.

And proudly above waves the Red, White, and Blue... You can learn a lot from Lydia!

He turned around to face the counter and found a bottle sitting there. The bottle filled with the Prozac he had spilled. Underneath it was a sticky note. He lifted the bottle before putting it in his pocket and saw the writing on the sticky note written in old cursive. The note read:

You are welcome, my love

-Lydia

The music continued, beginning the post-chorus, “Da da da... Da da da... Da da da... Da da da...”

Dominic held his breath in terror as he grabbed the box, and turned around, only to see the same woman he came across in the corporate waiting room. She stared emotionlessly at him for a moment, then slowly lifted her arms as the lyrics among the record player suddenly changed, becoming more distorted after every word, “Lydia, oh Lydia say have you met Lydia? Oh, Lydia the champ of them all... and as she swayed back and forth on her tethered noose, her lover went back just to do it too...”

The backs of her arms were now inches away from Dominic’s face as she showed him the scars, carried from her wrists to her elbows. He screamed and ran to the door with the box loosely cradled under his arm. Before he exited, he turned his back, and she appeared inches from his face. Her mouth abruptly went agape, and the final lyrics earsplitting sounded through her, “and now he is damned for eternal abuse... for he never married Lydia!”

Dominic made it back home by the time the sun was just below the horizon. He didn’t stop for traffic or pedestrians. He was too horrified to focus on his surroundings, and he swerved into a different lane every time someone was on a crosswalk, or the road was backed up. He frantically ran up the stairs to his apartment door and looked for the key as his hands shook violently. He dropped his keys, and before growing red in the face with frustration and terror, he pounded on the door, demanding to be let in. A few seconds later, Rachel answered the door, and upon seeing Dominic huffing, and most likely hearing his heartbeat from two feet away, she began to fade into a look of concern.

“What’s wrong,” she asked, “What happened?”

“Where’s my Mom?” he bumped into Rachel’s shoulder as he walked in. He noticed but didn’t apologize.

“Jesus, good to see you too!” Rachel scolded, “She’s in her room. After she asked for a tour, she just walked straight to it. I didn’t even tell where it was, she just knew-”

“Shut up! Okay? Just shut the fuck up!” Dominic shoved his shaky index finger in front of Rachel’s face, and she slapped it away in the offense.

“What the fuck is wrong with you-”

“Roselyn!” he didn’t let her finish. He stormed into the guest room, which was located in the room behind the couch. He found her sitting on the bed, reading from her- “Where did you get that?”

Roselyn removed her glasses, “Get what-”

“The iPad! How did you get the f-fu-hucking iPad?” He stood on the side of the bed, with his hands placed on the mattress threateningly.

Roselyn looked down at her tablet, and looked back up to Dominic, confused, “I brought it with me.”

“You brought it with you my ass! I packed it in the goddamn case!”

“Honey, I think you’re tired,” Roselyn tried to place her hand on Dominic’s, but he tossed it away from her.

“I’m not tired. I swear I- I’ll- I’ll just show you. Come on.” He walked out the door, but Roselyn and Rachel remained in position, reluctant to follow him. “I said come the fuck on!” and, this time, they followed without hesitation.

They reached the car in the parking lot, and he opened the back door after unlocking it and saw the plastic case was still there, filled with everything Roselyn needed. He opened the lid, and the tablet was gone. “See,” Roselyn assured, “I packed it when you left with me.”

“No... no, I-” He decided to move on to another issue, “Who was the girl in the apartment?”

Roselyn’s eyes became wide with fear. “What did you just say?”

“Has there been a fucking squatter living in your place?” Dominic leaned his back forward to make his face level with his mother’s, and she quickly stepped back from him.

“Fucking talk you piece of-”

“Okay, enough!” Rachel stepped in front of Dominic, and mimicked his finger being shoved into her face, “I don’t know who in the fuck you think you are tonight, but you need to calm! Down!”

Suddenly, a whimper emerged from Roselyn’s throat, and they both turned to face her, “Mom,” Dominic said, “Mom, I’m sorry. I’m just upset. I got scared.”

“I know,” Roselyn said, “I know who it was.”

Dominic sighed in exhaustion, “It’s fine, Mom. Let’s just go back inside-”

“Lydia,” Roselyn whispered, until her hysteria grew with each breath, “It’s Lydia! She’s here! Dominic, it’s not safe anymore-”

“Mom, answer to me calmly who Lydia is.”

She took a deep breath, “Let me just show you.” Dominic and Rachel were led back to the apartment by her, and into the guest bedroom. From the closet, she pulled out a binder with a pattern of vertical, tan, and dark brown stripes across the plastic-covered surface, and Dominic didn’t understand what it was doing in there either. However, he felt like he had enough to worry

about. Upon opening it, Dominic noticed many memories of his childhood: Christmas, where the entire family would visit their Great Aunt Judith for the week, and every time he and Jason showed up, she would have her homemade eggnog and sugar cookies ready for the two of them downstairs, next to her collection of board games and puzzles to keep them entertained.

Once Roselyn flipped to the last page, Dominic recognized the man in the final black and white photo as his Great Grandfather, Steven, who made a living as a farmer for most of his life, “Yeah, it’s just Grandpa Steve,” Dominic said to his mother, “I remember this photo, but he died before I was born. Way before.” He studied the photo more intensely and saw that his face was practically frozen, although there was still expression throughout it. His eyes were wide, and he kept his smile incredibly faint as if he was incoherently warning the photographer about danger somewhere near him.

Roselyn didn’t respond, she took the picture out of the case, and Dominic saw the crease at which it was folded. Hidden from his view all his life, was a woman, standing up completely straight next to him, with her eyes blank, and no smile or frown was in sight. He recognized the thousand-yard stare: It was the same woman he saw in the apartment and the lobby.

Roselyn pointed down at her, “That’s her,” she said, “That’s Lydia.”

“Why is this- why are you showing me this?” Dominic sat down on the bed and looked up at Rachel, who was swaying nervously, and biting her fingernails with her spare arm folded across her stomach, and gripping her waist.

“She’s here to- cause us pain.” Roselyn continued to stare down at the photo, “Lydia loved Steven, and he loved her. They began meeting with each other when she moved into their town for a job at a local bar. The more they met up, the more attached, yet vacant Lydia became, and Steven grew fearful of her. He refused to leave her, as he didn’t know what she would do if

he had tried, so he waited things out for a while, and eventually met someone else, and the two started an affair.

