



FICTION WRITING



Fiction Writing

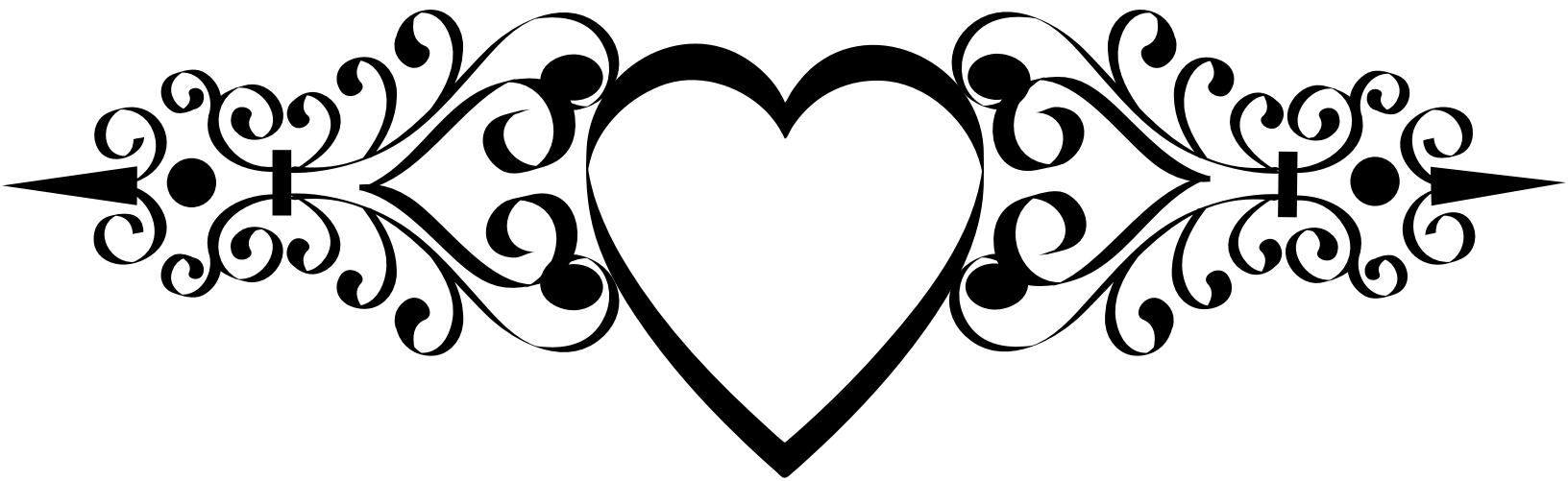
This was one of the classes I was looking forward to the most this semester. Fiction is where I shine when it comes to writing. I enjoy diving into my imagination, pulling out interesting stories, and keeping the attention of the audience. I enjoyed the writing aspect of this class. It expanded my writing knowledge as well as taught me a lot more about how to make my stories better, including the writing itself.

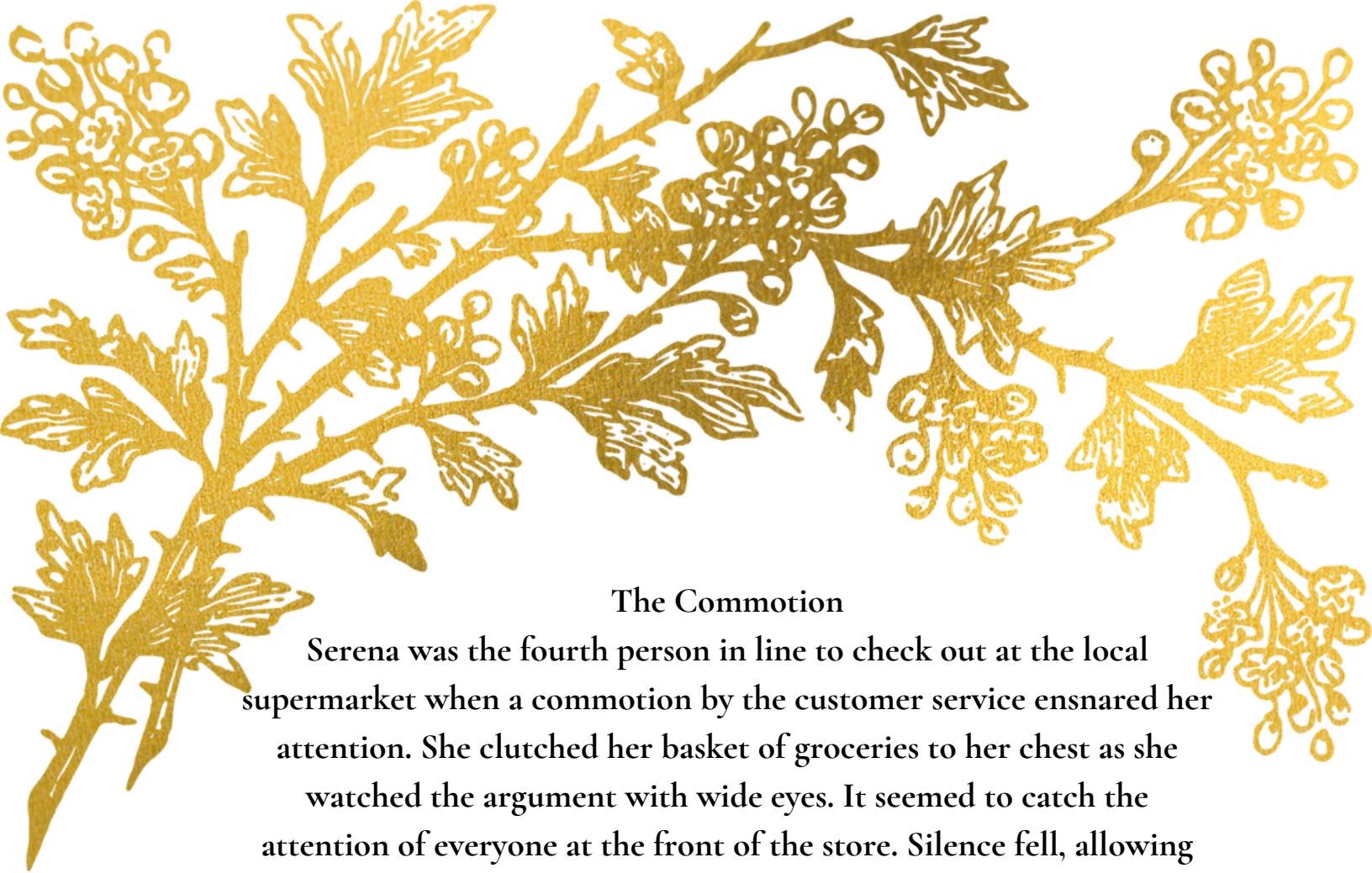
I learned about the characters and how to get better with descriptions. Characters are a major aspect of writing. You don't have a story without the characters. The scene is also very important as well as the exposition. It's always important to set up the story from the beginning. I also learned more about dialogue and the proper way to write it.

There were many lessons to learn in this class and it helped me with the book I'm currently writing.

The four mini-stories I chose are the ones I thought I did the best on. One focuses mostly on descriptions; another focuses mostly on the characters. Then there are my three major short stories that I had a lot of fun writing.

Writing has been my passion ever since I can remember. It hasn't always been my goal to become a published author or do anything with the stories I've written. I never used to think this is something I could do in the future. It was just a hobby to me when I was growing up. But as I started college, I realized that it wasn't an impossible dream. I could publish my writing and have a career in the writing field. So, I became an English major and took creative writing classes. I'll be graduating this semester and moving on to get my bachelor's degree in English. My dream is to become an editor and published author. This class was a step in the right direction. I hope you all enjoy my stories.






The Commotion

Serena was the fourth person in line to check out at the local supermarket when a commotion by the customer service ensnared her attention. She clutched her basket of groceries to her chest as she watched the argument with wide eyes. It seemed to catch the attention of everyone at the front of the store. Silence fell, allowing the customers to hear the hateful words an older lady was throwing at the young man behind the customer service desk.

The lady's face was turning red as she spat her words. "What do you mean you can't return this item and give me my money back?!"

