

# Light Infraction

## Quinn Grzywinski

---

### Chapter 1 | The Uneasy Sun

“Every single night it feels like the same dream.

In reality, the details are different, but by the time I’m awake, shaking in bed with my arms hugged around my waist, those details hardly seem to matter. Sometimes, everything seems tilted to the side as if I’m looking at the scene through a knocked over camera, or sometimes, it’s like the world is entirely one color: red like blood or blinding yellow like the sun. Occasionally, I even feel like I am aware of the fact that I’m dreaming. When this happens, I try to open my mouth, even if I’m not sure what I want to do. I might want to scream because I know what happens next, what always happens next. I might want to cry, like I can’t stand being here again. Or maybe, I want to laugh, to laugh at this absurd situation. No matter what happens first, and no matter what the details are, no matter if I know I’m dreaming or awake, what never changes what happens afterward.

I see a door.

I walk towards it.

If I know I’m asleep, all I feel is a growing discontent in my chest, that builds and builds until it’s like I can’t even breath properly.

If I’m awake, my mind screams at my body, wanting it to stop moving, to turn back and run away. Not once has my body listened.

Either way, I walk towards that door, and stretch out my hand, feeling the cold brass knob burn into my palm, painful, but never painful enough to make me let go.

This is when the door opens.

And I see it against the wall, swinging back and forth.

Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.

If I’m lucky, I jolt awake immediately after that, hours before the sun has risen.

If I’m not, I just watch it sway, for a time that feels like an eternity.

Then I wake up, and I realize my tears feel cold against my cheek.”

~

When Flynn opened the door, it was if the air itself grew colder. He felt it rustled through his long hair, blowing is back across his face, and he shivered as the hair on the back of his neck stood straight up. He

self-consciously ran a hand down the back of his neck, as if to brush the hair back down, or perhaps just to transfer the warmth from his hands to his neck. The change in temperature was not dramatic, in fact, Flynn wasn't entirely sure if he had simply imagined it. All the same, the moment he turned the doorknob and pushed forwards, a chill rocketed through his already stiff body. Maybe it was simply a crack in the wall, or the cold from a room that nobody had entered for a very long time. Maybe it was a warning.

The door creaked loudly on its hinges, the old wooden frame sliding agonizingly slowly to reveal the small room beyond. Bookshelves lined both walls, walls covered in a dented and dusty dark wood paneling that made the room seem darker than it actually was. There was a large window at the far end of the room, on the opposite wall from the door, letting the orange light of the setting sun spill onto a prominently placed wooden table that had a small heater placed on top. It wasn't on for some reason, so Flynn briskly hurried over, flicking a small switch on the side of the heater. The heater coughed to life, and Flynn let out a breath as the hot air poured onto his fingertips, warming his numb fingers. He just stood there for a moment, rubbing his hands together breathing onto them. After a minute or so, he reluctantly left the stream of heat, pulling out the nearest chair and sinking into it. He started taking off his many layers of clothes, first his green nylon jacket, then the gray scarf, laying them absentmindedly on the table. He sat there for a moment, tapping his fingernails on the table and checking his watch. He wasn't early. Everyone else was just late. Not that he blamed them, it had taken him a great deal of willpower to haul himself all the way up to the school through the nail-bitingly cold wind when he didn't even have classes, but he liked to be punctual if nothing else.

His eyes started to wander the room. Besides from his own, four other chairs were arranged around the table. Contrary to his expectations, the room was actually pretty big, it was at least five big steps from where the door was positioned to where the table that Flynn was now sitting. At the very least, it was much larger than club rooms he was used to...

The books that lined the shelves were mostly time-period studies; he supposed that this room had previously been some storage for a history teacher, hastily repurposed for today's event. The only source of light was the now fading sunlight, dying the whole room orange, further announcing the shadows in the corner of the room that the door wasn't placed in, which were so dark that Flynn couldn't quite make out what seemed to be a pile of blankets. No, not a pile of blankets. A blanket perched on a chair. Wait, no. Flynn peered closer, then started. The person sitting in the chair with the blanket in their lap had been sitting so still that he hadn't even noticed them. Flynn rubbed his eyes, then looked again. Nope, there was definitely a person sitting in the corner of the room, a girl he thought, nearly invisible in the shadow. He couldn't make anything much of her appearance, besides a pair of spectacles sitting on the end of her nose, her short hair hanging down messily, a hood thrown over her ears.

Flynn tilted his head to the side. The girl's head followed his movement. He straightened his head back vertically. The girl did the same. Flynn felt a bead of sweat run down his temple. He didn't know what to do in this situation. Why wasn't she saying anything? Why didn't she make her presence known when he had first entered the room? Why was she just staring at him wordlessly?

Flynn coughed. "Hi," he said tentatively, trying to get some kind of conversation going.

The girl still didn't say anything. Maybe she hadn't heard him. "Hi," he said louder, "my name's Flynn."

No response. Maybe she was deaf. He tried to remember bits of sign language his mother had made him learn in third grade because she thought it would build his character. He placed his hand onto the side of his head, and outstretched into an awkward salute, trying to copy the sign for "Hello". The girl tilted her head to the side again.

Okay, maybe she wasn't deaf. Was she foreign, and just couldn't understand anything he was saying? "Hola", he said, butchering the pronunciation. Silence.

"Hallo."

Quiet.

"Ciao."

Crickets.

"Y'el."

The girl's spectacles were reflecting the orange sunlight as they stared mutely at him.

Giving up, Flynn slumped back into his chair. If she wanted to ignore him, that was fine. They would sit here in silence until their fashionably late company decided to show up. He hummed. He tapped his foot on the floor. He silently wished that this awkwardness would end. The girl just wouldn't stop looking at him, her bright orange spectacles never leaving his face. His tapping became a little more loud and rapid. If she had something to say, she should just come out with it. He was seriously beginning to wonder if he was supposed to know her from somewhere, and she was just waiting for him to acknowledge their relationship. Irritably, Flynn racked his mind, trying to sort through the countless faces in his head that all seemed to mix together. If they had met, he didn't remember. So... "Look," Flynn said, putting a slight edge on his voice this time, "if there's something you want to say, please just say it."

The sun was so low and the orange light so dim that Flynn could hardly even make out the girl's face and frame anymore in the shadow, but he thought he saw her knees pressed together under the blanket, and her hands shaking very like she was nervous. A small noise emitted from her, like a mouse's squeak. The girl shook her head, then tried again. "Y-You," her voice came, delicate and soft in the silence of the room, "you have their eyes."

Flynn furrowed his brow, looking at the girl intently. "What... do you mean?"

The door to the room opened so violently and suddenly that Flynn spasmed in his chair, banging his knee painfully on the bottom of the table and cursing loudly. The girl in the corner let out another squeak, pushing herself further into the safety of the shadowy corner. With all of the subtlety of a sabertooth tiger, a boy and a girl had burst into the room, both with the same long stringy blond hair, both tall and lanky, and both with clear blue eyes. The boy spun around on his heel like a ballerina, before stamping his foot down with a loud thud, and setting his blue eyes on Flynn. "You're here, for uh, for the thing, right?"

Flynn didn't say anything for a second, taken aback by the flamboyant entrance. "Y-yeah." he stuttered tonelessly, rubbing his knee.

"Good, good." said the boy, falling into an empty chair, and putting his boots up onto the table, "thought me and Lily were the only ones who'd show up. You know what they'd called us here for? Probably to talk about the club thing yeah? Well, they had to crack down on us at some point, still thought I could make it till Christmas- HEY!"

He exclaimed loudly, pointing his finger at the girl in the corner, seeing her for the first time. The girl somehow managed to push her back even further into the wall, her face now even more covered by the shadows. "No, no, come on, come on! Don't hide back there! Come on out! Come on out! I don't bite. We're all friends here-"

The blond boy was cut his sentence with a cry of pain and a thud; the girl who had come in with him had kicked the chair the boy had been lounging in from under him, and he had fallen backwards, smacking his head on the wood floor. The girl in the corner let out a squeak that might have been an attempt at a gasp, her hands moving to cover her mouth. The tall blond girl stood over the boy, her fashionable fur coat fluttering

dramatically behind her, looking down on him expressionless. Then she turned to Flynn. “Just ignore him,” she said, her voice sharp and clipped, “he doesn’t know when to stop talking.”