“Steven still asked Lydia to marry him, and she replied with a yes, but on their wedding day, she caught Steven with her mistress, and she hung herself. Later that day, Steven was found hung in his backyard along with her, and his lover went missing.

After that, every generation of our family has experienced something. When you and Jason were kids, she was there with us, and now she’s with you.”

Dominic was speechless. He didn’t know what to do, say, or think. He didn’t want to believe a word she said, but the evidence of her case was stacked up directly in front of him. He stormed out of the room immediately to the master bedroom, and Rachel followed him.

“Dominic!” she scolded, “If you don’t believe her, at least just humor her! She is a human fucking being-”

“Don’t tell me what to believe!” Dominic screamed at the top of his lungs, then said calmly, “We’re putting her in a nursing home. I’m going to look for places tomorrow.”

“Wait... Don’t you have work tomorrow?” Dominic’s throat sunk into his stomach. He had completely forgotten to tell Rachel about his suspension.

“Um... Well- no I don’t. I forgot to pack the model for the meeting, so I lost the client, and I got suspended. For a week.”

Rachel laughed out of sheer disappointment and backed away from him, and towards the door. “You know what? I hope you’re okay with sleeping on the couch tonight. I can’t believe you.”

“Come on, please-”

“Either a couch or a hotel!” Rachel folded her arms, and Dominic decided it wasn’t worth it to keep arguing. He went to the closet to grab an extra pillow and a few blankets and left the room. From behind him, he heard Rachel say, “Get some sleep, the sun is setting. We have a lot to talk about tomorrow. He threw the bedware onto the edge of the couch, and the pillow fell to the floor. Before a night of restless sleep, he took a quick shower, and couldn’t stop thinking about the photo Roselyn had shown him. He couldn’t get Lydia out of his mind.

Tuesday.

Dominic awoke to Roselyn sitting next to him, patting his head with kind eyes. He jumped and sprung to life as Roselyn scooched back as not to be as intimidating. “What in the hell,” he asked quietly. He suddenly remembered Rachel was still sleeping.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” Roselyn waved, “You looked so peaceful, I just wanted to give you some good luck. Are you and Rachel okay?”

Dominic rubbed his eyes, “We’ll be fine. It was just a stupid argument. I’m gonna apologize when she gets home.”

“And I’m sorry if I scared you last night, too. I know how dangerous Lydia is-”

“Mom, I appreciate it, but I don’t think it’s her. It’s some sort of... hallucination. From all the stress.”

Roselyn’s brow furrowed, and she asked not-so-subtly, “Have you drank since you were expelled?”

Dominic especially didn’t want to think about that horrific time in his life: When he went to parties instead of classes, practically wasting the money Roselyn loaned him to pay for it. He let those bottles take advantage of him, ruin him, and

the screams when people raced out of the fire in the frat house, lying on the grass to try and put themselves out.

at such an early age.

Despite the memories rushing through like acid reflex about to rise, he smiled, and said, “Did you know I never told you how Rachel and I met?”

Roselyn looked at him, “No. I never realized that.”

“When the Dean kicked me out, and I packed up my things, I got on the bus about ten minutes later. She was the only other person sitting there. I was astonished immediately. She

looked up, smiled, and it made me feel... like everything would be okay. And now it is. So, thanks to Rachel for saving my reputation, no. I don't drink anymore."

"Yet, I've noticed you still get really angry easily."

This time, he didn't answer.

"Does Rachel know why? Does she know why you were on that bus?"

Slowly, the conversation was causing Dominic to loath himself. He knew he should have told her what had happened, but what would she think of him then? He sat up straight, and lied, "Yes. She does."

"Ok. Good. Now, get dressed."

"Why? I can't go to work."

"We have something to do."

"Like what?"

Roselyn sat up, and said, "I want to see Raymond."

Dominic had his breath taken away for a moment, then he smiled, and got up to get ready.

Dominic was proud to see Roselyn walk through the revolving door, strut up to the front desk where Paula was sitting, and ask her if Raymond was asleep. *That's my Mom*, Dominic thought, *For the first time in years, I'm looking at my Mom right now.*

He went beside her as Paula sat there, bewildered at seeing Roselyn's face. "Rosey?" She exclaimed. "Is it you?"

"Yes. It's me, Paula." Roselyn stretched her arms out for an embrace, as the nurse sped around the desk, "It's so good to see you! I haven't seen you since-

"Since you babysat Dom and Jason. It sure has been a while."

“I’m so happy you’re doing better!”

Roselyn turned to Dominic, and grinned, “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for my son.”

Paula placed her hands on Dominic’s shoulders, and whispered to him, “You... are a goddamn miracle.” She hugged him tightly, and he hugged her back. “Well,” she continued. “I think Raymond will be excited to see both of you. Follow me.” She led them to the left hallway, where room 112 was; Where Dominic’s father was. He could already feel himself tearing up when he heard Roselyn gasp at the condition he was in. The curtain wasn’t drawn when Paula led them inside, and Raymond lay there, with a sheet pulled up to his chest, looking straight at the ceiling without blinking for one second, and his mouth gaping open.

“Dad,” Dominic said gently as he slowly sat down on the provided couch, inviting Roselyn to sit with him, “It’s Dom. I brought someone with me this time.” He turned to his mother who had a sudden inability to open her mouth. She reacted almost the same way Rachel had reacted when he took her to see Raymond: distraught and confused.

Paula closed the door and walked back down the hall to give the three of them their privacy.

“Go ahead and say hi if you want.” Dominic jerked his head to the hospital bed.

Through the great lump in her throat, Roselyn said, “Hi Raymond... It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” She grazed her hand across his. “I’m sorry, honey. I’m so sorry that I haven’t been here. I wasn’t well. I was just so scared that if I came, something would happen to you, to our family. I don’t want any of us to get hurt again.”

Dominic was trying his best to resist the formation of his tears as he looked at Roselyn hand-in-hand with his father again. It reminded him of when he was young, and they were all happy. When his parents would dance and kiss to Elvis Presley on their record player, and

Dominic and Jason would scream in disgust. However, they did it for entertainment. They loved seeing them dance together, and Dominic didn't realize how much he missed that.