The man visibly took a deep breath and let it out slowly, plastering a smile on his face. "Ma'am, as I've already said, this item has obviously been well used," he said. "Besides, you don't even have the receipt with you. I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do."

Serena winced as the lady's voice reached a crescendo that only dogs should be able to hear. She felt sorry for the young man. He didn't deserve to be treated like that by anyone. He was only trying to help her. She didn't like how retail workers were treated by rude customers, especially since she understood first hand, being the manager of a nearby clothing store.




“Listen here, asshat!” screeched the lady. “I will get my money back one way or another. Do you want me to call corporate on you?!”

Serena snorted softly to herself. “Okay, Karen,” she muttered under her breath. The customer in front of her coughed to cover a laugh, overhearing her.

“Ma’am, I’m sorry,” the man said quietly. “If I could help, I would. I’m afraid anyone would say the same thing, even my managers. If you continue making a ruckus, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

The lady didn’t like that, her face turning an unhealthy shade darker. Was she even breathing? Serena took a step forward, prepared to say something and lay a verbal smackdown on the lady to get her out of the store. Before she could say a word, one of the store managers showed up with a frown on his weathered face. After a few stern words to the lady, she finally huffed, let out another insult to the young man, and stormed out of the store.

Serena let out a relieved breath, glad that was over. It was time to finish her shopping and go home.



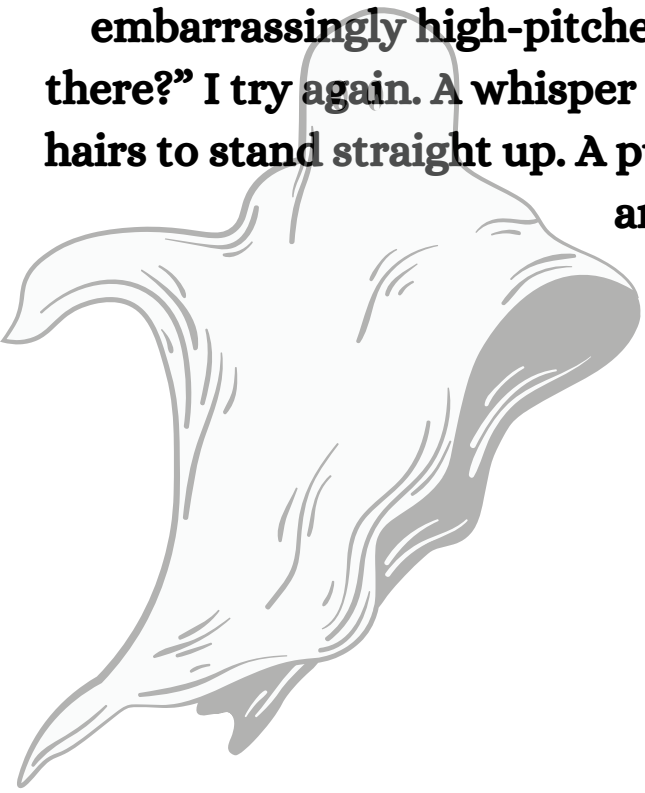
Ghostly Shudders

The table in Ashewood Manor is the only piece of furniture that was not sold at the auction before the house was put on the market. It's a huge, thick, bulky piece of wood that is nearly impossible to lift even with the help of a friend. It's the only thing in the house that I've come to steer clear of ever since I moved in at the beginning of the Fall Semester. There's a strange aura surrounding the table that makes me uneasy.

As the days pass and I begin to get comfortable in my new home, I can't help noticing strange things that seem to be centered around the table. Like how the air surrounding the object is thick with the kind of chill that sends shivers up and down my spine. Sometimes I swear I can see the ghost of a handprint on the table's surface. The other day as I walked past, a chair moved on its own.

My goal is to get to the bottom of these freaky events. I didn't sign up for a haunted house. I bite my bottom lip in nervousness as I take a step closer to the table that suddenly looks a lot more intimidating than it has before. The air seems to thicken around me and I take a deep breath as I grasp the back of a chair and slowly slide it out. I plop down on the seat and shiver. Ice cold seeps through my jeans from the chair and my butt goes slightly numb. I shift in the seat uncomfortably.

"Who's there?" I demand. Or I try to demand. My voice squeaks in an embarrassingly high-pitched tone. I clear my throat awkwardly. "Who's there?" I try again. A whisper ghosts across the back of my neck, causing the hairs to stand straight up. A puff of breath follows quickly and I flinch. "Who are you?" I whisper.



“Ghooooossttt,” a voice hisses in the silence.

I frown. “Is that your name or what you are?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer the question. “You’re trespassing.” His voice is barely above a whisper and I have to strain my ears to hear him.

“I’m not trespassing,” I argue. “I’m renting this house while going to college.

Now tell me who you are.”

The chair across from me is suddenly knocked backwards and crashes to the floor with a loud thud, startling me. My heart races in my chest as I glance around, trying to see my invisible roommate.

“We really need to work on your anger management issues,” I state calmly.

“I’m tired of having a conversation with myself. At least let me see you.”

“No!!!!!!” the voice roars. The table suddenly lifts from the floor and hovers for a second before toppling on the side with a bang.

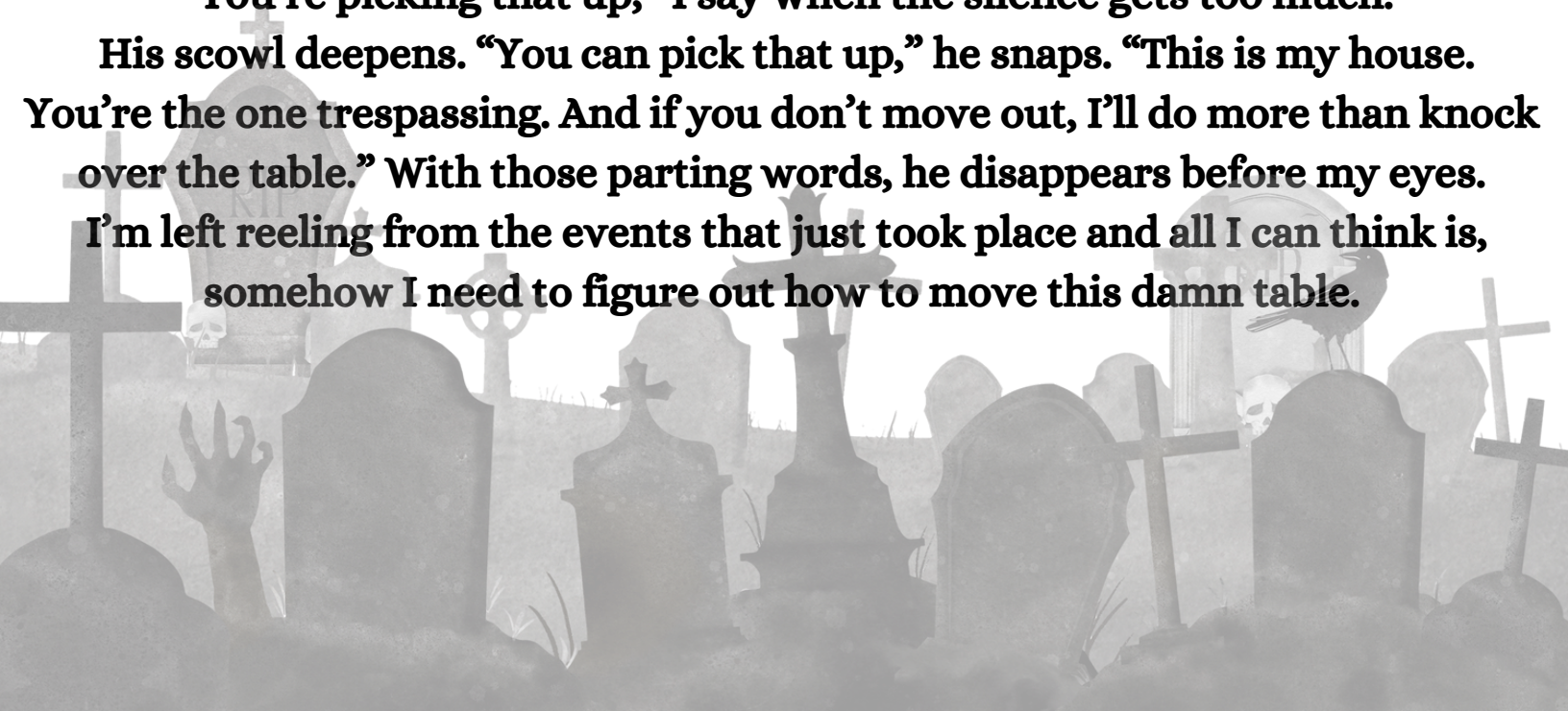
I’m frozen in shock as I stare at the overturned table. Strangely, the only thing I can really think of is how the hell am I supposed to put that back in its place? My next thought is, damn, Mr. Ghost is strong. I’m snapped out of my thoughts at the sound of footsteps coming closer to me. My gaze snaps from the table towards the sound and I gasp when a form flickers.