Flynn nodded slowly. “Um... is he alright?”

The girl turned to look back at the fallen boy, who was lying sprawled on the ground, not really moving. “Yeah, Shea’s fine. Isn’t that right?” she said, pressing her boot against the boy’s cheek.

“Yeah, Shea’s fine.” came a small voice.

The girl turned back to Flynn, “see, he’s fine.”

Personally, Flynn thought that the boy had just said that to get out of being kicked again, but with all the weirdos marching into this room, he probably had better things to think about besides the well-being of others. The girl brushed off some nonexistent dust from her fur coat, and sat tiredly into the chair that the boy had previously been sitting in, resting her chin on her elbow. Now that Flynn got a good look at her, he couldn’t help but notice her clear attractiveness. Everything about her face, the smooth features, the long eyelashes and the bright red lipstick, screamed out femininity. Her long blond hair fall down behind her head, straight and silky, matching wonderfully with her blue eyes, blue eyes that now was looking at Flynn since he had been staring at the girl. “Oh,” she said, “sorry, I didn’t- I’m Lily, and the jester down there is my unfortunate brother Shea. Don’t mind him, he’ll stay down for a bit.”

“Nonsense, sister my sister!”

Shea had leaped back to his feet with such energy that it seemed impossible that he had even been hurt in any way from his hefty fall. He twirled around on his heel again, stopped, and extended his arm to Flynn.

“Shea’s my name, so what is yours?”

“Flynn.” said Flynn, taking Shea’s hand and shaking it once.

“Brilliant, brilliant, and who is the wonderful lady in the corner?” Shea released Flynn’s hand and practically skipped to the until-now completely silent blanketed girl. He pointed out her with both of his index figures, waiting for a response. None came.

“Well, that’s fine.” He strode back to the table, and once again lounged a seat, this time in the one next to Flynn, and put his feet back onto the table. “But anyway, shouldn’t there be a teacher here?”

Flynn had actually been wondering the same thing. All of them had been called here via letter to meet with the English teacher Mr. Boesen, during winter break no less, at the end of day which was a complete violation of the precautionary tactics in this town gripped by fear, and he hadn’t even thought to show up on time. He might as well leave right now, there was no point staying if the person who had called them here wasn’t even going to show.

For some reason, Flynn’s eyes found the girl in the corner with the blanket. He didn’t quite understand why she was here. The letter he had received yesterday in the middle of the night had called for him and two other students to meet in a room in the abandoned school building at 5:30, there hadn’t been any mention of a third student. So why was she here? Flynn actually began to wonder if the girl was just someone who lived here in this room and they had interrupted her down-time, but the stupid idea quickly left his head. He couldn’t make out much of her face in the growing shadow of the room, but the tips of her shoes and legs were sticking out. She was wearing a Hjeslin uniform, or at least part of it, so she must be a student, right?

Not really knowing why, Flynn rose from his seat, and walked slowly over the girl. She tried to slink back further, but she had run out of space to retreat, her legs pushing uselessly against the floor. First stepping over the threshold of where the orange sunlight spilled into the room and the shadows the girl was hiding herself in, Flynn crouched down in front of her. He could see her a little more clearly now that he was closer. Short black-gray bangs were hidden by the hood of the jacket she was wearing. He couldn’t see her body as it

was covered by the blanket, but for the first time, he got a good look at her eyes. They were large and brown, staring into his own with an expression that was a mixture of fear and curiosity. She was scared of him.

Or, more specifically, she was scared of his eyes.

But that didn't matter.

Slowly but surely, Flynn extended his arm in front of the girl, smiling softly. "Hi," he whispered so Shea and Lily couldn't hear him, "I'm Flynn. Could I at least have your name?"

The girl stared back. He could see himself reflected in those large, brown eyes.

"Just a name."

The girl let out what sounded like a little sigh, and, very slowly revealing a tiny arm from under the blankets, gently took one of Flynn's fingers, and shook it up and down once. Flynn hardly even felt her touch. Her hand felt so flimsy that it seemed as if it would break if he shook it too hard. Her mouth moved, and a voice so soft that Flynn wasn't even positive he heard it push softly from her lips.

"Nina."

Then the moment was over. Her hand disappeared back under the blankets, and Nina buried her face into her chest, hiding her expression from Flynn. Flynn clicked his tongue once, a little bit annoyed. Well, he supposed that would have to be enough for now. He rose back from his crouching position and returned to the middle of the room. Shea has seemingly discovered the functioning heater, and had pressed his face against the vent, moaning softly as his long blond hair ruffled in the push of the heat. Lily had taken to a book, reading while grinning, showing a mouth of perfect white teeth, the most expressive Flynn had even seen her. Meanwhile, Mr. Boesen had yet to show. Flynn checked his watch, flopping back into his original chair. It had been only five minutes, yet somehow he already felt very tired. He wondered if he should just ditch. The thought made him a little excited. He held a reputation for being a notoriously good student in Hjeslin Academy, for being a teacher's pet as they said, and the thought of ditching to dispel that fib rather appealed to him. In reality, he wasn't really that engaged with his studies, he just didn't have the willpower to be disruptive in class and explain to a teacher why he handed in any homework. He didn't really understand how some of the class jesters could stand to be so loud all the time; Flynn thought it was easier to just put his head down and study. Not that that satisfied him to any degree, but when he thought of anything else he'd rather be doing, nothing really came to mind. Then again, maybe ditching wasn't such a good idea. He didn't want to be alone in the town all alone with the sun setting. Nobody in their right minds would likely be out at this hour. Absentmindedly, Flynn looked at the window. The little town of Hjeslin was entirely visible from here, as Hjeslin Academy sat on a small hill at the edge of town, but Flynn could only pick out a couple of moving dots that he assumed to be people. The town seemed quiet. No not quiet. Like it was holding its breath, hoping nothing else bad would happen. Christmas was only a week-and-half away after all. Another incident would definitely-

The door exploded open again. Flynn started in his chair again, smacking his knee on the bottom of the table for the second time. "GOD! ...dammit!" he hissed through his teeth clutching his knee, "why?"

It was Mr. Boesen, his glasses dangling precariously from one ear, his mousy salt-and-pepper hair disheveled, and his face bright pink from the stinging cold wind. An incoherent fountain of words was bubbling from the back of his throat as he stumbled in, nearly tripping over the floor. "Oh- oh dear- I- wait- Wow, I am so- -so very sorry about this." he stuttered with a voice that seemed like it could give out at any moment.

Flynn eyed the man, still rubbing his knee, remembering Boesen had arrived on the scene in Flynn's english class for the first time looking nearly the exact same way: uncomfortable, timid, and fully not qualified to handle a school-room of full-fledged high-school students.. Officially a substitute, Boesen had arrived to replace

the previous teacher Ms. Flemgadst, who had taken a week to take magical journey through the Kamchatka Peninsula with nothing but a backpack of basic supplies, a machete, and a fanny-pack with a digital camera inside. It had been about two months since anyone had heard from her. Some kids in Flynn's english class had started a pool of bets about whether she was dead or would return alive, and sixty days later, the sum had grown to over one hundred dollars as more and more people chipped in to gamble on the fate of their teacher.

Flynn currently had five bucks in that Ms. Flemgadst would come back a week after New Years, since he once heard a story that she was wrestled a grizzly bear into submission, and figured anybody who could do that could probably survive in the wilderness for two-and-a-half months.