Dominic leaned to the edge of the cushion to get closer to Raymond, "I hope this is a good surprise for you. I bet you missed her-"

Raymond's eyes lunged into the direction of Roselyn, and both of them yelped as soon as they leaped out of their seats. A breath of air escaped him as if a growling bear had escaped his hoarse throat. "Heeeeerrrr..." he uttered, as he pointed to his wife. Louder this time, he bellowed, "heeeeerrrrrrrrr..."

Dominic was now at the table, reaching for the remote to call a nurse. When it was firmly grasped in his hands, he frantically pressed any button he could, continuing to glance back to the patient.

Raymond began to scream. The noise was earsplitting, sounding as though he had just been impaled in the chest and feeling every moment of it. Paula and another short, blonde-haired nurse rushed in and found Dominic crying for help, Raymond gasping for air and flailing his entire body around in his bed, and Roselyn sitting at the couch, seemingly too shocked to do anything.

Raymond suddenly calmed himself, or rather, abruptly froze, then moaned, "stay... away..." the heart monitor indicated that the rate was now at 0 bpm. A doctor rushed in, and pulled out the defibrillators, doing everything he could to bring him back. Within three shocks, the doctor called it and pulled the cover over Raymond's head.

Dominic sat back down and rubbed his hand assuringly around his mother's back. "Do you want to go home?" he said.

"Yes," Roselyn responded. "I want to go home now."

And with that, they walked out of the room, ignoring Paula, the other nurse, and the doctor's condolences.

In Dominic's car, they went home as Roselyn sat in the passenger seat, barely speaking a word. They were about halfway home, but it was a much longer drive because of a traffic jam, and the lingering, uncomfortable silence. After what felt like hours, Roselyn finally spoke up, "Do you see what I mean now?"

Dominic turned to her, keeping the road in his peripherals, "Sorry?"

"This is why I didn't want to leave. Something bad happens to us all the time. If I had just stayed inside, Raymond wouldn't have lost his lih... his li-" She couldn't finish her sentence, and she broke down in tears with her hands covering her face, and her elbows ledged up onto her knees.

"Mom," Dominic rubbed her shoulder, "you didn't do anything wrong. His time was just... up. There was nothing we could've done."

"It's all my fault," She was still fixated on her position.

Dominic turned his attention back on the road in front of him as the traffic slowly began to move forward, "No, it's not."

"It's my fault."

"Please, stop saying that. Things will only be worse off if you blame yourself."

"It's my fault..." She was sobbing continuously like a broken record.

"Mom? Please just answer me. You're scaring me."

"It's my fault. It's my fault... *It's my fault... It's my fault... IT'S HER FAULT!*"

Roselyn's voice altered entirely, and the furious hollar of those three words exasperated inches away from his ear. He jumped and jerked his head to the passenger's seat. Instead of

Roselyn... sat her, Lydia, with her intense, observational look aimed at his eyes. In an instant, almost like a jumpcut, her face went from blank to wide eyes and an abnormally wide smile, spreading to her earlobes.

Dominic screeched, and swerved into the left lane, about to hit another car head-on. He swerved back, and it took him a while to get himself centered. When he did, he heard his Mom's voice again, "Dom! Dom, what's wrong?"

"I- I just... what's going on?" Dominic was shifting his gaze in every direction, trying to regain some sort of sense of reality.

"Your left is coming up," Roselyn pointed at their apartment building, and, without using a turn signal, he jerked the wheel towards the lot.

"Jesus, Dom!" Roselyn cried. "Watch how you turn that wheel!"

Dominic ignored her, and he stormed from his parking space, and up to the apartment door, where he fiddled with his keys, dropping them a few times, and finally got the door open once he got his shaking hands to finally cooperate.

Roselyn continued her aggravations, "What happened to you? Please, answer me!"

Dominic turned to her abruptly, "I saw her! Okay? I saw her in the passenger seat."

Rachel walked in from the bedroom, "What's going on? Can you guys please quiet down-"

"She was there, Rachel. Lydia was in my fucking car!" Dominic paced back and forth in the living room, his breath shaking and panicked.

Rachel stopped him, and wrapped her arms around his waist from behind, "Baby, it's okay. She's gone now. You don't need to worry-"

He turned abruptly, “But I *do* need to worry. Who knows when she’ll be back? If what Mom says is true, then she was the one who made me forget the model and get suspended from work, Dad pass-”

Rachel’s eyes grew wide, “What happened to your Dad, Dominic?”

Roselyn stepped forward, “I’m so sorry you weren’t there, Rachel. He... he passed away.” Tears lit up her eyes and cheekbones.

“Dominic, I’m so sorry.”

He threw himself onto the couch, feeling completely defeated. Roselyn suddenly gasped, sped up to him, and said, “Dominic, what if the college thing wasn’t your fault? What if Lydia was there. It was probably her who started the fire!” Dominic’s lungs and stomach collapsed entirely when he heard those words.

Oh god, he thought, oh dear god.

He heard Rachel’s voice speak up from above him, “Fire? Dom, what is she talking about?”

Roselyn said, “You told me she knew.” Her voice was raised slightly, and it was clear she was upset. Dominic’s head was down, and he heard footsteps walk into the guest room, and the door slammed shut.

“Dominic?” Rachel sat down next to him, “What did your Mom mean by a fire?”

Dominic took a deep breath, “Do you remember when we met? I came on the bus, and sat down in front of you.”

“Of course I remember.”

“I never told you why I was on that bus,” Rachel was silent, possibly too shocked or concerned to be able to respond, so Dominic continued, “My roommates and I were having a

party. I- I didn't see the outlet was... I plugged the stereo into the outlet and- it was worn out. I got drunk, I spilled my drink onto it. Rachel, so many people got hurt. It was all my fault. I hurt so many people, Rachel." Dominic burst into tears as he looked back upon the unfond memory.

Rachel wrapped her arms around his neck and nuzzled her head into his neck, "It's not your fault, Dominic. You didn't know what was going to happen. You couldn't have known. And your father... I know I didn't get to meet him before everything, but I can tell you this: he would be proud of you. He loves you."

Dominic wasn't certain whether or not that was true. He wanted to believe it, but he couldn't see it happening. All he saw was Raymond shaming him for his grave mistake. However, he thanked Rachel and held her tighter than he ever had before as his tears dripped onto her pink tank top. He fell asleep on the couch for the second night in a row, this time with Rachel holding him, both of them happy to have each other.