My unwanted roommate is a young man no older than me. His lips are twisted into a scowl as he glares at me as if I’m inconveniencing his life somehow. I glance from him back to the table.

“You’re picking that up,” I say when the silence gets too much.

His scowl deepens. “You can pick that up,” he snaps. “This is my house. You’re the one trespassing. And if you don’t move out, I’ll do more than knock over the table.” With those parting words, he disappears before my eyes.

I’m left reeling from the events that just took place and all I can think is, somehow I need to figure out how to move this damn table.





(THIS IS THE PRELUDE TO SHROUDED IN DARKNESS.)

How I Died

THE CABIN NESTLED BETWEEN SEVERAL LARGE TREES IN FRONT OF LAKE HUDSON BELONGED TO MY MOTHER BEFORE SHE DIED WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER. I INHERITED THE PROPERTY WHEN I TURNED TWENTY-ONE WITH THE REQUEST THAT I LEAVE THE FURNITURE AND DECORATIONS ALONE. I HAD NO PROBLEM WITH THAT BECAUSE I WAS CLOSE WITH MY MOTHER AND HAVING HER THINGS IN THE CABIN FELT LIKE SHE WAS THERE WITH ME STILL.

MY HUSBAND ALWAYS HATED THE CABIN. HE WOULD SAY IT WAS TOO GIRLY OR TOO OLD LADYISH. I GOT USED TO IGNORING HIS SNEERED COMMENTS. HE WASN'T ALWAYS LIKE THAT. WE MET IN HIGH SCHOOL. HE WAS A SENIOR AND I WAS A SOPHOMORE. I THOUGHT HE WAS SO COOL. HE MADE ME FEEL SPECIAL AND HONORED THAT A SENIOR WOULD WANT TO SPEND TIME WITH A YOUNGER PERSON LIKE ME. WE STARTED DATING MY SENIOR YEAR AND I FELL HARD FOR HIM. HE WAS THERE FOR ME WHEN MY MOTHER DIED. HE WAS MY ROCK. BUT AFTER I INHERITED THE PROPERTY, HE CHANGED.

HE BECAME VIOLENT, FIRST WITH HIS WORDS, THEN HIS FISTS. THE FIRST TIME HE SLAPPED ME, I WAS SHOCKED. I WAS SO SURPRISED THAT I DIDN'T DODGE THE SECOND SLAP. HE RAN OUT OF THE CABIN AFTER THE SECOND HIT AND DIDN'T RETURN FOR HOURS. EVEN AFTER THE ABUSE, I WAS STILL WORRIED SICK ABOUT HIM. I SAT ON THE COUCH IN THE LIVING ROOM, HOLDING MY MOTHER'S FAVORITE WOOL BLANKET AGAINST MY BODY AS I WAITED FOR HIM TO COME HOME. WHEN HE ENTERED THE CABIN, HE SPENT AN HOUR BEGGING FOR MY FORGIVENESS. I HAD NO CHOICE. WE MADE LOVE FOR HOURS AND LAID ON THE RUG IN FRONT OF THE FIREPLACE, TALKING UNTIL THE SUN CAME UP. JUST LIKE WE DID WHEN I WAS STILL IN HIGH SCHOOL.

HE ONLY GOT WORSE AS TIME WENT ON. I NOTICED HE WOULD CHANGE LITTLE THINGS ABOUT THE CABIN. THINGS HE PROBABLY THOUGHT I WOULDN'T SEE. WHEN I'D CONFRONT HIM, HE'D BLOW A GASKET. I LEARNED



TO FEAR HIM. THE CABIN TURNED INTO HIS HOME. THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT HERE OF MY MOTHER'S. HE SLOWLY MOVED HER OUT. THERE WAS NOTHING I COULD SAY TO STOP HIM. HE WAS SCARY IF I TRIED TO SAY ANYTHING.

MY HEART POUNDED IN MY CHEST AS I HEARD HIS BOOTS STOMPING UP THE WOODEN PORCH STEPS. HE WAS IN A BAD MOOD TODAY. HIS ATTENTION ZEROED IN ON ME AS SOON AS HE BURST THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR. HE SAID NOTHING AS HE LEAPED AT ME IN A SUDDEN FIT OF RAGE. A SCREAM LEFT MY THROAT AS HIS HUGE FIST MET THE SIDE OF MY HEAD.

I DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO DEFEND MYSELF. PAIN EXPLODED IN MY HEAD AND I FELL OFF THE COUCH, LANDING HARD ON THE RUG IN FRONT OF THE FIREPLACE. THE SAME SPOT HE USED TO LOVE ME ON. MY FINGERS ABSENTMINDEDLY FIDDLED WITH THE FIBERS OF THE RUG EVEN AS HE LEAPED OVER MY BODY AND BEGAN PUNCHING AND KICKING. FOR THE LONGEST MOMENT I FELT BLINDING PAIN. IT WAS THE MOST INTENSE PAIN I'VE EVER FELT AND I COULDN'T EVEN CRY OUT IN MISERY. BUT THE PAIN SOON FADED AWAY AND I WENT NUMB. I WAS NUMB TO EVERYTHING. I KNEW THIS WAS IT. HE WOULD FINALLY DO IT. SOMETHING MADE HIM SO ANGRY THAT HE WILL FINALLY DO SOMETHING THERE WAS NO COMING BACK FROM.

THE LAST THING I SAW WAS MY HUSBAND'S RAGE-FILLED FACE AND I REMEMBERED THINKING HE USED TO BE SO DAMN BEAUTIFUL BEFORE I FADED AWAY INTO DARKNESS.



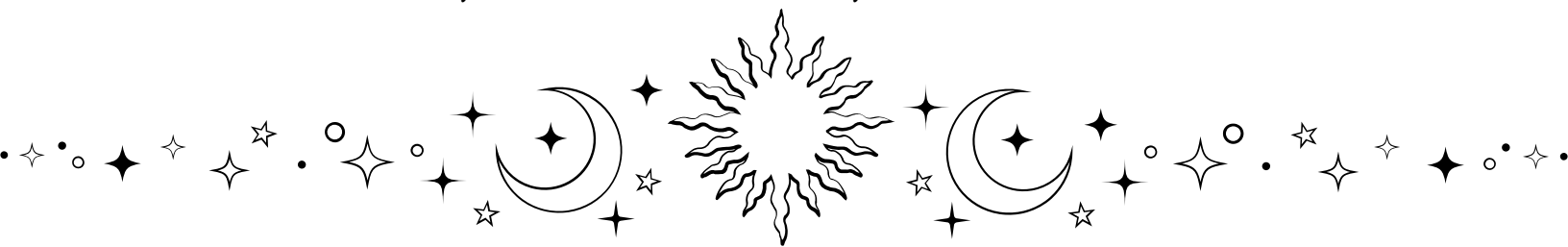
FOR SOME CONTEXT, I WROTE THIS LITTLE STORY FOR MY FICTION WRITING CLASS. THE ASSIGNMENT WAS THAT THE MAIN CHARACTER COMMITTED A MURDER AND WE HAD TO DESCRIBE HOW HE SAW THE WORLD AFTER THE CRIME WITHOUT ACTUALLY ADMITTING WHAT HE DID. THIS IS THE DIRECTION I WENT WITH IT.