In the meantime, the duty to control the class had fallen to Boesen, and it had gone about as well as Flynn had expected when he first saw Boesen stumble into the room on the day he arrived to teach his class. The classroom had fell into unofficial anarchy, an anarchy that Boesen had desperately tried and failed to control. English class was mostly just a study hall now for students, since Boesen didn't know how else to make the period productive, since he clearly had no control over the class to teach them anything. Mostly students just used it to goof off with their friends or play silly games, but since Flynn had no interest in games or friends, the period had mostly become a time for him to finish all the other homework he had for other, more important classes. Since english was the last period of the day, this had created a sleepy atmosphere as Christmas break arrived, and by the start of the break, almost nobody had been showing up to Boesen's class at all. Flynn had attended the last day, but even didn't even pretend to pay attention as Boesen had stuttered out some basic grammatical laws to the few students in the room.

Somehow, Boessen looked even more pathetic now than he had that day. In his right hand he clutched a bundle of papers, in his left a frayed old coat the color of sick. He seemed to be wheezing from the cold, his runny nose spilling over his front, and made a sound somewhere between a sigh of relief and coughing up blood as he laid his items on the table and sank slowly to the floor, putting his elbows on the table to support himself.

The papers spilled out everywhere on the table, and Flynn vaguely spied some newspaper headlines from the local paper, a student roster, and some little pieces of plastic that might have been flashcards.

The room was silent for a moment as Boesen kneeled on the ground, breathing in and out heavily. She was looking at the man with a mixture of amusement and curiosity, his cheek still pressed against the grate of the heater. Boesen's entrance had been sudden enough for Lily to look up from her book, but apparently the situation unfolding in front of her wasn't interesting enough to hold her attention, so she returned to flipping through the pages absentmindedly. Flynn had expected Boesen to scare Nina further, but she actually was leaning forward in her chair for the first time, looking at the english teacher intently.

After a few more moments of making unspecific noises, Boesen rose to his feet, and surveyed the room. "We all made it okay?" he said.

Silence.

"Well, yes I suppose you did. I mean, you're all here- so of course, you all- all made it. I'm just glad you all m-made it here on such notice, a-after all, it has been a hell of a few months-"

Flynn stood up abruptly, his chair scooting backwards loudly. Boesen jumped, his glasses finally slipping off and landing onto the floor. Flynn stared at the man, and felt an unexpected yet extremely strong feeling of dislike. He couldn't stand looking at this sorry mess anymore. Then the moment of hatred was gone, replaced by a heavy weariness. Sighing, Flynn sat back down, turning his head away from Boesen to stare back out the window at the view of the town fading into the night.

After another pause, Boesen started again, clearly rattled. "L-let me just take attendance, then we can get started with the reason I called you here today."

Of course, this was pointless. A quick look at the room would tell anybody that all of the invited students were present, but it seemed like Boesen didn't know what else to do at this point besides strictly follow protocol. The substitute teacher cleared his throat, and pulled from the table on the many thickly spreaded papers, holding it up in his right hand. He then picked up his glasses from the floor, adjusted them on the bridge of his nose, and began to read out the names.

"Lily and Shea McAdams."

Lily, finally putting away the book, lazily raised her hand. "Yeah, we're both here." she said, pointing with her other hand to Shea, who had finally gotten tired of basking in the warmth of the heater and had taken to surveying the bookshelves on the walls. After a moment, the blond-haired boy chimed in as well, "me and her, yeah, both here."

"Okay," said Boesen, taking a thick black Sharpie from his pocket and checking off both names of his list, meticulously making the checks as neat as possible. He then looked up. "Flynn Castle."

"Present." said Flynn flatly, taking his eyes from the window to stare back at Boesen, who didn't appear to notice, as he was absorbed deeply in the all-important name-checking.

"Flynn... Castle." said Boesen quietly, and mostly to himself, "right. And Nina..." he looked over the the shadowy corner, "you're over there, right?"

"Yes." came the voice, more louder and articulate than Flynn had ever heard it. Nina's face had appeared from the darkness, almost attentive now, her wide eyes gazing at Boesen with more emotion than she had showed to either Flynn or Shea. Flynn gazed at her in silence. What was up with this girl?

"So... that's everybody, isn't it!" said Boesen, finally looking up from the paper, tucking the Sharpie back into his pocket, and gazing at the sorry array of students present, all of whom were paying varying amounts of attention to what he was saying, "then we can get started, can't we?"

Suddenly, the atmosphere changed around the substitute. His previously wide eyes narrowed, his shoulders slumped slightly as he leaned the palms of his hands into the table, and he breathed slowly in and out, like he was bracing himself for something. His voice came, this time louder than before, and not wavering, but rather with a sturdy edge to it. "Shea, I'd appreciate if you would come and sit down for a moment. This is important. Nina, you can stay where you are."

The last rays of orange light dipped out of the room, as the distant sun finally sank below the horizon in the distance, replaced by the eerie glow of dusk. With it, it was like the whole room changed with it. The previously awkward but still comfortable atmosphere was gone. Instead, as Flynn gazed into the narrowed eyes of his substitute english teacher, their pupils slowly observing the mess of papers on the table, he got a much different feel. Fun time was over. It was time to shut up and get serious.

Shea seemed to notice the change in the air, and quietly marched over to the chair next to Flynn, stretching both arms behind himself then crossing them. Lily's phone was nowhere to be seen, her piercing blue eyes completely focused on Boesen and the papers he had laid flat onto the table. Nina had disappeared back into the darkness of the corner as she leaned back in her chair, but Flynn could feel the presence of her gaze nonetheless, staring from the dark with attentiveness and seriousness. Boesen let out another sigh, running a hand through his bespeckled hair once before scooting one of the papers from the pile toward the students. Flynn meanwhile, wasn't quite sure what he should be doing. The shift had happened so quickly he had hardly even had time to register it. With an air of inevitability, Flynn realized that he didn't understand these people. Flynn looked back and forth between Boesen and the golden-haired brother and sister, before resigning to eye the single news-clipping that Boesen had pushed forward, which had a big bold black font scrawled on top of it. He couldn't quite read it from the awkward angle he was seated at, but he hardly needed to. He recognized the

clipping as the same one his dad had pushed forward toward him on the breakfast table that fateful early November morning, and the same as it did then, the picture below the caption: a distorted mess of timber, sent a chill down his spine.

Boesen cleared his throat. "As I'm sure all of you are already aware, a senior student from this academy, Linsley Shorsheck, was killed last month in early November."

Flynn stared at him with incredulity. Of course they remembered. Did he think they were stupid? Classes had been cancelled for a week, and the story had made national headlines, not simply because a highschooler had been killed but because of the way-

"-and her body thoroughly ravaged. She was found at the edge of the town near the forest, and..."

Boesen stopped, gulping, and just for a moment, the awkward and timid substitute english teacher that he knew appeared behind Boesen's glasses. Flynn didn't blame him. He couldn't care less about Linsley Shorsheck, he hadn't even know she had existed before her body was discovered, but no matter who you were, the state of the body would make anyone stop for a moment.

Boesen tried again, wiping his sleeve against his forehead to dispel the sweat running down his brow, perhaps from the cold, but likely from the image facing him. "And her body had been impaled in different places with 29 pieces of timber, likely collected from the waste of the christmas tree buyers that had gone up last month. Some pieces of timber had been stabbed into the arms, legs and stomach, but... but most notably, four pieces of timber had been shoved through the eye-sockets, three in the left eye, one in the right. However, her autopsy revealed that the impalement was not the cause of death. Instead, the autopsy concluded that a mere hour-and-a-half before the body was discovered, Linsley Shorsheck had been strangled to death, likely by a young adult-to-middle aged male, judging from the bruises around the victim's throat. As of right now, no fingerprints of additional evidence that could lead to the killer's whereabouts or identity have been recovered. There was no sign of the victim being sexually assaulted before or after death. The victim was eighteen years old."