Dominic dreamed of the night in college. He felt the sweat created from his dread travel from reality to his sleep state. He had escaped the house, just as a wave of flames escaped with him, but he managed to save himself unharmed. He sat up from the mildewy grass that was cut in the early morning and brushed off his jeans as well as the back of his shirt as best he could. He turned around, and immediately sobered up after the sight of tens of people running out of the house, flames covering their shoulders, hair, and limbs. They all ran down the street or rolled in the yard to try and put themselves out. Dominic cried out in fear, helplessness, and remorse as he relived the horrific sight of his friends being scorched from what he saw as his own doing.

From all around him, he suddenly heard an echoing laugh, somehow sounding distant, yet directly around his personal space. The laugh grew more and more hysterical as if it was

enjoying a scene in a play. Dominic looked up at the right window where his bedroom was and saw Lydia staring right at him, and cackling. It seemed as though her vocal cords would give out at any second.

“It was you! You made me do this!” Through a blur of tears and a lump in his throat, he cried out, “You destroy my life, my job, my family! WHAT THE FUCK DID WE DO TO YOU!” As soon as he finished speaking, her laugh became louder than ever, and from sudden flames surrounding her, the light illuminated (or created, rather) her bruised neck and gaunt face, with a blood-red color where her corneas and pupils were supposed to be.

Her laugh then evolved to a roar announcing his voice repeatedly, *“DOMINIC!*

DOMINIC! DOMIN-”

Wednesday- Wedding Day.

He awoke on the couch and felt his back, head, buttocks, and feet completely drenched in sweat. His vision cleared, and he saw Roselyn looming over him, “Dominic, get up,” she said, “It’s Wednesday.”

He sat up, feeling confused and diluted, “So what?”

“You know. Jason’s wedding!”

Dominic planted his hand into his face, “Dammit. Where’s Rachel?”

“She went to work, silly! She’ll be back soon. Come on, let’s get you dressed up.”

Roselyn led him to his bedroom, where his suit had already been sprawled out onto his side of the bed. She closed the door for Dominic to get his privacy, and he was fully dressed for the wedding by approximately five minutes, wearing a white button shirt, and a black suit, dress pants, tie, and shoes.

He was disappointed with the fact that Jason never asked him to be his best man, so, knowing nobody would be paying attention to the chairs, he simply wore a work suit. He still found it offensive that Jason didn’t put his family in the ceremony itself, and made his old college buddies go walk the aisle with him. He simply saw Dominic as his brother. Not a friend, just a person who was supposed to be in his life, and he couldn’t trade a heart and soul to reverse that, and he knew what Jason thought about him. So, it was more of a personal attack to Dominic, not so much to Rachel, or his Mom, but him.

He heard pounding against his door, which was much more aggressive than it needed to be, “Dominic. Are you dressed?” It was Roselyn, making sure everything was in order before they had to leave.

“Um, yeah,” he responded. “Can you tell me the time?”

There was about a five-second wait before a response, “It’s two fifteen.”

Great, Dominic thought, *Rachel should be here any minute*. He exited his bedroom where he found Roselyn standing by the arm of the couch, waiting for him to see her purple dress.

“What do you think?” Roselyn asked him.

Dominic was surprised to see her dressed up. She looked so happy, excited, and fulfilled: Something he hadn’t seen in forever, “You look beautiful, Mom.”

Roselyn walked up to him, and kissed him on the forehead, “Thank you, sweetie. Now, grab what you need and get your butt to the parking lot. I’m sure Rachel is here now-” she was interrupted by the honk of a horn that was discerned from an open window by the small, circular dining room table, “That’s our cue. I’m so excited!” Roselyn shrieked with glee and jumped in the air before opening the front door.

“Jesus, Mom. You’re pretty cheery.” Dominic chuckled.

Roselyn stopped dead in her tracks, turned to him, and responded with her tone elevated and offended, “What’s wrong with being proud that someone found true love?”

Dominic felt shocked, and frankly, almost scared from her sudden change in moods. He simply shrugged, grinned, and said to her, “Nothing. It was just a joke.”

“A joke. Right. Okay. Let’s go.” She walked out, without leaving the door open for Dominic, so he had to open it again, and lock it behind him. At the apartment exit, he saw Rachel’s red 2007 Volkswagen Beetle. Roselyn was already opening the back door, pushing herself in, and Rachel’s hand waved from the driver’s seat window, implying she wanted him to hurry.

He sped up to the passenger seat door and climbed inside. Rachel was already in her red dress, and her hair was smooth with slight curls forming at the end. Her beautiful, long strands ran down her shoulders. For a person who hadn’t met her, or knew her, she would look simple

yet tasteful. But, to Dominic, her sitting there was the most amazing sight he had ever laid his eyes on.

“Wow...” He somehow managed to utter, “You- y-you’re...”

Rachel smirked, and adjusted her hair behind her ears, “Come on, Romeo. We have places to be.”

Dominic forgot Roselyn was there, and he jumped when he heard her say from behind him, “So are we going, or...”

“Yup. Central Park, here we come.” Rachel pulled out from the parking space, and onto the main road in the direction of Jason’s magical night, and Dominic’s nightmare he had dreaded for months.

They had parked in the lot reserved for the wedding, and it took them approximately ten minutes to get to the park. “Did they have to reserve the park so far away?” Dominic complained to Rachel.

She glared at him, and responded, “Are you gonna act like a twelve-year-old the entire time?”

“Is Jason gonna be entitled in front of his guests the entire time?”

She waited a moment to figure out what to say next, but could only come up with, “Touché,” and they both walked onto the green, fresh-cut grass with Roselyn following silently close behind them. On the cement trail, they were led to a small pond where in front of it was seating, and a white altar with vines and roses rising on the top and sides. Farther from it sat a white tent, with four long, clothed tables placed vertically, and chairs all surrounding them. Most

people were gathered around the tent, and they spotted Jason and his bride, Maria, surrounded by about six women in matching pink dresses, whom Dominic assumed were the bridesmaids.

Rachel pointed at them, “Dominic, there’s your brother! Let’s say hi!”

Dominic practiced what he would say to him, “Hey there Jason, thanks for not putting us in this shitty wedding! You know, since we’re your entire family and all. By the way, why don’t you introduce us to your twenty-year-old sex slave? My guess is you’ll flee in about nine months when you find out the baby is her brother’s rather than yours!”

Rachel hit him across the shoulder, and she and Roselyn both scolded in unison, “Watch your mouth!”