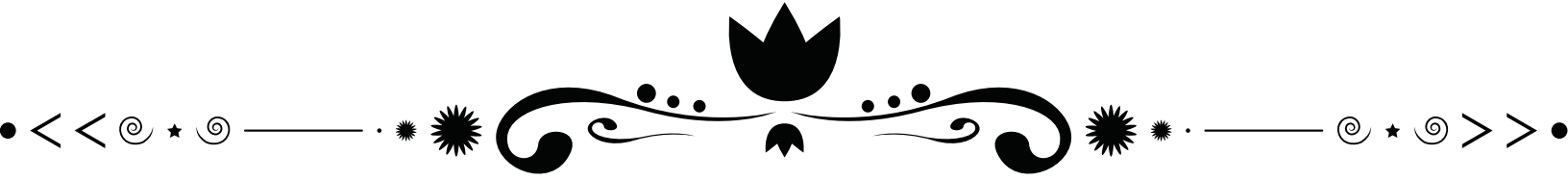
SHROUDED IN DARKNESS

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY. THE SUN WAS SHINING WITH ONLY A FEW PUFFY WHITE CLOUDS IN THE SKY. THERE WAS A COOL BREEZE THAT RUSTLED THROUGH THE TREES SURROUNDING LAKE HUDSON. THE WATER WAS STILL AND SPARKLING IN THE SUNLIGHT. IT PROVIDED A HINT OF COOLNESS ON A SEEMINGLY HOT DAY. BIRDS FLITTED FROM TREE TO TREE, WHISTLING HAPPY TUNES WITHOUT A CARE IN THE WORLD. BECAUSE THEY REALLY DIDN'T HAVE A CARE IN THE WORLD, DID THEY?

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY. YET THE WORLD SEEMED SO BLEAK AND DARK. A SMALL DOCK PROTRUDED FROM THE ROCKY BEACH. A SINGLE, SMALL FISHING BOAT WAS TIED TO THE END OF THE DOCK ON THE LEFT SIDE. A YOUNG MAN IN HIS MID-TWENTIES SAT AT THE EDGE OF THE DOCK WITH HIS BARE FEET DANGLING ABOVE THE WATER. HIS TOES BARELY DIPPED BELOW THE LIQUID SURFACE BEFORE HE YANKED HIS FEET UP WITH A SMALL HISS. THE WATER CHILLED HIS SKIN A LITTLE TOO MUCH. HE DID THIS OVER AND OVER, LEAVING HIS FEET UNDERWATER LONGER EACH TIME.

HE WAS AN ATTRACTIVE YOUNG MAN. HIS DARK BROWN HAIR WAS THICK AND WAVY, JUST BARELY REACHING HIS SHOULDERS. THICK EYEBROWS SLANTED ABOVE DARK BLUE EYES. HE HAD FULL LIPS AND A SQUARE JAW THAT WAS CURRENTLY CLENCHED TIGHT. HE HAD TO BE OVER SIX FEET TALL WITH BROAD SHOULDERS AND A BODY THAT CLEARLY SAID HE WORKED OUT OFTEN. HE WOULD BE EVEN MORE ATTRACTIVE IF HE SMILED. BUT THERE WAS NOTHING THAT COULD MAKE HIM SMILE. NOT THE SINGING BIRDS, OR THE COOL BREEZE, OR THE CALM WATER, OR THE SCENT OF NATURE.





IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY. YET THE WORLD WAS SHROUDED IN DARKNESS. HE LEANED BACK ON THE DOCK A LITTLE, RESTING HIS PALMS ON THE WOOD AS HE TURNED HIS FACE TOWARDS THE SUN, CLOSING HIS EYES AND BREATHING DEEPLY. HIS EYES SNAPPED OPEN AS MEMORIES FILTERED THROUGH HIS THOUGHTS. PAINFUL MEMORIES. THOUGHTS HE HAD NO BUSINESS THINKING, YET COULDN'T SEEM TO MAKE THEM GO AWAY. WHAT IF THE DAY MATCHED HIS MOOD? WHY MUST EVERYONE ELSE BE HAPPY AND CARRY ON WITH THEIR LIVES AS IF NOTHING HAPPENED? HOW DARE THE WORLD KEEP SPINNING? HE WAS STUCK IN A DAZE. A NEVER-ENDING LOOP OF HEARTBREAK AND HORRIFYING GUILT. AND HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO ESCAPE.

HE KICKED HIS FEET, SPLASHING THE WATER AND STARTLING A FEW FISH WHO WERE BRAVE ENOUGH TO GET THAT CLOSE TO HIM. THE WATER SOAKED THE BOTTOM OF HIS GRAY JOGGERS BUT HE CONTINUED SPLASHING. HE WAS TIRED. HIS STOMACH TURNED AS HE STARED AT HIS SURROUNDINGS. THE SUN WAS TOO BRIGHT, YET SEEMED DULL. THE TREES WERE TALL AND PROVIDED A SENSE OF SHADE THAT SEEMED TOO DARK. THE LAKE WAS BLACK. AT LEAST IT LOOKED BLACK TO HIM. IT LOOKED LIKE AN ABYSS OF DARKNESS.

A WELL THAT WENT ON FOREVER. AS HE STARED INTO THE WATER, HE CAME TO A DECISION. AND SUDDENLY IT WAS TOO QUIET. THE BIRDS STOPPED SINGING. HIS DESOLATE WORLD WAS COMPLETE.

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY. A DARK, BEAUTIFUL DAY THAT WOULD SOON END. HE PUSHED HIMSELF TO HIS FEET AND LEANED OVER THE EDGE OF THE DOCK JUST A LITTLE, STARING DEEPER INTO THE MURKY WATER. THIS SEEMED LIKE A PERFECT SPOT. HE TURNED TO HIS SIDE WHERE A BAG OF HEAVY WEIGHTS AND A ROPE LAY UNTOUCHED. WITH SWIFT MOVEMENTS, HE TIED THE ROPE AROUND HIS WAIST IN A KNOT THAT COULD NOT BE UNDONE. HE ATTACHED THE END OF THE ROPE TO THE BAG OF WEIGHTS AND MOVED BACK TO THE EDGE OF THE DOCK. WITH ONE LAST GLANCE AROUND AT THE BRIGHT WORLD AROUND HIM, HE WAS SATISFIED WITH WHAT HE SAW. IT WAS A QUIET WORLD. A SILENT ONE.

IT WAS A DARK DAY. A DESOLATE WORLD. A DAY THAT WAS ENDING. WITH THOSE FINAL THOUGHTS, HE LET OUT A HEAVY SIGH AND STEPPED OFF THE EDGE OF THE DOCK, DISAPPEARING INTO THE WATER FOREVER.

AND AS HE VANISHED FROM SIGHT, THE BIRDS BEGAN TO SING AGAIN.



Found Family

I remember the day I found out I had a younger brother. I was fifteen years old and a sophomore in high school. My sixteen-year-old brother was my biological brother. We were adopted together into the same family. It was a closed adoption, so we knew nothing about our biological family. That was how we grew up and we were fine with it.

Until everything changed.

We came home from school one day in the Spring to find our mom on the front porch, crying. She was on the phone with someone. She hung up when she saw us.