With a heavy sigh, Boesen turned the piece of paper over and looked back up at Flynn, Shea and Lily. Nobody spoke. A strange heaviness had fallen on the room. It had really gotten dark outside, and apparently noticing that the light was fading quickly, Boesen retreated to the door and flicked the light-switch. A flare erupted from the ceiling, and Flynn had to blink to get his eyes adjusted. He wanted to say something, but it was like something was blocking his throat, not letting any words get out. Thankfully, Shea beat him to it. "Teach," he said, his voice flat and lacking any of the energy he had shown before, "we know all of this. The principle announced it to the whole school" -*though in significantly less detail*, thought Flynn- "and all. Why are you telling us this again?"

The mousy-faced young man looked at Shea with a looked so sad that even Flynn felt a pang of empathy for him. He had never been particularly good at reading other people's feeling, and more the most part, he didn't care a whole lot either, but even he could tell that answering Shea's question was the very last thing Boesen wanted to do. Regardless, the teacher slid forward another sheet of paper from the pile, this one looking more like an official report, and laid the palm of his hand on top. He took another breath, then became to speak again.

"Early this morning, the body of Hjeslin Academy sophomore Gary Velvet was discovered floating in Suaquando River"

"Ohmygod." the voice came from behind Flynn. He turned. Lily was starting at Boesen, her face even more pale than usual. Her mouth was covered by her frail hand, as if it was keeping in a breath of horror.

"-with his hands and feet missing and the stumps sewed up with wire. His body had shown visible signs of torture prior to death, bruises were found around his throat and chest, there were some stab marks and



healed wounds, as well as a crack in the skull on the crown of his head. While the exact cause of death is uncertain, the victim likely died from his injuries, his body dumped in the river afterwards. Due to the method of body disposal, police can find no fingerprints on the body, skin underneath his fingernails, or hair on his clothes. While there is no official report yet, it seems like the victim had been floating in the river for about six hours prior to discovery, caught on a bundle of brambles underneath the bridge. The victim was 16 years of age.”

As Boesen stopped talking, Flynn felt a strange sensation in his chest. Two people were dead. Two young people. Two students. Two students, from the school he attended. In the span of only about a month and a half. This was horrible. This was a despicable crime. He didn’t doubt that. Yet the sensation in his chest wasn’t quite sadness, and neither was it disgust. It was something that was slowly filling him, extending to the ends of his toes, and making a bead of sweat run down his temple. It was something that he didn’t even know how to describe. Whatever it was, he didn’t like it.

Boesen was still standing, bending over the pile of papers scattered on the table. He had taken his glasses off and laid them gently down, his face covered by his free hand. Boesen’s fingers slid down the lines of his face, nose, and mouth, before with a sigh, the hand slid off his chin and hung pointlessly at his side. Flynn looked at Boesen’s eyes. There were soft and gray, like his hair. Gray eyes that looked very, very weary. Boesen’s voice once again filled the room, quieter than before. “Understandably, both of these incidents have resulted in a meeting between the faculty of this school. All the teachers are horrified, of course, and the principle has been working tirelessly since the second discovery to recover details of the murder and console the family of the victim-”

Shea’s voice interrupted. “Wait, teach, two students from this academy were killed?”

“Yes.”

“But like- doesn't that- that mean...”

“Shea, we’re not jumping to any unfounded conclusions. Coincidences happen all of the time, however due to circumstantial evidence, we need to consider the possibility-”

“No.”

That was Lily’s voice. Her eyes were wide as they stared at the newspaper headlines, her mouth a pencil thin line of horror on her face. “No. No. Nononononononono.”

She wasn’t even speaking full words anymore. A stumbling line of sounds were overflowing from her mouth fast and swift, not even carrying meaning anymore, but rather one note of panic that grew louder and louder. In a moment, Shea was at her side clutching her shoulders and holding Lily with an expression extremely serious. “Come on, breathe Lil, breathe. Remember what Dad said. Breathe.”

Slowly, Lily voice pattered out, her mouth hanging open without anything coming out. Shea was still holding her close, his hand squeezing hers tightly. Mr. Boesen didn’t seem to know what to do. He was staring from the siblings to the door, like he was contemplating just running for it. His palms were extended out, like he was trying to shield himself from something. “W-wait.” he said, stuttering horribly.

Flynn gave him a look. Wait for what? What was he trying to protect himself from? It seemed to over now, by any rate. Lily was fallen silent. Her usually brushed back hair had fallen in strands over her face, covering the blue, expressionless eyes. It was kind of strange, contemplated Flynn. His first impression of Lily had been as somebody thoroughly in control over her emotions and social life, but it seems he couldn’t have been further off of the mark. Still, seeing her like this made him feel uncomfortable. If she was going to have a panic attack or whatever, couldn’t she at least have it somewhere else?

Flynn wouldn't have thought that it would've been possible for Nina to press herself further into the corner of the room, but the shy girl still managed to find ways to amaze him. He could see her clearly since Boesen had turned on the lights, but the girl had made an attempt to throw the blanket over her head, and slid her back down the wall so far that Flynn wondered if the chair was going to kick out from under her and she would fall butt-first onto the ground. Apparently watching people have panic attacks weren't really her kind of thing either. At least he thought it was a panic attack. Lily didn't really seem to be breathing anymore, so maybe it had ended already.

No, she was breathing.

Maybe.

He couldn't really tell if her chest was moving up and down since her body had folded over in its inactivity. All he could see of her now was the arch of her back, with a pile of blond hair cascading down it.

"Is-is she alright?"

Boesen had stepped forward. Flynn supposed he had stopped trying to run away from the situation and was now going to make some sort of attempt to take control since he was, after all, the only adult.

Shea looked up. "Yeah, she's alright. Just give her a minute."

Moments after, Lily stood up, swaying unsteadily as attempted to brush the dangling hair out of her eyes. Her blue eyes appeared, dazed yet somehow angry, as if she was frustrated that she had collapsed. Her furious gaze found Flynn, and he shrunk back on reflex. What was she mad at him for?

Boesen didn't seem convinced. "Are you sure?" he said, crossing the room, and placing a hand on Lily's back, "if you need to go home, I understand-"

"Get off." Lily's voice sounded more like a growl than anything, and the timid substitute instantly jumped backward, his palms back into a defensive position, "please get off."

The girl took a deep breath and stood up, tilting her head backwards and gazing at the ceiling, her eyes closed as if she was praying. Then her head snapped down, and she readjusted her position in the chair, gazing intently at the paper Boesen had brought in. At some point Shea had returned to his own seat, a dumb smile back on his face like nothing had happened, also giving a newfound attention to the mess of papers, picking them up at random and persuasion through them for a few seconds before putting it down and moving onto the next.

Boesen looked confused, open his mouth as if to ask Lily again if she was fine, thought better of it, and walked back with a confused look on his face to his original place at the head of the table. For once, Flynn didn't blame him. He too wasn't quite sure to think about what had happened. Lily was back to her standoffish demeanor she had first exhibited, like she was trying to pretend like the whole thing had never happened. That was fine, he didn't care either way, but he couldn't help be puzzled by the whole thing. Whatever the reason, it seemed like it was time to return to the regularly scheduled murder report.

"So- so with b-both of these tragic events in mind," said Boesen, who also seemed content to just move on from the bizarre distraction, "the faculty of the school h-have decided to take into account an unlikely and hopefully false possibility."

"Which is?" said Shea, absorbed by what Flynn thought was a monthly rainfall report.

Boesen did not answer, at not fully. He seemed to be thinking about how to say his next line. Perhaps he didn't want to break the news to the students, but he not needed have anyway. Flynn had figured out what he was going to say next, and so likely had everyone else. Boesen tried again. "That is, um, without, um, without-"

"We're being targeted aren't we?"

Flynn couldn't take it anymore, and his sudden speech surprised Boesen enough to make the drop the small flashcard he had been holding. "We're being targeted. Hjeslin Academy students are being targeted by a serial killer."