Regretting nothing, Dominic rubbed his shoulder in the spot where his wife slapped him and led her and his mom to Jason and Maria: A tall, brunette Asian woman who none of them had ever met before this moment. Jason was speaking with the bridesmaids, and tossing his glass of wine around the vicinity as his bride continuously glanced at her phone, seemingly wanting to get along with the day.

Dominic, and most likely Roselyn and Rachel as well, heard the end of the conversation before Jason peered his sight to them, pathologically lying, “... And on that Africa safari- and I swear to you- the lion jumped right on top of the jeep! Of course, I gave the driver about a 40% tip for being so calm through that ordeal, but I helped get it down-” He smiled as he turned to the group of three, “Well if it isn’t Dominic, Mom, and-” He snapped his fingers as Rachel stared at him in dismay and offense, “Sorry sweetie, I’m blanking on your name.”

“Rachel,” she responded monotone.

“Nice to meet you, Roxy!”

“We’ve known each other for six years-”

“Oh, and of course I couldn’t forget my beautiful girl. Maria, this is my family: My Mom, my brother Dominic, and his wife, Regina.”

Maria finally put her phone down, looked up at them all, and almost too politely, she greeted, “Hi! Oh my gosh, it is so nice to finally meet you all! Rosey, my baby Jason has told me so much about you!” she looked up and down at her and then embraced her tightly as Roselyn looked uncomfortable, but still went along with it to please her son. When they parted she continued her blabbering, “Now, agoraphobia. Is that like- that disorder where you refuse to eat? I mean, only because you look a little-”

Before Maria was able to suck in her stomach with her arms, Dominic interrupted her. “Okay. Jason, what time is the ceremony?”

“Right! Well as most of you know, we aren’t supposed to be greeting guests before the ceremony, but we thought we could just quickly say hi to a few people. But, since Maria and I are all dressed, we’re gonna get started...”

Maria checked her phone again. She jumped with excitement and put her hands on Jason’s shoulders, “Baby, it’s 2:50. We should be getting ready.”

“Wow! Time flies!” Jason dumped out his glass of wine and tossed it onto the ground for someone to pick it up later, “We should get going. Baby, gather your friends. Everyone else walking is already waiting.”

Jason, Maria, and the bridesmaids walked off past the tent to where everyone walking the aisle already was. Maria was the last to leave. Before catching up, she placed a hand on Rachel’s shoulder and said, “Nice to meet you, Rambo-”

“Rachel!” Rachel snapped. And, without another word, Maria hurried to the back of the tent.

Dominic studied the area and noticed other guests walking towards the seating and altar. Roselyn did the same without waiting for him or Rachel to walk along with her. Dominic grasped Rachel's hand gently, smiled, and said, "Are you ready, Rambo?"

"I love you, but fuck yourself." Rachel laughed as she let go of Dominic's hand to jog to her unassigned seat without him. He chuckled, jogged toward her, and sat down in the middle of the second row of the groom's side. Dominic looked around to see if there was anyone he recognized. On the groom's side, he saw a lot of people from work, some of Jason's neighbors, however, no family. The only family that Jason seemed to have invited was Dominic, Rachel, and his Mom.

Roselyn... Roselyn... Dominic tried to find her sitting down somewhere, but every seat was taken except for one, and she wasn't there. He leaned to his left and whispered to Rachel, "Hey, do you know where Mom went?"

"Not sure," Rachel responded, "But have you noticed that since we got here, she's barely talked. I don't what it is, but she's been off today."

"She snapped at me before we left," Dominic admitted, "I don't remember her ever doing something like that before. Maybe she disapproves of the wedding?"

"Maybe. But she was talking about how excited she was in the car."

Dominic shrugged, "My Mom is an enigma."

A woman from behind them leaned forward between their chairs and aggressively shushed them. Dominic was about to confront her until upon turning, he saw Jason and his best man (His college freshman roommate, Bradley), and the officiant once violins began to serenade. Once they reached the front, Dominic saw Jason's eyes shifting back and forth, looking concerned and confused. He scowled at Dominic, and mouthed *Where the hell is Mom?*

Dominic mouthed back *No idea* while shrugging his shoulders. He heard Jason sigh as he turned his head to the left side of the altar, and noticed an older Asian woman sitting in the far left seat in the front row. He concluded that it was Maria's mother, indicating that the ceremony was starting. The procession was followed by the groomsmen (Jason's fraternity brothers), and the bridesmaids; the groomsmen walked arm-to-arm with the bridesmaids before sitting down in the front row of the right side. In his seat, the groomsman in front of Dominic inconspicuously thrust his crotch area into the air. Jason held in laughter as he gave him the bird below his waist. *I should be in the front row, Dominic thought, That should be me messing with my brother.*

Rachel must have noticed Dominic had started to clench his fists slightly because she gently placed her hand on his leg. She looked at him as if to say *It'll be okay. He's an asshole anyway.*

Dominic put his arm around her and kissed her on the forehead. He fixed his focus back to the aisle, where he noticed that more people were sitting now, and the flower girl was leading the bride and her father. Everyone stood up, and Dominic was the last to do so. The father (who was shorter, approximately 5'8"), hugged Maria, then leaned over to shake Jason's hand. Upon sitting down, the officiant asked, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

In a thick, Chinese accent, the father responded, "Her mother and I do." Afterward, the officiant began reading from the Bible that he had in his possession.

Dominic had stopped listening and was turning his head, gazing at the park surrounding him. His mind was suddenly filled with confusion when he heard the violinists serenading again. The sound was beautiful, but he didn't understand why they would be playing at such a time. He leaned over to Rachel and whispered in her ear as quietly as possible, "Why are the violinists playing?"

She looked up at him blankly, having no idea how to respond. Finally, she uttered, “What are you talking about?”

“The music. They started playing while the Priest-” Rachel wasn’t listening to him anymore, and her head was turned back to the alter. However, Dominic still kept his head almost facing the sky, dazed at the music. The tuning seemed to be getting adjusted lower and lower after each note was played, and he slowly recognized the melody. His throat sank to his stomach.

Lydia, oh Lydia, say have you met Lydia? Oh, Lydia the tattooed lady! She has eyes that folks adore so, and a torso even more so-

“No,” Dominic whispered.

Rachel hissed at him quietly, “Dominic, what do you think you’re doing?”

“No. Not this. Not now.”

“Dominic. Quiet,” Rachel warned him again.

He didn’t listen to her. He stood up, pointed at the violinists behind the seats, and screamed, “No! Stop it now!”