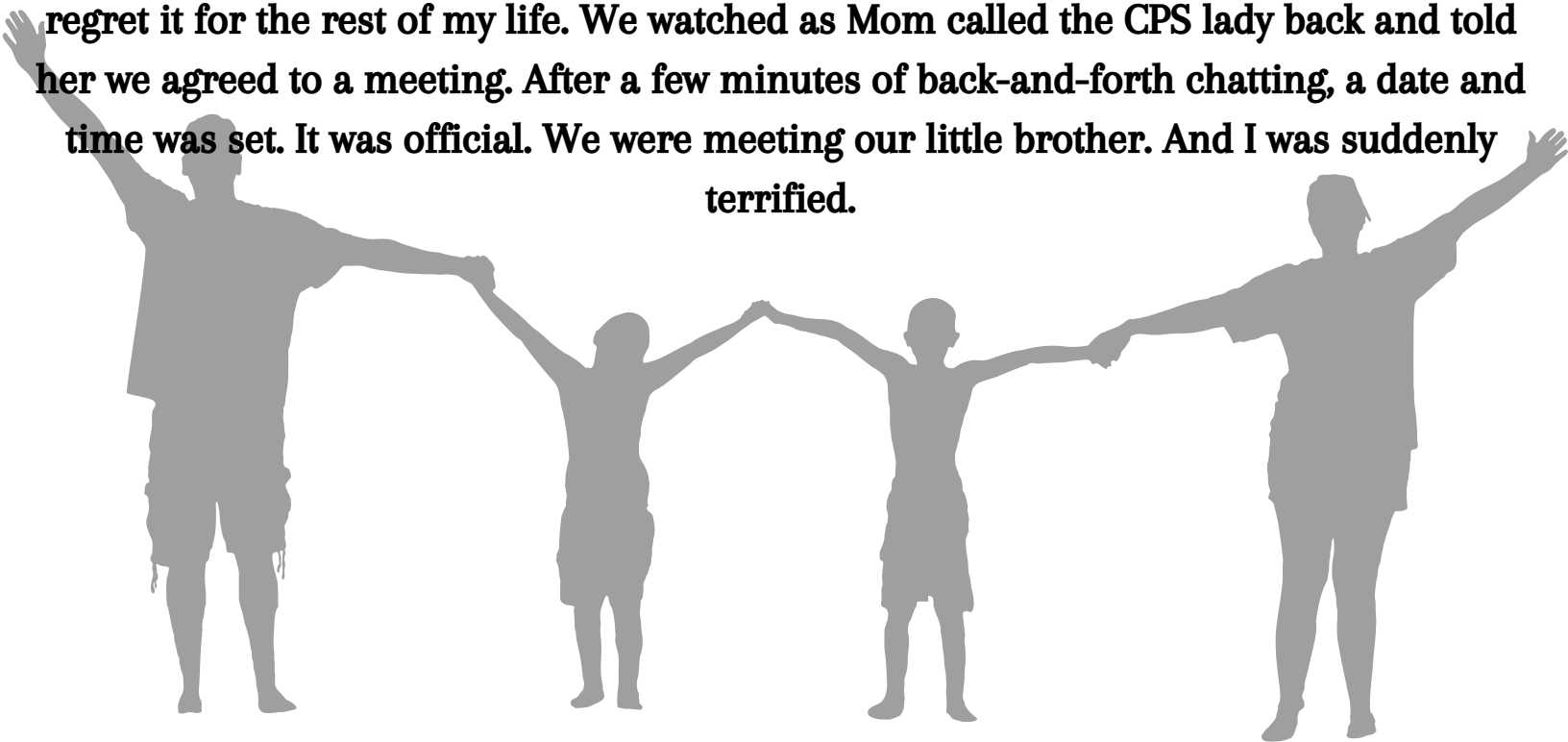
“I need to tell you something,” she said, wiping the moisture from her face. “CPS just called me. They asked me if we knew anything about your biological family.” My heart began racing in my chest as she continued talking. “When I said no, the woman on the phone told me you have a younger brother who needs an emergency foster placement. His name is Austin. He’s twelve. She asked if we’d like to meet him.” She fell silent and watched us digest this information.

I wasn’t sure how my older brother, Dwayne, was taking the news, but I felt light-headed. I was feeling so many emotions. Excitement, disbelief, and fear warred with each other to be the dominant emotion. Fear was winning.

“What do you think?” Mom asked. “Do you want to meet him?”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt,” Dwayne shrugged, sounding very unsure of himself.

“Yes,” I answered. “I’d like to meet him.” I knew if we didn’t take the chance, I would regret it for the rest of my life. We watched as Mom called the CPS lady back and told her we agreed to a meeting. After a few minutes of back-and-forth chatting, a date and time was set. It was official. We were meeting our little brother. And I was suddenly terrified.



That Friday, we were released from school early, only missing the last class of the day. It took about an hour to drive to Valley of the Moon Children's Home. It was a gorgeous Spring Day. The sun was high in the sky. There was a nice breeze flowing around us. Ironically, the children's home was right across the street from the local prison. I wouldn't have noticed if Dwayne hadn't pointed it out.

We met up with Lucinda, Austin's social worker, in the parking lot of the home. My heart began racing even more and I was afraid I would start hyperventilating as we got closer to the entrance.

The walk from the parking lot to the front door of Valley of the Moon Children's Center seemed to take forever. My breath continued to pick up the closer we got. My older brother, Dwayne, shot me a side-eyed glance with a raised eyebrow, silently checking to see if I was okay. I nodded slightly in response, but that didn't stop me from nearly hyperventilating. A social worker named Lucinda was leading us inside the building. She turned to me as we finally entered the meeting room.

"Are you okay?" she asked, concerned.

"Yep," I answered a little breathlessly. My head jerked into a nod. She looked skeptical but took my answer for the truth.

"He'll be down in a minute," she assured us. "He's very excited to meet you all."

The room descended into silence. The quiet felt thick and heavy as we waited, full of uncertainty. I glanced around the meeting room. It looked like a family waiting room at a doctor's office. Magazines littered the rectangular wooden coffee table in front of a cloth-covered couch. A couple of leather chairs sat scattered across the table. A small square table was in the corner of the room with a small box of blocks and Legos sitting on it. Before I could continue studying the room, a buzzer sounded, and a metal door across from the wooden door we came through swung open. My breath hitched when a young boy, twelve years old, stepped through.



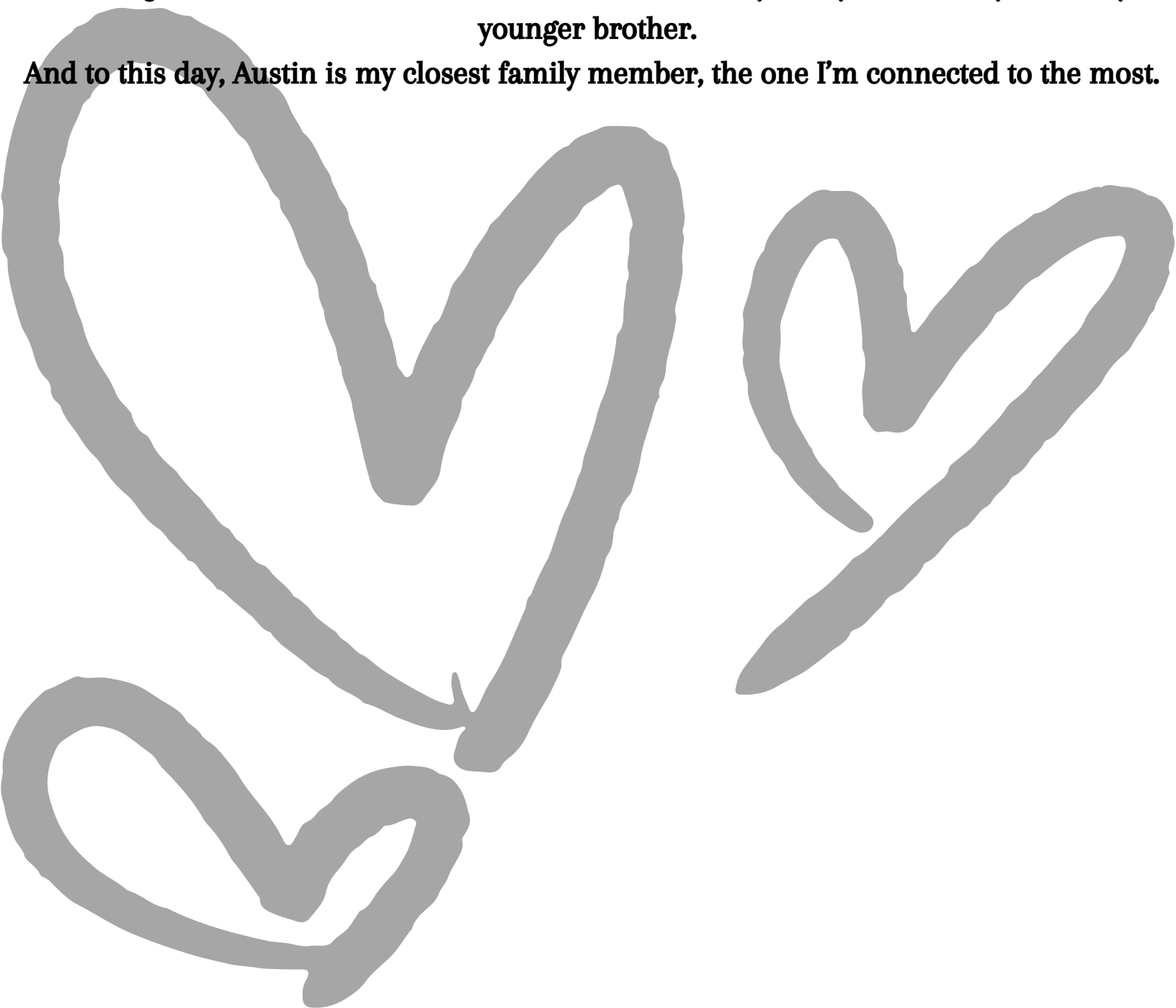
I couldn't stop staring at him. This moment felt surreal.