Boesen looked horrified. "That's not-" he stuttered, "that's not what I-"

Flynn interrupted him, standing up suddenly and picking up the news report of Lily McAdams. "That's exactly what you're trying to say, right? It's too weird, isn't it? Two separate, unrelated students killed in the span of less than two months. The teachers and principle are probably panicking right now, if I had to guess. That's why this whole thing is so unorganized. So, just tell us what we really want to know. Why did you bother calling us all up here just to tell us this? Shouldn't you, I don't know, be relaying these suspicions to the student body and their parents. You'd think we'd want to know-"

"We are!"

Boessen apparently had had enough of being scolded by a student, and his voice carried the same weight that it had when he had first had called everyone over to the table. "We're sending out an email first thing tomorrow morning that thoroughly explains the situation and our suspicions about it!"

"So why are you letting us know first?!" shot back Flynn, his temper unusually high, as spittle from Flynn's mouth sprayed over Mr. Boessen unpleasantly colored jacket.

"That's because!... because..."

Suddenly the man looked tired, and the fight that had filled him seemed to evaporate in the space of instant. Boessen rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger. His eyes darted to the door and back, like he was looking for someone to walk through and support him. The door remained entirely shut. His foot starting vibrating, his toe tapping habitually over and over on the floor, faster and faster. His voice stumbled out. "As-as a group, the faculty of decided that since this matter handles the students in a very personal and unexpected way, the decision has past that the students should be treated with... w-with moderation, as we know that the students of this academy are capable and mature."

Flynn didn't even need to be paying attention to know that Boessen didn't believe what he was saying. It was as if the english teacher has reading from a prepared script, a script that was about to completely contradict what he personally believed. As Boessen continued to read, Flynn felt an apathetic weariness and frustration. He tossed the report back onto the table, sat back in his chair, and put his head down on the table as he listened to this bullshit unfold.

"Thus, we have decided to give the students a fundamental role in how the school handles these tragedies, as it directly concerns... them more than us. I-it was decided that the students who have yet to fulfill the school prerequisite of joining at least one extracurricular club with half of the school year over would be chosen to be the head of this student-lead effort. In other words-" for a moment, Flynn's eyes met the teacher's, and what he saw there surprised him. It wasn't fear, and it wasn't fatigue. Instead, Boessen's eyes reflected back at him a vivid message of pity, like he was apologizing for what he was about to say, "-all of you have been chosen to be a part of this... club."

Everyone in the room reacted. Lily sighed with something between a scoff and exasperation, and Nina let out a sound that resembled to squeak of a puppy. Shea leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbow on the mess of papers littering the table.

"So... what exactly do you- like... what does that mean?" he said.

"Um..." Boessen scrambled through some more papers, his panicked and fast moving fingers brushing aside a stack of mid-quarter financial reports as he struggled to find the desired paper, "that is more- more or less up to... to the four of you. We thought your input directly to the student body would come through a lot clearly

than by the teachers or announcements by the principle... Of course!...of course we'll still be doing our part, b-but we thought that this would be a good way to... uh... to..."

His voice slowly faded away, and his arms slumped down to hang loosely at his sides. *Is this real?* thought Flynn, stunned, *"are we really having forced this responsibility on us because the school can't be bothered?"* That couldn't be right. What school would ignore their students being killed? What about reputation? What about morals? What about everything this implied about the head of the school faculty?

Flynn stared blankly back out the window. Was he over-reacting? Surely the school didn't mean to pass the burden of protecting the safety of the establishment to the students? Was this "club" just a figurehead, a way for the students to feel like they were being involved in something that in reality was not under their control at all? Or-

Lily's voice interrupted his thoughts. "So are we like, being tasked to make sure students aren't making stupid decisions that could endanger their lives?"

"Um," Bossen rummaged through some more papers, "the principle wasn't- wasn't really specific on that part-"

*That part?* thought Flynn incredulously. *That part - you mean what this club even exists for?*

"-but yes, I-I imagine that will be in part of what you are doing. Now, we only have a few weeks until school starts up again, s-so I suppose the expectation is that you will have some sort of agenda you will put into place when the term begins again on the 10th. I've-" he messily pulled out a severely wrinkled piece of paper from his back pocket, "I've taken it upon myself to print a out a schedule- a- a sort of outline for what we will be doing for the next twenty-five days."

"Wait," Shea suddenly sputtered, "you mean we're going to be meeting up here *every day*?"

"W-well," said Boessen, pushing his slipping glasses back up the bridge of his nose, "obviously we won't ask you to come all the way up here during Christmas or the New Year, but yes, daily attendance is for the most part mandatory."

Shea let out a puff of air that he had been building in his cheeks. "There goes my winter break homework." he muttered to himself.

Lily also looked slightly annoyed, but then her eyes landed on the newspaper about Lily McAdams, and she elbowed her brother hard in the side. He looked at her accusingly, but then his eyes followed her gaze, and his face too took on a more somber expression.

Nina had taken to looking at her knees, Flynn had noticed (or at least where he thought her knees were, he couldn't quite tell under the blanket), and the look on her face puzzled him. Her eyes were narrow. Her tiny fist lay clenched on top of the blanket. She was biting her lip, so hard that Flynn swore that he could see a trickle of blood run down her lower lip. Flynn's dad worked as a lawyer, and Flynn had been able to watch several tape-recordings of his dad's cases. The expression on Nina's face looked just like the accused standing in front of the judge, waiting in dread for the "Guilty" verdict to be shouted through the room. That worried him.

Flynn returned to his own thoughts. He still was a little confused on the club's main purpose, but he supposed that they would be spending the time making flyers with captions like *"Students home before last light don't get killed at night."* and hanging them around the school. He supposed it could be worse, he wasn't sure if he would be able to stand a more bothersome club, like the ones who went on field-trips or actively participated in aiding the community. It wasn't like he had anything else to do during the break. But still, the whole thing still seemed strange to him. It seemed like the principle had actually requested this club to be formed, only this morning in fact, and even if they were just figure-heads to calm the nerves of the student body, it still seemed strange to give any kind of direction in the investigation.

Flynn shook his head.

No, they weren't going to be investigating.

It would be best to get that out of his head right now.

Maybe they would discuss routes for student to head back home, or detail places in the town for students to avoid. The real detective work would be best left to the actual detectives in the police. Meanwhile, there was one last question he had.

Boessen cleared his throat. "I'm going to be letting all of you go in a second, but before that happens, I owe you an explanation. Some of you probably are wondering how this whole situation got sorted out so fast. The truth is, the faculty and the police have been suspecting that students from this school are being targeted specifically even before Gary Velvet was found this morning."

Boessen's eyes fell to the floor, and he slowly turned away from the table. With quiet, almost solemn steps, he walked over to the now illuminated corner of the room, and crouched down on one knee before the small girl under the blanket. "Nina," he said, so softly that Flynn could hardly hear it, "you ready?"

With the slightest movement possible, Nina nodded once. Her head bobbed down once and her dark-gray bangs covered her eyes, and whatever expression her face held was blocked from Flynn's view. She sighed again, then, more quietly than Flynn could have believed, stood up.

The blanket gently slid down her waist and dangled around her legs, finally giving Flynn a full-body view of the girl. As it turns out, Nina had a body in addition to her head and legs. It was small and slender, what you'd expect, and decked in a Hjeslin Academy girl's uniform: dark gray jacket covering a plain undershirt, and a dark grey frilly skirt which reached down to her shins, nearly touching the pair of small shoes which covered her feet. Her large brown eyes lifted their stare from the floor, fixing themselves on Flynn once more. He could see the same expression in them: apprehension, confusion, and a little bit of fear. Flynn lowered his eyes. He didn't want to look anymore.

Hastily, Mr. Boessen lifted the chair from the corner and placed it equal distance from the table and the door, then returned to his position at the head of the table, this time leaning back on it instead of standing. Nina stepped daintily over the blanket sprawled on the floor, and walked over to the chair, with body language that suggested she would rather be walking over a nest of burning coals. She sat down without a word, and let her clasped together hands fall onto her lap, where they lay, constantly fidgeting.