“Um, sir,” the Priest began uncomfortably, “You object to the marriage?”

“I- Why would I-”

“I announced for someone to speak if they objected.”

He looked around, perplexed, embarrassed, and terrified. Everyone was murmuring to each other in the seats behind him, and Rachel was tugging at his arm, trying to pull him down. He turned to Jason and Maria, who were both shooting daggers. “Um- no. Uh... carry on.” he waved and sat back down.

Rachel snapped again, “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“To hell with “I don’t know”. What were you thinking?”

“The music. It was-”

The Priest spoke up to try and silence the two of them, “Then by the power invested in me and the state of New York,” he quieted down slightly, “I now pronounce you... husband and wife. Jason, you may kiss the bride.”

The two of them followed the instructions given to them and everyone happily cheered. Everyone except for Dominic, who still was distraught by the music that had now gone back to normal.

Everyone got up to get ready for the fajita and taco dinner bar that was being held in the tent, and Rachel shook his shoulder when she saw how deep a trance Dominic was in. “Dom,” she said, “Honey, we have an hour until dinner. Let’s find our seats.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah sure. The violins are just really- captivating.”

Her eyebrows furrowed, “Are you okay?”

Dominic rose from his seat, and grunted, “Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s eat.”

About two hours went by, and Dominic didn’t touch the food that he put on his plate. Rachel kept telling him that he needed to eat, but he had no appetite. Mainly, because of the music, the embarrassment, and the fact that Roselyn was still nowhere to be found.

“I’m sure she’s okay,” Rachel said, “She’s probably just taking a walk, and lost track of time.”

Dominic didn't buy a word that came through her mouth. He especially didn't believe her consultations when Jason stood up and announced, "I was wondering if anyone has seen my mother, Roselyn? She left about two hours ago and hasn't returned."

"See? Even Jason is worried. Fucking *Jason*. My brother who reeked of weed at *our* wedding is scared about something."

"Okay. Let's just dance for a little bit, then we can go check her apartment and ours."

With a breath of relief, Dominic responded, "Thank you."

They sat in silence for a short while, then Jason walked up to them. He put his arms around them, kneeled in between them, and said, as if speaking to children, "So you guys having fun?"

"Yes, Jason. This reception is quite adequate." Dominic spoke to him monotone, and Jason got the message.

He raised his hands, and said, "Geez, dude I was joking around. Actually, while I'm here, can I talk to you about something?" he glanced at Rachel, "Like, in private?"

"Yeah, sure." Dominic got up and followed Jason behind the tent where they wouldn't be seen by anyone.

"So, a couple of things," Jason began, "Thing number one: Dad. Why the hell didn't you tell me?" He folded his arms.

Dominic shrugged, "I just- have a lot on my mind."

"Well, Rosita told me about it, and I have everything set for the cremation."

"Her name is Rachel."

"Right. Rachel." He didn't apologize, "Well, I had his ashes and vase given to me. They're on the mantel at my place."

“But,” Dominic paused, “Shouldn’t Mom have his ashes?”

“I mean, I guess that would make sense. But everything’s already been done. I’ve made the payments, which you should’ve done-”

“I should’ve done? I didn’t have to do shit! I had to watch him die is what I had to do.”

“Okay, fine. We can figure out a way for you to pay me back.”

“I’m not going to-” Dominic sighed, “What were the other “things” that you mentioned?”

“About that episode during the ceremony? Like, what was that?” He laughed.

Dominic stuttered, “I have no idea. It was just an episode.”

“I mean, I was mad in the heat of the moment, but now it’s pretty funny. Hell, I should’ve supported you.”

“What?”

“What I mean is that I kind of *had* to marry Maria because her parents like my money. But I didn’t exactly want to. Why would you buy the cow when you already get the milk for free, right?” He slapped Dominic’s arm playfully, “Remember that quote. Live by it. Like, I don’t know why you married *Rachel* half the time.”

“Why-why would say that?” This time, it was Dominic who folded his arms.

“Rachel has obviously gotten around. I mean, look at her. So, if she already fucks enough to be good at it, then why would you marry her? You can get the good stuff without any bullshit contract.”

“Are you drunk or something?” Dominic had no idea where any of Jason’s advice was coming from.

As Jason scratched his forehead, his eyes shifted, and he answered, “No, why?” At that point, now that Dominic knew that Jason understood what he was saying, he directed a punch

into his chest. Stepping back and leaning forward, Jason said angrily, “What the fuck? I was just telling the truth! I was trying to be nice!”

“You called my wife a slut!”

“I said she gets around! I was complimenting her-”

Dominic shoved Jason, and he planted his ass onto the ground. People must have heard yelling because a small crowd started gathering around them.

Dusting himself off, Jason got up and chuckled, “Oh, you’re asking for it, are you?”

“Yeah, I am-” Before he could finish, he felt a surge of pain puncture through his nose, and his neck pulled back.

Dominic gritted his teeth and knocked Jason back onto the ground while bending his knees on top of him, throwing punch after punch, and slap after slap. Finally, Jason was able to block a punch, and he dug his knee into Dominic’s stomach. He let out a great breath of air and lay on the ground, struggling to breathe for a while.

Jason was now above him, screaming, “Is the wind knocked out of ya? It’ll make you think twice next time you try to fuck with me! DON’T FUCK WITH-”

Dominic was able to get up quickly although air had still escaped him. Despite his now weak state, he had landed an uppercut punch on Jason, and blood immediately dripped from his chin.

“Dominic, get back!” A voice called out from behind him, and he felt arms being wrapped around his and being dragged backward. He landed his elbow into the person’s stomach and he felt the grasp of the arms escaping his torso. Everyone gasped, and many more began to yell hysterically and angrily.

“Dominic,” the voice said again, “I have to go,” the source of the voice traveled across him, and away from the crowd. He saw the red wavy hair bouncing off the person’s shoulders and the matching skirt of the dress swaying spastically around her. Dominic realized who it was immediately.

“Rachel!” he called out, and he ran towards her as she disappeared after turning at the park exit.

Jason gripped his upper arm, trying to hold him back. “You’ve done enough,” he scolded. “Maria called the police. They’re coming any minute-”

Dominic said goodbye to Jason with a blow straight to his throat, and he was knocked to the ground, choking. Everyone else was too busy trying to help Jason get back up that they never paid attention to Dominic leaving. He caught up to the gate where Rachel had turned, but when he searched the sidewalks and crossings, he found her nowhere, and he became tied up in the busy streets, not even knowing where to start.