"You're definitely the missing link," Mom's voice suddenly broke the silence. Her gaze darted back and forth between Dwayne, the newcomer, and me. "Dwayne and Britany don't look much alike, but you bring the three of you together."

Lucinda stepped forward with a gentle smile. "Austin, meet your siblings," she said softly. "Dwayne, Britany, this is your younger brother, Austin."

The moment Austin smiled at us and greeted us, I formed a connection with him. We bonded almost instantly. We chatted and laughed, getting to know each other. After several minutes of hanging out, Mom and Lucinda thought it might be fun to go to a nearby park to spend some more time with each other. So, we played basketball together and laughed and chatted some more. It was the best day of my life; the day I met my younger brother.

And to this day, Austin is my closest family member, the one I'm connected to the most.





Unfriended Movie Scene

I stare at the Skype message as my friends fall silent on their ends. Everyone is staring intently at their computer screens. They see the same message I do and are wondering how to respond.

Tonight, we're going to play a game. – billie227

I can see Adam starting to get worked up again. He shakes his head violently and begins pacing in his living room. Jess can't stop crying and seems to be frozen with fear. My boyfriend, Mitchie, says nothing as he glares into his laptop. I'm not sure what to do. I'm about to respond when another message pops up.

We're going to play Never Have I Ever. – billie227

Jess twitches in her seat and sits up a little straighter. Her voice comes through the speaker of my laptop, timidly. "Like the drinking game?"

Exactly. But instead of the loser drinking, the loser is going to die. – billie227

Is everyone ready? – billie227

Adam swears as he plops back down in his seat and Jess lets out a short cry. My heart begins to race with terror. But there's one thing that crosses my mind. "Wait, how do you play?" I ask quickly. "How do you play?"

Will someone explain the rules to Blair? – billie227

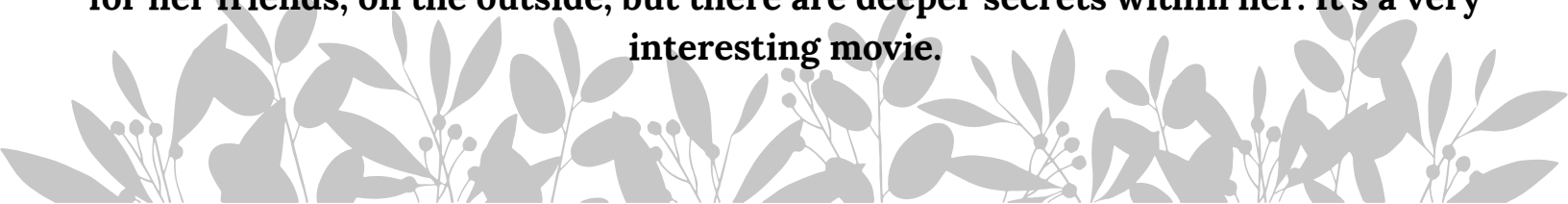
Jess breaks the silence to quickly explain the game to me, but it confuses me even more, so I demand to know why this cyberstalker is doing this to us. That's when I learned the disturbing truth. The stalker is here for revenge because of a video that was uploaded a while ago resulting in a classmate's suicide. I admit it was a horrible video, but we don't deserve to die over it!! We had nothing to do with that after all!!

Jess continues to cry and begins shaking her head and saying no over and over. Another message pops up.

Jess, would you rather die right now? – billie227

I decided for all of us because I refuse to watch any more of my friends die. We'll play the game for now, but we won't go down without a fight.

The movie scene I chose to write was from Unfriended. It's one of my favorite horror movies that came out several years ago. The point of this scene is the beginning of the end for the rest of the main character's friends. The stalker is trying to turn them against each other and reveal their secrets with this game as a revenge tactic for being the cause of the student's suicide. The main character seems like a good person, strong and caring for her friends, on the outside, but there are deeper secrets within her. It's a very interesting movie.



LOVE BREAKS FREE

“WHERE WERE YOU LAST NIGHT?” FATHER’S DEEP VOICE ECHOES THROUGH THE DIMLY LIT LIVING ROOM AS I SLIP THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR, TRYING TO REMAIN UNDETECTED.

I FREEZE AT THE FOOT OF THE STAIRS, MY LEFT HAND GRIPPING THE BANISTER SO TIGHTLY THAT MY KNUCKLES TURN WHITE. I KEEP MY GAZE FIRMLY PLANTED ON THE FLOOR. MY HEART RACES IN MY CHEST. I HATE THE EFFECT HE HAS ON ME. THE FEAR THAT THREATENS TO CHOKE ME EVERY TIME I’M IN HIS PRESENCE. “OUT,” I ANSWER, TRYING TO SOUND FLIPPANT. THE SHAKINESS IN MY VOICE BETRAYS MY EMOTIONS. “OUT,” HE REPEATS FLATLY. HE SITS IN HIS FAVORITE ARMCHAIR IN THE CORNER OF THE LIVING ROOM, FACING THE FOYER. HIS BODY HIDES IN THE SHADOWS OF THE ROOM. A SMALL LAMP ON A LITTLE GLASS TABLE NEXT TO THE COUCH IS ON. I DON’T HEAR HIM RISE, BUT A SHIFT IN HIS INTENSE ENERGY TELLS ME HE’S COMING CLOSER. “I KNOW WHERE YOU WERE.” HIS VOICE DROPS TO A MENACING WHISPER.

A SHIVER TRAVELS UP AND DOWN MY SPINE BUT I REMAIN STIFF, TRYING TO HIDE THE ANXIETY RISING IN ME. “THEN WHY DID YOU ASK?” I DEMAND.

FATHER STOPS BEHIND ME. “I WANTED TO HEAR WHAT YOU’D SAY,” HE ANSWERS QUIETLY. “YOU’RE NOT TO SEE THAT BOY AGAIN, JADIS. YOU KNOW THE RULES OF THE COVEN. WOLF SHIFTERS ARE OUR SWORN ENEMY. WE STAY AWAY FROM THEM.” I SPIN AROUND TO FACE HIM. HIS BLACK EYES ARE AN ABYSS OF DARKNESS AND CRUELTY, BUT I FORCE MYSELF TO MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT. “I UNDERSTAND YOU HAVE ISSUES WITH THEM AFTER WHAT THAT ROGUE DID TO MOTHER,” I SAY AS CALMLY AS I CAN. “BUT NOT ALL OF THEM ARE BAD. IT ISN’T FAIR TO HOLD ONTO A GRUDGE LIKE THIS.”

FATHER’S EYES NARROW AND HIS HAND SNAPS FORWARD IN A BLUR, WRAPPING AROUND MY THROAT. HE SQUEEZES ENOUGH TO CUT OFF MY OXYGEN AND MY BODY STILLS, RECOGNIZING THE GRASP OF A PREDATOR. “WE DO NOT SPEAK OF YOUR MOTHER,” HE HISSES. “EVER. YOU KNOW THE RULES AND YOU CHOSE TO BREAK THEM. I FORBID YOU FROM SEEING THAT BOY AGAIN. NOW GO TO YOUR ROOM AND REMAIN THERE UNTIL I CALL FOR YOU.” HE SQUEEZES HARDER FOR A SECOND BEFORE SHOVING ME AWAY WITH ENOUGH FORCE TO KNOCK ME OVER.