Boessen cleared his throat again, but his short-lived composure when he had addressed Nina seemed to have disappeared like the darkness she had been sitting in. "Um... N-Nina was, that is, she-uh- Nina was-"

He stopped talking. Nina's right hand had risen from her lap into the air, had arm barely lifting high enough to reach her shoulder. "I... I can say what happened." she said, her voice soft and weak.

Boessen glanced at the sitting girl. "Are you sure?" he said, with a concern that Flynn thought was strangely intimate.

"Yeah."

Boessen held her gaze for a moment longer, then bent his head down, and gestured with his hand at Nina. "Go on, then."

For once, Flynn was paying an extreme amount of attention. Nina's unexplained presence was one of the only things that he was legitimately interested in. He actually found himself leaning forward in his chair, gazing intently at Nina as she fidgeted a bit more with her hands again. Again, Flynn was reminded of someone awaiting retribution for their sins, but the girl's eyes had a different expression in them from what he had seen before. They were narrowed, a tiny hint of determination radiating from the pupils, as they stared straight ahead at nothing in particular. Nina cleared her throat, and began to speak.

“About a week ago, um, I was-”

She gave a pleading look towards Mr. Boessen. He stared back at her intensely, and nodded his head once. It seemed to calm her.

“A-About a week and a half ago, I was attacked.”

Shea voice came so suddenly and so loud that it made Flynn jump. He had actually completely forgotten that the blond-haired boy and his sister were even in the room. “What do you mean attacked?”

Flynn rolled his eyes. *Maybe if you shut up she could tell us.*

“I mean... the same person who killed Linsley Shorsheck and Gary Velvet... they-they tried to kill me too. ...At least, I think it was them.”

The room was completely silent. Flynn was stunned, but he wasn't sure why. He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, and brushed away a bead of sweat that had for some reason been running down his brow. For a moment, Nina looked at Flynn, but this time he shrank away from her stare, because along with determination, was something else: accusation. She was accusing him. She was accusing him of something. What the hell was she accusing him for? She didn't know him well enough to accuse him of something. They had never talked before. They had hardly even spoken-

He froze. Flynn Castle had never been easily frightened. His calm demeanor was one of the things he credited himself with. But for some reason, at that moment, he recalled Nina's first words to him, and a chill went down his spine.

Whose eyes did she say he had again?

东末

## Chapter 2 | The Shadows Grow Darker

Nina wasn't the kind of person who typically chose to walk home alone at night, but it couldn't be helped. She had fallen asleep in the old school building, and when she had awakened underneath her blanket, the orange rays of sunset had already begun to flood into the room. She had hurried to put on her jacket over her school uniform, but by the time she had pushed open the creaking front doorway and hurried down the small cement steps, the sun had fallen behind the horizon, darkness had settled onto the town. Street lights flickered on as she passed, and the already chilly air grew colder and colder. She breathed into her hands, wishing that she hadn't forgotten her gloves at home. Steam rose from her mouth and dissipated into the night air, fading instantly against the darkening sky.

The walk home wasn't far, but it was down a steep hill. Hjeslin Academy and the old school building were situated on the uppermost region of the town, and students needed to hike up and down the incline every morning and noonday in order to get to and from the academy. It wasn't something Nina appreciated. She wasn't at all athletic to begin with, and the night air which was now seeping into her throat every time she took a breath seemed to somehow make her breathing rougher, more ragged. She stopped for a moment, placing her gloveless hands onto her knees, holding out her arm so she could breathe into her jacket as to not inhale more of the cold air. Her quickening breaths slowed, and she closed her eyes, trying to calm the growing pain in her stomach. She was still for a moment, basking in the darkness of her closed lids.

Her eyes opened, and she looked down the hill that led to the rest of the town, as street light flicked on and on further and further in the distance, their distant lights illuminating the path ahead. She didn't want to go home. She didn't want to keep walking in this cold air, keep feeling the chill of the wind as it weaved past her ears, or shiver more and more as the cold seeped more and more past her jacket right into her skin. She didn't want to go back to that house, to see that front door or-

What happened next was something that Nina wasn't sure of. She knew she had heard footsteps right behind her, suddenly piercing the night's silence as they loudly accelerated behind her. Then she was on the ground, pain spiking through the hands and knees she had extended to prevent her rough fall. They were bleeding now, the skin torn and muddy from scraping against pavement. A pressure was being exerted on the back of her head, and a black, gloved hand was clamped tightly over her mouth. Nina realized her cheek was

now being pressed hard against the ground, her legs sprawled out behind her, her chest aching from the impact, and the weight of whoever was on top of her. She tried to scream. She really did. But the moment her distorted panicked cries bled out, muffled by the glove, the pressure on the back of her head intensified severely. Her face was pushed even more roughly into the cement, and suddenly she couldn't move her mouth at all. Her lungs gasped for more breaths of air, but the gloved hand closed around her mouth was making it difficult. After some more struggling, the instinctive spasms of her body started to finally settle, and Nina finally stopped trying to resist. Once she stopped moving, the pressure on her head relented slightly. There was sound of movement above her, and a head, almost snake-like in motion, arched into her vision, followed by a neck. It was almost impossible to discern details, she was too upset to be thinking clearly, and tears that had not quite fallen were collecting in her eyes, blurring her vision, but she saw some sort of large black coat pulled over the mouth and nose of... *someone*. Their head and hair were completely covered by some sort of wool beanie, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw another gloved hand reach out of sight to get something. All that were visible were the eyes, and the skin around them, bright pink from the cold. The eyes stared horribly at her, almost seeming to bulge out of their sockets. Somehow, Nina wasn't able to see what color they were, nor did she particularly care. They might have been brown, or blue, and any other shade. She didn't know. All she was able to concentrate on was their gaze, staring a hole through her, examining her, judging her, almost in fascination.

Nina would've screamed more, but the terror of whatever was looking at her seemed to be squeezing her chest so tightly that she could hardly make a sound. Her vision, restricted to the blank pavement pushing against the side of her face and the odious eyes, was distorted for a moment, until the tear rolled down her face and splashed onto the ground. Her breathing became more ragged. She almost felt like she would pass out. Then she saw the syringe, held in front of her by a gloved hand.

The tip of the needle seemed to be shining under the moonlight, and a drop of some sort of liquid fell once from the end. Nina's eyes widened in terror. She thrashed against whatever was holding her down, trying to do whatever she could, anything she could, to get away, to not see the end of that needle, coming slowly and slowly towards her. Soon, all she could see was the moist shaft of the syringe, which now was hovering inches in front of her eyeball.

Nina couldn't think, and her throat felt so tight that even breathing didn't seem like much of an option anymore. She closed her eyes.

*I guess this is my punishment.*

~

"Jesus."

Shea yelped as Lily drove her elbow into his ribs, and he doubled over onto the table, "Shut up!" she hissed through her teeth.

"Okay."

Flynn wasn't quite sure what to think about Nina's story. It was certainly pretty terrifying, but it didn't make a whole lot of sense either. He felt lightheaded, almost giddy, though he couldn't figure out quite why. That familiar sensation was building in his chest, stronger than before, and it seemed at any moment it could explode from his belly and rocket up his throat. He quickly leaned forward in his seat, burning with curiosity, "So, you just woke up after that?"

"Flynn". Boessen's voice seemed far away.



“That’s weird though. Why would whoever did this drugged you unconscious, but then to just leave you alone-”

“Flynn!”

He leaned forward, still not noticing the teacher’s raised voice.

“So what the hell is up with that?” he said breathlessly, “did someone else come and the perpetrator ran from them? What about-”

Suddenly the world flipped over, and Flynn fell backwards, smacking his butt on the wooden floor. It happened so quickly that he hardly had time to register the pain, or why all of a sudden he could see suddenly the ceiling of the room. *Why*, he mouthed.

“Dumbass”. It was Lily voice. Flynn turned his head, to see her leaning over the table to glare at him on the ground, her leg still extended under the table from when she had kicked his chair from under him, “Look at her!”