Think, goddammit, Dominic scolded himself. He then suddenly realized the tracking app they put on each other’s phone in case each other’s cars broke down and they needed help. He pulled out his phone and opened the app. He had found her icon in a hospital parking lot only a few blocks away.

What the hell is she doing there? Dominic began jogging to his right, starting to make his way to his wife’s location.

In the hospital lobby, a frizzy-haired blonde woman with glasses glanced at him from behind the reception desk when he rushed in. Dominic hurried to her and said, out of breath, “Is my wife here? Her name is Rachel Lacey!”

“Um... yes. Dr. Smith is with her. Room 102 just down the hall-” Dominic sprinted down the hall to the room. When he found it, he unnecessarily burst the door open with his side and arm, and he saw Rachel sitting on a stool and the doctor next to her.

“What’s going on?” Dominic asked. “What’s wrong with her?”

Dr. Samuels pointed to Dominic with his pen, “Is this your husband?” he asked after turning to Rachel.

She looked down, and muttered, “Yes. It is.”

“Would you like me to tell him?”

Rachel’s chin began shaking, and she turned her head to hide tears forming.

“What? Is she okay?” Dominic could hear practically nothing except the sound of his own heart beating out of his chest.

“Sir. I’m so sorry. Your child... your child is gone.”

Dominic felt words, noises rather, forming in his throat, but he was never able to get any of the sorts out for a full minute.

“I understand if you want to sit down or lay down for a moment-”

“Child?” That was the only thing Dominic could bring himself to say.

He could even hear remorse and sorrow building in the doctor when he said, “Oh my gosh. You didn’t know?”

Rachel spoke but barely spoke up. Keeping her head down, she said, “I was pregnant, Dominic. It’s been about a month.”

Dominic went silent again for a moment, until the doctor finally said, “I’ll give you two a minute alone,” the doctor then left the room, and paced into the hall.

Dominic felt his eyes losing vision from tears, and he blinked a few times in an attempt to clear it, but to no avail. It was followed by a deep, shaky breath. “How about a name?” he asked her.

“I was thinking... if it’s a boy: Raymond. If it’s a girl: Roselyn.” Rachel’s voice was muted and frail.

Dominic nodded, “I like those names...”

Without saying another word, Rachel got up from the swivel stool she was sitting on and faltered to the bathroom, where more hysterical sobs could be heard once she closed and locked the door.

Dominic sat on the couch in front of the bay window, then buried his face into his hands. He knew for a fact who was behind this: Lydia had been the answer to everything; his job, his father, his mother at the wedding, and now his baby. He sniffled, and mumbled, “I know you can hear me, wherever the fuck you are. I don’t know how the fuck I’ll do it, but I fucking swear to you, I will drag you the hellish pit you came from. I’m going to fucking kill you, Lydia.” His anger took him over suddenly. He stood up and screamed so loud that he immediately felt the sore scratchiness in his vocal cords, “I will FUCKING KILL YOU!”

Ding Dong.

Rachel’s text tone. Her phone’s bright screen lit up on a table from across the room. Dominic didn’t know why, but the curiosity got the better of him, and he stood up to see who wanted to speak. When he walked up and held the phone in front of him, he saw Jason’s name, with the notification:

Jason Lacey sent you a message.

He opened the phone, somehow without needing a passcode, and the conversation was unlocked, showing conversations from today, to months prior. He began scrolling up, then he scrolled past a picture that got his attention: It was a picture of Rachel's slim torso and shoulders, with nothing but a baby pink bra, and the left strap slid down her arm. It was followed by a caption she had typed herself:

Do you want this???

He read the next text. It was from Jason, reading:

Fuuuuck yesss! Get here asap! Any surprises in store this time?

Lol maybeeee XXX

Maria isn't there, is she?

Stayin with her parents for the night just for fun. Dominic?

Staying on the couch tonight. Got pissed off cuz

he thought someone was in Rosey's place. He won't notice I'm gone.

Perfect... can't wait

The next text was a picture from Jason of him laying on his stomach with his bare rear shown at the perfect angle for it to be seen.

He coughed as tears raced down his throat. He could no longer scroll, for the last text was now showing. At the bottom, sent 2 minutes ago, Jason wrote,

I saw what Dominic did to you. Is our baby okay?

The bathroom door opened, and Rachel walked out, wiping tears from her eyes.

“I think I want to go home, Dominic-”

Dominic held the phone in front of her face, “What the fuck is this?”

She squinted at the screen, then her eyes burst wide. “Dominic-” she began, “Where- where did you get this?”

“It’s *your* phone. Is it true?”

“Is what true?” Rachel’s chin was shaking again.

“That you were fucking my brother! That it was *his* fucking kid!”

“Baby, I don’t know where that text came from. Please believe me,” she began sobbing again as she placed her hands on Dominic’s-

“DON’T FUCKING TOUCH ME!” his free palm surged across Rachel’s face after she attempted to place her hands on his arms, “You fucking whore!”

“I never cheated on you, please baby I love you-” her wails were interrupted when Dominic slammed the phone onto the tile flooring and shoved his wife against the wall. She slid to the floor, covered in silent tears, although an occasional deep and rippled breath escaped her

throat. From terror and trauma, her face grew red, wrinkled, and quivered. Her head was exhaustedly rested on her shoulder and leaned against the wall. Her legs were sprawled out, and her arms were limp and staying wherever they had landed. Dominic didn't move one inch. He simply stood there, feeling superior as she feared for her life.

Dominic didn't even hear someone else enter, but what started as a man's voice saying, "What is going on," gradually became the voice of a young woman's, sounding almost dream-like.

Dominic slowly shifted his head in the voice's direction, his eyes wide and filled with anger. A lock at the top of his forehead was loose and dripped heavy amounts of sweat. He too was red in the face, but for a separate reason.

Standing at the entrance was Lydia in her white wedding dress and long locks of blonde hair. She started with a small grin, but the smile soon grew abnormally wide, along with her eyes.

"You..." Dominic whispered in his scratchy throat. He lunged at her, and they both flew across the hallway. When they hit the floor, he grabbed the top of her dress, and screamed, "What the fuck do you want from me, huh? Just leave me the fuck alone! Fucking leave! Me! ALONE!"

Lydia began laughing hysterically and maniacally. Through the laughter, she said, "Sir..."