I FALL ONTO MY BACK, LANDING PAINFULLY ON THE EDGE OF THE STAIRS. WITH A BURST OF WIND, HE USES HIS VAMPIRE SPEED TO DISAPPEAR. I SIT ON THE STEP FOR A SECOND, CATCHING MY BREATH AND RUBBING MY NECK. IT WILL NO DOUBT LEAVE A BRUISE. TEARS THREATEN TO FALL AS I HURRY UP TO MY ROOM WHERE I COLLAPSE ON MY BED. I'M OLDER THAN THE OLDEST HUMAN, YET MY FATHER TREATS ME LIKE A CHILD. AS IF I WAS STILL A BABY VAMP.

I SUPPOSE I CAN'T REALLY BLAME HIM FOR HIS ACTIONS. I UNDERSTAND WHERE HIS ANGER COMES FROM. I WAS JUST A LITTLE FLEDGLING VAMP WHEN A ROGUE ATTACKED MY MOTHER. WE WERE IN THE WOODS BEHIND BLACKTHORNE MANOR WHEN THE ROGUE CAME OUT OF NOWHERE. MY MOTHER PUSHED ME OUT OF THE WAY, PROTECTING ME. SHE WAS MAULED TO DEATH WHILE I RAN TO GET HELP. WATCHING MY FATHER TEAR THE ROGUE APART WAS BOTH SATISFYING AND TERRIFYING. HE BECAME A DIFFERENT MAN AFTER THAT. HE WAS THE VAMPIRE CLAN LORD, THE LEADER OF THE HALE COVEN. UP UNTIL THEN, HE WAS A VERY FAIR AND KIND LEADER. AFTER MOTHER'S DEATH, HE BECAME CONTROLLING AND CRUEL. NO ONE WAS SAFE FROM HIS IRE.

I NEVER REALLY HAD A PROBLEM WITH OBEYING HIS RULES BEFORE. I NEVER THOUGHT THEY WERE UNREASONABLE. UNTIL I MET HIM. KALIX JONES. THE ALPHA OF THE ASHE VALLEY PACK. HE WAS MY FATED MATE, THE ONE PERSON THAT I WAS MEANT TO BE WITH. HE WAS EVERYTHING I EVER WANTED IN A MATE. IT WASN'T UNHEARD OF FOR THE FATES TO PAIR A COUPLE FROM TWO DIFFERENT SUPERNATURAL FACTIONS. BUT I KNEW MY FATHER WOULD FLIP HIS SHIT. SO WE KEPT OUR RELATIONSHIP HIDDEN FOR WEEKS. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, I DON'T CARE ABOUT MY FATHER'S RULES.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, I WANT TO BREAK FREE OF HIS CONTROL AND LEADERSHIP.



MY HEAD TURNS TO THE WINDOW AS I HEAR A MOURNFUL HOWL. MY HEART SKIPS A BEAT. IT ISN'T THE HOWL OF MY MATE, BUT IT IS A CRY FOR HELP. AND I SUDDENLY KNOW WHO'S RESPONSIBLE. ANGER FILLS ME AS I RIP OPEN MY BEDROOM WINDOW AND LEAP OUT, LANDING SOFTLY ON MY FEET. I ZIP INTO THE WOODS, USING MY VAMPIRE SPEED. I REACH THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE PACKLANDS WHERE A WOLF LIES IN A POOL OF BLOOD, ITS GUTS SPILLING FROM A DEADLY WOUND IN THE BELLY. THE STENCH IS AWFUL AND I SLAP A HAND OVER MY MOUTH AND NOSE TO KEEP FROM LOSING MY LAST MEAL. TEARS SLIP FROM MY EYES. THIS IS GOING TO DEVASTATE MY MATE. IT HAS MY FATHER'S MARK ON IT, BUT HIS SCENT IS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND. HE COVERED HIS TRACKS WELL. A TWIG CRACKING IS THE ONLY WARNING I GET BEFORE THREE LARGE WOLVES SUDDENLY BURST FROM THE TREES, ENTERING THE CLEARING AND CIRCLING ME AND THE BODY. THEY SNAP, SNARL, AND GROWL AT ME BEFORE THE BIGGER ONE GROWLS AT THE OTHER TWO, EFFECTIVELY SHUTTING THEM UP. HE TURNS AND TROTS, HIDING BACK IN THE TREES AS HE SHIFTS INTO HIS HUMAN FORM. THE OTHER TWO WOLVES WATCH ME WARILY, KEEPING GUARD.


ALEC SAWYER, MY MATE'S BETA, STEPS BACK INTO VIEW WEARING A PAIR OF JEANS.

"WHAT HAPPENED, JADIS?" HE ASKS, CONCERNED.

I HESITATE, BUT WHY? WHY SHOULD I CARE IF I BETRAY MY FATHER TO THE WOLVES? AT THAT MOMENT, I MAKE MY CHOICE. MY FATHER NO LONGER HAS MY LOYALTY. "MY FATHER," I SAY IN A CLEAR VOICE. "HE FOUND OUT ABOUT MY MATING WITH KALIX. TO SAY HE WASN'T HAPPY IS AN UNDERSTATEMENT. I'M SO SORRY." MY VOICE CRACKS ON THE LAST WORDS.

ALEC FROWNS. "DOES YOUR FATHER WANT A WAR?" HE DEMANDS HARSHLY.

"I DON'T KNOW ANYMORE," I WHISPER. I REALIZE IT'S TRUE. I REALLY DON'T KNOW MY FATHER ANYMORE OR WHAT HE WANTS. I CAN'T LET HIM CONTINUE HURTING THE WOLVES. "I HAVE TO GO BACK. I HAVE TO GET HIM TO STOP. TELL KALIX I'M SORRY."



I TURN AND RUN BEFORE THEY CAN PROTEST OR CALL ME BACK. MY FATHER IS BACK AT BLACKTHORNE MANOR BY THE TIME I REACH MY BEDROOM WINDOW. I CAN FEEL HIS ENERGY THROUGHOUT THE MANSION. I SAIL BACK THROUGH MY OPEN WINDOW, LANDING ON MY SOFT CARPET WITH A LIGHT THUD.

“YOU DISOBEYED ME AGAIN,” FATHER SAYS.

I FLINCH IN SURPRISE. HOW DID I NOT SENSE HIS PRESENCE IN MY ROOM? HE SITS ON THE EDGE OF MY BED, HOLDING MY DIARY IN HIS HAND. HIS EYES SCAN THE PAGES SLOWLY. “I DIDN’T GO MEET HIM,” I PROTEST WEAKLY.

FATHER KEEPS HIS EYES ON THE PAGES OF THE NOTEBOOK. “BUT YOU STILL RAN TO THE WOLVES,” HE REPLIES. HIS TONE IS COLD ENOUGH TO FREEZE THE AIR. “AND THIS BOOK HOLDS SOME INTERESTING INFORMATION.” HE FINALLY GLANCES UP AT ME, HIS GAZE FRIGID.

I TRY TO SWALLOW AROUND THE SUDDENLY LARGE LUMP IN MY THROAT. MY LIPS OPEN AND CLOSE SEVERAL TIMES, BUT I CAN’T SEEM TO MAKE A NOISE OR SAY A WORD. FEAR LEAVES ME FROZEN IN PLACE. I WATCH HIM STAND AND GLIDE OVER TO ME. HE GRABS MY WRIST AND SLAPS A SILVER MANACLE AROUND IT, LOCKING IT FIRMLY IN PLACE. I GROAN, INSTANTLY FEELING MY VAMPIRE POWER DRAIN AWAY, LEAVING ME WEAK AND TIRED. IS THIS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE HUMAN? “IT SEEMS I CAN’T TRUST MY OWN DAUGHTER,” FATHER SNEERS. “SO I GUESS I HAVE TO TAKE MATTERS INTO MY OWN HANDS. YOU’RE GROUNDED UNTIL I CAN TAKE CARE OF THIS LITTLE PROBLEM PERMANENTLY.”