Confused and still on the ground, Flynn turned his head again to look at Nina, and immediately realized what he had done wrong. Nina’s eyes were looking straight at the ground, the pupils wide and staring at nothing in particular. Her hands were tightly gripping her knees, the knuckles white with pressure. She was terrified just remembering the experience, never mind explaining it to someone else. He didn’t know why it had taken him so long to realize that.

The room was quiet. Flynn slowly got to his feet, and picked up the fallen chair from the ground, scooting it back into place. He slouched back into his chair, suddenly feeling a lot more aware of himself. Shea coughed awkwardly. Boessen leaned forward, and whispered something into Nina’s ear. She gave a little nod, still not looking up from the floor, and Boessen pulled up a chair to sit next to her. He intertwined his fingers and resting them on the table. “Okay.” he said.

“Obviously, we don’t have any sort of concrete that the person who assaulted Nina was in fact the same person who killed both Mr. Velvet and Ms. McAdams, but that definitely seems to be the most logical assumption for us teachers at this time.”

Boessen sighed, and his gaze started to wander from the faces of the children in front of him to studying the window at the back of the room. “We had been considering the establishment of this “club” since Nina’s incident a week ago. Obviously, the murder of Mr. Velvet hastened the decision by the principal, so here we are.”

*Yep*, thought Flynn, *here we are. Five idiots sitting in a room.*

“But wait,” interjected Shea, a little more loud than absolutely necessary, “why... you know, why didn’t anything... happen to Nina.”

“I don’t know.”

Boessen’s voice was so stern that even Flynn shrank away a bit from it. “And honestly, I don’t care. It’s enough for me that Nina is safe. I hope that sentiment is shared by all of you.”

There was another awkward silence. Nobody in the room seemed to want to look at each other, and upon her whispering something else in Boessen’s ear, Nina got back up and returned to the corner of the room. She seemed to be gathering her things and putting them into her bag.

“I won’t force you to be here tomorrow,” said Boessen, his voice returning to its regular, soft demeanor, “I think I’ve kept you here long enough. It’s too late, I’m sure you all have homework to finish up-”

Shea made a sound that might have either been a snort or an anguished cry.

“-and I don’t really want you having to be out of the house late at night either, for obvious reasons. Be back here in two days at nine in the morning. That way you can have the whole afternoon off.”

Lily uncrossed her legs and stood up, brushing some non-existent dust off her pants leg. "Let's go Shea," she muttered barely loud enough for Flynn to hear. Her brother obeyed promptly, slouching in behind Lily's long blond hair that danced behind her as she started for the door.

"Hold on." Boessen said, the lining of nervousness back in his voice, "it's late, and it's dark outside. I came here in the school car. I'll take you all—"

"No." Lily was already at the door, her back to the rest of them. "We'll be fine. Thank you for asking."

Then she was gone, the thud of the door signifying her departure. Shea looked back at the rest of them with a sort of apologetic look in his eyes, shrugged his shoulders exaggeratedly, then disappeared after her.

For some reason, the room seemed to lose a bit of its warmth, even though the heater was still coughing out air on the table. Nina tucked the blanket into her bag, and started to make frequent glances towards the door, but didn't move for some reason. Boessen sighed and started to gather the scattered papers on the table, slowly putting on his frayed coat. As he started to stack them back up, he turned to Flynn, his gaze piercing. "I don't suppose you would like a ride home?" he said, coughing once.

"No."

"Well, thought I might as well ask. You ready, Nina?"

Nina nodded, and as the English teacher tucked these stacks of papers under his arm and headed out the door, and turned back to stare at Flynn once last time. Flynn didn't move, but met her gaze evenly. It might have been his imagination, but he could swear her mouth moved, or at least tried to, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she kind of wiggled her hand in some sort of awkward wave, and jogged out the door after Boessen. He was alone.

For some reason, the heater sounded a lot louder than it had a moment ago. Flynn sighed, and leaned back in his chair. He felt very tired, more tired than he had walking up that damned hill to the school. He let his arms flop to his sides, hanging loosely, his knuckles brushing the wooden floor, as he pondered on the day's events.

*A club, huh?*

It wasn't like he had never been in a club. During middle school, when he had lived in the city, he had been a part of the school newspaper club. It had been a pretty crappy newspaper (since nobody got anything done until a day before the deadline), and since the clubroom had been next to the gym, there was constantly loud thumps in the distance that happened just long enough apart for you to forget how annoying they were. But he hadn't disliked it. In fact, it had been in that time that he had made probably the closest friends he ever known in his life. He had even wasted the last year-and-a-half of middle school crushing after the girl who was in charge of printing the newspaper and running it to the principal's office before their deadline every Friday afternoon. He could distinctly remember their faces, even now, four years later. He felt his fingers tense up.

He hadn't talked to any of them since he had left halfway through his last year of middle school. Of course, his departure had been a hurried affair, his dad had wanted to leave as soon as he could, but he knew that that was just an excuse. In truth, if he had wanted to see them before he moved to this tiny coastal town, he could've. But he had purposely avoided talking to anybody during that time. In the end, he had left without even saying goodbye. The club president had sent him an email a week after he arrived in Hjeslin, but he had never opened it. He didn't have the strength.

All of a sudden, a fresh wave of anger bubbled up inside of Flynn's stomach, directed at nobody and nothing in particular. He put his hand onto his nose and pressed it downward against face, stretching out the tired muscles. He let out a heavy sigh, and rested his cheek against the table, the warm air from the heater brushing through his hair and making his eyes water. He wondered if he should just fall asleep here. He had a

sneaking suspicion that if he went home now, there would be a certain person that he didn't particularly want to see waiting for him. As nice as just lying here until he keeled over and died seemed, it was probably about to get a lot colder in here, and this single heater wasn't going to provide as much comfort as his bed. With a groan, he slowly put in his hand next to his face, and pushed back into an upright position in the chair.

Outside, it was pitch black. The orange sunlight that was engulfed the room when Flynn had arrived was completely gone, replaced by faint moonlight obscured by a heavy overcast of gray clouds, that moved slowly and hypnotically across the sky. The lights of the town below seemed more dim than usual from Flynn's view through the giant window.

With a sigh of exertion, Flynn pushed himself from his chair and grabbed his green nylon jacket, then his scarf, and put them arm as he walked through the doorway. Then he backtracked for a moment, realizing he had forgotten the turn off the sputtering heater.

The hallway outside the room was darker than he had expected. He supposed it made sense, the old school building had been abandoned a few years ago and there were no more working lights, but he had to squint and put his hand to the wall to navigate through the musty dark. The room they had been using was only a short walk from the front door of the old school building (though technically someone had stolen the front door last winter, so now there was just what looked a rectangle-shaped hole in the wall) but Flynn still managed to trip twice, before he descended the single step that led to the building, and took in some breath as the cold breeze hit him. It was easier to see outside, the moon was brighter than he had initially thought, and up ahead, the streetlamps that illuminated the road to the school proper were flickering on, one by one.

The walk back home was not a pleasant one. Flynn began to wonder if he should've swallowed his pride and accepted Mr. Boessen's offer of a ride. Though the nylon jacket was warm, and the scarf that he wore around his neck thick, the bitter wind seemed to slice right through both. He hugged himself, burying his hands in between his jacket and the scarf, fervently wishing in between the clattering of his teeth that he had thought to bring gloves. But was it really his fault? No, no it wasn't. It hadn't been *him* who had the stupid idea of forming a club for all the kids the others didn't want.