"What?" Dominic yelled.

"Sir... you're hurting me..." The man's voice was back, and beneath him was the doctor, trembling, fearing for what Dominic might do next. He looked to his right, where the lobby was, and he saw the receptionist leaning over her desk, terrified, with the phone glued to her face. She

was most likely calling the police, and Dominic knew that that was his cue to leave. He got up and sprinted to the door. Not once did he stop running until he made it back to his apartment.

Two weeks later

Dominic had lost his job after all. He had spent the last two weeks after the wedding primarily all alone. Rachel never returned. He assumed she was staying in a hotel, or having threeways with his god-awful brother and sister-in-law, whom he hadn't seen either, which made it even more of a case to Dominic with where Rachel had gone. Roselyn was still missing, and it had been on the news a few times. However, Dominic never had any part to say in the matter. He didn't care to in the first place. All he wanted was to stay on his couch and let his greasy hair and beard grow. He hardly ate, slept, smiled, or moved. The news was playing on the tv, and although he didn't remember turning it on, he didn't give two shits about it. Nor about anything.

The reporter was standing on the side of a highway when she began her story for the night, "Good evening, Tom. I'm standing here just outside New York City where a tragic car accident has occurred. As you can see, many police cars are behind me, blocking the road. However, they, unfortunately, haven't been able to save the life of the poor woman and driver, who has been identified as Rachel Lacey, a local reporter for the New York Times.

"Now, it's not just the accident I'm here to talk about, but the connection with a missing person, Roselyn Lacey, Rachel's mother-in-law, and the murder of Jason and Maria Lacey, who have been found in murdered in their bedroom this morning. We still have no leads in the murders, the missing person, nor this tragic accident. Back to you, Tom.

Dominic's old Lacey Architects I.D. photo was shown on the screen.

“If anyone sees this man, please contact the police immediately so they can take him in for questioning. Back to you, Tom.”

Dominic didn't react. He simply turned off the tv and sat in silence and darkness. Everything he had was now gone. But for some reason, Dominic didn't feel any remorse. He felt he had just been too tired to care.

Suddenly, the quiet and echoing voice of Lydia appeared in all directions, *Dominic. Come with me, my love.* The entrance to his apartment creaked open, and the light of the hallway that he hadn't seen in forever blinded his eyes. He hated her, yet, this time, something was different. He could tell she didn't want to hurt him, but speak to him. He got up from his couch, lost his balance, and fell back. His legs felt like jelly after not using them for so long. He momentarily managed to lift himself again, and limp and stumble towards the door.

He had made it out of his apartment and somehow found himself in the lobby of where Roselyn's apartment was. The lights were dim and flickering on and off spastically, and no one else was near. Throughout the building, he could hear his favorite song:

Lydia, oh Lydia, say have you met Lydia? Oh, Lydia the tattooed lady! She has eyes that folks adore so, and a torso even more so-

The smell of the dead rats had somehow lingered to where he was standing, and it grew stronger as he slowly walked up the stairs to see Her.

Come, my love. You are almost here.

He was standing in front of Roselyn's apartment, not moving a muscle, and his nose nearly touching the door.

Enter, my love. I want to see you.

All the locks were undone, and Dominic opened the door. In the living room, stood Lydia. She looked beautiful, and Dominic felt more alive and aroused than he ever had with Rachel.

This was all for you, Lydia said, although her voice still sounded distant, I have wrangled the toxic people from your life. All you need is yourself, and me.

“Why?” Dominic asked dryly.

Why? Because I love you, darling. Much like I loved your Great Grandfather. But he was unfaithful. I saw how you reacted to my test.

“What test?”

The pictures of Rachel and Jason practically together. I wanted to see how you would handle my simulation, and I see now that you do not take adultery lightly as I do not. I admire that.

“You mean you-”

Yes. I created those messages. I am rather proud of the work. I am proud of all the work I've done for you. If you hadn't become who you are now, we would not be here. Together. They were both silent for a moment, then she asked, How do you feel about being in this room, my love?”

“The rats. They smell bad.”

Lydia scowled in confusion, *Rats? However do you mean, my love?*

Dominic remembered everything that came to Roselyn ever since she had left this apartment:

She's in her room. After she asked for a tour, she just walked straight to it. I didn't even tell her where it was, she just knew-

You looked so peaceful, I just wanted to give you some good luck.

My Mom is an enigma.

Damn rats in the bathroom. I guess they died in there overnight...

Dominic turned the knob of the bathroom door with his shaking hand, and on the other side, he heard the dozens upon dozens of flies swarming inside it. There was Roselyn, hanging still in the center of the bathroom, with a tethered rope around her neck. On her bare legs was the blood that had dripped to a puddle on the floor, but dried over time.

He slowly stepped back and turned to Lydia, "When I apologized to my Mom. When I took her to see her husband, when she disappeared at Jason's wedding, it wasn't her. It was *you*."

I liked your mother. I really did, but I knew how close you were to her. If I didn't do this to her, and take her form, then how could we have gotten so close as we are right now? She extended her arms out for an embrace, revealing the scars she carried on her arms. Come here, my love.

Dominic swayed towards her. When he stood in front, he got down on his knees and wrapped his arms around her legs. He began to cry, not in fear, or sadness, but happiness, that she was there with him.

Dominic?

“Yes?”

... Tell me you love me.

Happily, he whispered, “I love you, Lydia.”

Good. Now, do one more thing for me.

“Yes. Anything for you, my love.”

She leaned down to his ear and whispered affectionately.

He nodded, “Yes. Of course.” He got back up, and slowly went back to the bathroom. He stopped in front of the mirror and broke a portion of the glass. The pieces fell to the countertop and he picked up the largest one he could find from the pile. Behind him, he turned on the bathtub faucet, where the ice-cold water ran straight down the drain, a problem he needed to fix. He plugged the drain, and as it should, the tub began to fill with water. He stripped all of his clothing, got in the tub, and began dragging the shard of glass against his skin, breaking into it from his palms, to his upper arms. The tub began to overflow, and the water splashed onto the floor.

“This is for you, Lydia,” Dominic said as his blood dripped down the tub’s side and onto the tiling, mixing in with his mother’s.

As you have read in the story, I have touched very sensitive topics that may have been triggering for some readers. Know that there are friends, family, and resources that can help you. If you are a victim of domestic violence or suicidal thoughts, call these numbers for support:

Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233

Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

We are all here for you.