HIS WORDS CAUSE A SHOCK TO TRAVEL THROUGH MY BODY. WHAT DOES HE MEAN BY THAT? DOES HE PLAN TO KILL MY MATE WHILE I’M SITTING HERE POWERLESS? HE GRABS MY ARM IN A VICELIKE GRIP AND DRAGS ME DOWN THE STAIRS AND TOWARDS THE BASEMENT. I DIG MY FEET INTO THE CARPET IN AN ATTEMPT TO STOP HIM, BUT MY NEWLY FOUNDED WEAK STATE IS NO MATCH FOR HIS STRENGTH. THE BASEMENT IS A CAGE WHERE WE LOCK NEW FLEDGLINGS WHO CAN’T CONTROL THEIR BLOODLUST. IT HASN’T BEEN USED SINCE MOTHER WAS KILLED. THE BASEMENT DOOR IS METAL AND LINED WITH SILVER. THE WALLS OF THE BASEMENT HAVE SILVER MIXED IN IT. IT’S THE PERFECT PRISON. FATHER DOESN’T HESITATE AS HE OPENS THE DOOR AND TOSSES ME DOWN THE STEPS.

I LAND ON THE MUSTY FLOOR WITH A GRUNT, PAIN JARRING MY SPINE. “FATHER, PLEASE!” I CRY IN A HOARSE VOICE.

“I’M GOING TO PAY YOUR MATE A VISIT,” FATHER SAYS WITH A CRUEL CHUCKLE. THEN HE’S GONE, SLAMMING THE DOOR BEHIND HIM.

I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG I'M IN THE BASEMENT, BUT IT SEEMS LIKE DAYS HAVE PASSED. I CAN FEEL MY HUNGER REACHING A CRESCENDO. VAMPIRES CAN GO WEEKS, SOMETIMES MONTHS, WITHOUT BLOOD, BUT WITH THE SILVER ON MY WRIST AND SURROUNDING ME, I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG I CAN LAST WITHOUT NUTRITION. I HAVEN'T MOVED FROM MY SPOT ON THE FLOOR EXCEPT TO CHANGE POSITION WHEN I GET TOO UNCOMFORTABLE.

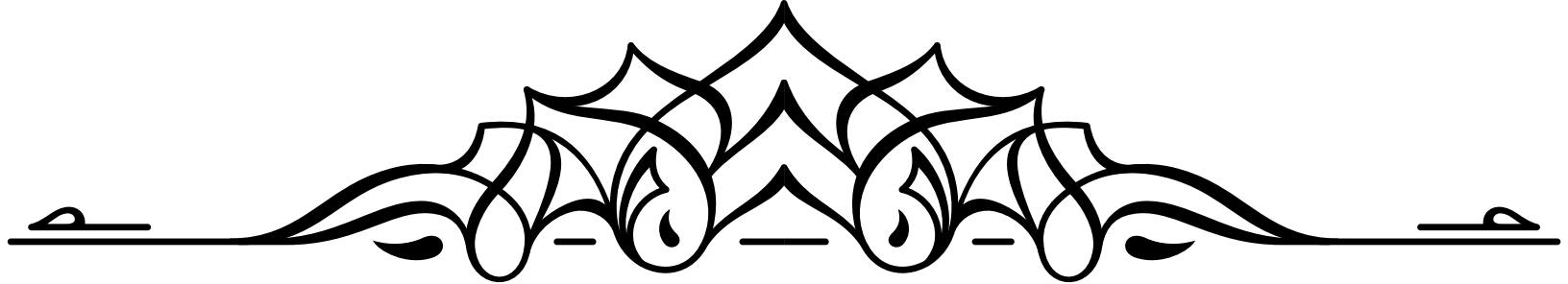
IT'S PITCH BLACK WITH NO WINDOWS. THE SILVER HAS DIMMED MY SENSES SO I CAN HARDLY SEE ANYTHING. IT FEELS LIKE I'M LOST IN A BLACK WELL, SWIMMING IN NOTHING WITH NO ESCAPE. AND THEN THE DOOR SWINGS OPEN AND MY SAVIOR COMES TO MY RESCUE.

I THINK I'M DREAMING WHEN KALIX RUSHES DOWN THE STEPS AND DROPS TO HIS KNEES BESIDE ME. "OH BABY," HE BREATHES. "THANK THE GODS I FOUND YOU. YOUR HOUSE IS SO BIG I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD. WE HAVE TO HURRY. MY PACK IS KEEPING YOUR FATHER AND COVEN OCCUPIED, GIVING US TIME TO GET YOU OUT OF HERE."

"ARE YOU REAL?" I ASK, DARING TO HOPE.

HE CHUCKLES SADLY AND TUCKS A STRAY LOCK OF DARK HAIR BEHIND MY EAR. "YEAH, SWEETHEART, I'M REAL," HE SAYS SOFTLY. "NOW LET'S GET YOU OUT OF HERE." HE SLIDES A KEY OUT OF HIS POCKET AND UNLOCKS THE CHAIN ON MY WRIST. SLIDING HIS POWERFUL ARMS UNDER MY BODY, HE LIFTS ME UP AND HURRIES UP THE STAIRS AND OUT OF THE BASEMENT.

MY VAMPIRE POWER RUSHES INTO MY BODY INSTANTLY, ALLOWING ME TO RELAX SLIGHTLY. WITH THE POWER COMES MY HUNGER AND MY FANGS SLIP OUT OF MY GUMS, MY MOUTH WATERING AND MY STOMACH RUMBLING.



“FEED QUICKLY,” KALIX SAYS, OFFERING ME HIS WRIST. “YOU NEED YOUR STRENGTH.”

I LATCH ONTO HIS ARM, MY FANGS EASILY BREAKING HIS SKIN. I GULP DOWN HIS SWEET AND METALLIC BLOOD GREEDILY. “AS I SAID, MY PACK IS DISTRACTING YOUR FATHER FOR THE TIME BEING. IT WILL BE ENOUGH TIME TO PACK YOUR SHIT AND RUN. WE’RE LEAVING THIS TOWN AND OUR FAMILIES. WE’RE GOING TO DISAPPEAR AND GO SOMEWHERE NO ONE WILL FIND US.”

I PULL AWAY FROM HIS WRIST, LICKING THE SKIN TO HEAL THE BITE. “BUT YOU’RE THE ALPHA,” I ARGUE.

HE SHRUGS. “ALEC IS MORE THAN CAPABLE OF TAKING OVER,” HE REPLIES. “I WON’T EVER PUT YOU IN THE POSITION TO BE IMPRISONED LIKE THIS AGAIN. NO ARGUING. WE HAVE TO GO.”

I FOLLOW HIM UP TO MY ROOM AND WE PACK AS MUCH AS WE CAN INTO A DUFFLE BAG. WE FINISH JUST AS WE HEAR THE FRONT DOOR OPEN AND THE SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS RUNNING AS WELL AS SEVERAL VOICES CHATTERING. MY BREATH HITCHES AS FEAR FILLS ME AGAIN. I WON’T BE A CAPTIVE AGAIN. WE MAKE NO NOISE AS WE LEAP OUT OF MY BEDROOM WINDOW AND HEAD INTO THE WOODS. AS WE RUN, I HEAR MY FATHER’S RAGE-FILLED ROAR. WE REACH THE PACK LANDS WHERE ALEC STANDS ON THE ROAD NEXT TO AN SUV AND ANOTHER DUFFLE BAG AT HIS FEET.

“YOUR BAG, KAL,” HE STATES. “NO ONE CAN TRACK THE VEHICLE. THE ASSHOLE VAMPIRE WON’T BE ABLE TO FIND YOU. AND NEITHER WILL ANYONE IN THIS PACK.” HE HESITATES FOR A SECOND BEFORE EMBRACING MY MATE FIRMLY. “YOU’VE BEEN A GREAT ALPHA AND FRIEND. I’M OVER THE MOON THAT YOU FOUND YOUR MATE. DON’T WORRY ABOUT US. WE’LL BE FINE. JUST BE HAPPY AND ENJOY YOUR LIVES TOGETHER.”

“THANK YOU,” I SAY SERIOUSLY. WE PUT OUR BAGS IN THE TRUNK AND CLIMB INTO THE VEHICLE. I WATCH ALEC DISAPPEAR IN THE MIRROR AS WE DRIVE OFF. AS WE LEAVE TOWN, I FINALLY ALLOW MYSELF TO RELAX. FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE MY MOTHER DIED, I’M FREE. FREE TO LIVE AND FREE TO LOVE.