*Yeah*, he thought bitterly, *let's get all the weirdos and hope that old building collapses on them*. He clenched his fist, though he wasn't sure if it was for warmth or not. Boessen's stupid face hadn't helped either. In fact, he was *glad* that he had rejected his offer for a ride home. That failure of a substitute had tried to get testy with *him*? He should just be grateful that somebody in the school had found a job for him to do in between teaching so tediously that the class grade average slipped down by half a percent every day. He recalled the first and only time Boessen had ever tried to hold a classwide activity, probably before he had realized that nobody but Mrs. Flemgadst would be able to hold the class's attention for more than few minutes. He was trying to introduce the concept of solipsism because it was relevant to some book they were learning, but wasn't having a lot of success raising his voice over the collective disinterest of the class. "Now solipsism," he had said, his glasses dangling from one ear and his mousy hair frazzled with discomfort, "-please stop throwing that Percy!- now solipsism is the belief that in the entire world, only oneself is truly real. The solipsist -please listen- yes, LISTEN, believes that his perspective is the only one that exists and that can be considered-". In the end, the only thing the class learned was that Morty Eldman could score a perfect 3-point paper basket into the trashcan from across the room, and the only thing Flynn had learned that Boessen didn't have a clue what he was doing. He supposed the memory of the teacher he hated being ridiculed by his own classroom should bring a smile to his face, but for some reason, he couldn't find it in him. He tried to muster a sort of grin, despite his teeth still chattering thanks to the cold, but it felt fake. Half-asked. Flynn sighed again.

All of that said, Boessen had seemed a little different today. Yes, he had still been hapless and awkward beyond belief, but he had almost seemed to command a presence. Flynn remembered that first time that Boessen's voice had hardened, when he had first called them to talk about the murders. It had seemed out of character. Not to mention his uncomfortable favoritism towards one certain student...

Flynn stopped walking. He hadn't realized where he was. Below him, the river gurgled. Every morning, he needed to cross the bridge over Susquando River, an over glorified stream which ran throughout the town that was just wide enough to merit a bridge to cross over it. He typically didn't think much of it, but now, the river below the bridge looked eerily black, and the gurgling of the water which usually was calming sent a chill down his spine. Only hours ago, the body of Gary Velvet had been pulled from underneath the very bridge he was standing on, his limbs inexplicably sewn up with wire like some sort of amateur home-art project. Not that you could tell. If there had been policemen or yellow tape when they had found the body this morning, there were no traces of it now. As he reached the end of the bridge, Flynn peered over the side, looking at the section where the foundations of the bridge met the riverbank. That was some small bushes and brambles growing under there. He supposed that must have been where the victim (Gary, his name was Gary) had been caught and tangled up, or else he would have just kept drifting until he went out to sea. That must have been the initial plan. That meant that the actual murder, or at least the disposal of the body, must have happened further up stream. Boessen had said that the victim had been dead for at least six hours, so either the body had been floating downstream for a good amount of time before it was caught underneath the bridge, or the more likely option, the body had been caught almost immediately, and simply been unseen in the dark shadows of the night and early morning. Hypothetically, if he was the killer (and this *was* hypothetical, whatever that weird blanket girl thought) and he wanted the body to float out to sea, he would have made sure there wasn't a long trip in between. In other words, since the river opened out to the ocean only a half-mile up the road, while the murder probably didn't happen underneath the bridge, it had to have taken place relatively near. A smile started to creep onto Flynn's face. That weird feeling was building in his chest again.

Something made a very loud sound behind him. Flynn twirled frantically, almost tripping over his own feet, grabbing the side of the bridge for support. For a moment, he looked around wildly, his heart pounding, not seeing anything besides the glow of the moon and the worn stone of the bridge. Then he looked downward. A small black and white dog was looking back at him, holding a stick that was much too big for him in his mouth. It seemed the dog had been walking onto the bridge, and the stick had clanged into one of those metal poles placed at the beginning and end of the bridge, which he thought were meant to make sure cars couldn't enter. He placed his hand on his chest, clutching the fabric of his jacket. He didn't realize how tense he had been, or how loud the beating of his heart rang through his ears.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. *Stop being stupid.* There was no way the killer was still around. There was nothing to be afraid of. It wasn't like anything bad would happen to him in particular. He had nothing to do with it.

The dog was still looking at him, its small nose quivering slightly, like it was drinking in his moment of embarrassment. Flynn turned back to face the river, trying to ignore it, but he could still feel its stare burning into the back of his neck. He whirled back around. "What?!" he said incredulously to the dog, feeling simultaneous ridiculous and indignant.

The dog said nothing, but one ear perked up, giving the impression it was raising an eyebrow. "Get out of here!"

The dog made a movement that almost resembled a shrug, and trotted off, the stupidly large stick that in its mouth. Flynn clicked his tongue, stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jacket, and began to walk down the road. “Jackass,” he said sullenly to himself, “think he’s better than me? Well he’s just a dog, what does he -SHIT!”

Another loud bang behind him had startled him, and he had tripped over a jutting cobblestone. He fell heavily onto stomach, and furious, looked to see what had caused the noise.

The dog was there again. It seemed like the stick in its mouth had this time hit the metal poles on the other end of the bridge. Its head was tilted as it looking at him, like it was mocking him. Flynn tried to get up angrily, but ended up slipping again.

~

When Flynn arrived back at his house, he found he wasn’t surprised to see that the lights in the kitchen brightly shining through the window. During the first few years after he and his father had moved to Hjeslin, whenever he had come home late from school, it would be a rare sight for any lights in the house to be on. His dad was usually so exhausted from work that Flynn only got to see him for an hour or two at a time every week; he would just put on some TV when he got home and fall asleep with a bowl of cereal in his lap. However, over the past few months, that had slowly but surely changed. Ever since his dad had met *that* woman. He couldn’t seem to escape her, and the almost choking atmosphere that she seemed to perpetuate. Now he stood outside the front door, taking in deep breaths of the cool air. He could feel his heart pounding again, as the sound of laughter obscured by the door erupted from inside the house. The kind of laughter he was more used to hearing from his father these days. With a deep breath, he dug the nail of his thumb into his index finger, and opened the door.

Instantly, a wave of warmth washed over him, and a pleasant smell wafted up to his nose. Somebody had apple pie in the oven, though Flynn knew full well he probably knew who it was. The first thing you saw when you entered the house was a hallway leading up to some stairs, but if you looked to the immediate left, the direction Flynn was purposely avoiding looking as he took off his scarf and hung it on the hanger, the living room and kitchen would greet you. “Welcome home Flynn!”, came a hearty voice.

Flynn let his eyes slide over to the left, and saw his father sitting by the kitchen, a mug of hot chocolate in his hand, and a bright smile on his face. To this day, no matter how many times relatives pointed it out or how much he hated it, Flynn was extremely aware of the fact that he was essentially the spitting image of his father. They both had the same piercing green eyes, the same black hair(though his dad kept it much shorter than Flynn), the same pointed jaw, and the same intense stare.

“Hi Dad.”

Up until a few months ago, he and his dad had also shared the same stiff features, the kind that struggled to smile properly, but now, the smile on his Dad’s face was so wide that it was almost unrecognizable to him. That was, he knew, largely due to the other person at the table.

“Hi Zoe.”

Zoe was the kind of person who people noticed the moment she walked into a room. It wasn’t because she was particularly beautiful, or because she attracted a lot of attention to herself, it was simply because she cut such a striking figure. The first thing most people noticed was her hair. It was an almost impossibly vivid silver, almost white, and it fell down behind her back from the ponytail she kept it tied up in at the top. The next thing people noticed were her eyes. They were bright violet, and gave off an humbling feeling, like under Zoe’s stare, what you thought and what you cared about her irrelevant to what really mattered. Most people who weren’t

silenced by her gaze were struck down by her voice, which was soft, but cold and fiercely intelligent, which she commanded with confidence and grace. As the town's local doctor, she wore a white lab-coat over a red blouse, like she did now, or when she had to frequent the chilly outdoors, she wore a fashionable black trench coat, which was hanging on the back of her chair. She turned to look at Flynn, and her face broke into a tired yet kind smile. "Hello, Flynn. How was your day?"

Flynn knew it was unreasonable of him to hate her. But he did. He hated everything about her. He hated her palatable aura of superiority. He hated how her violet eyes always seem to stare deep into him, like she knew exactly what he was thinking. He hated how she always was so patient and understanding of the situation she was in, and how she was surely making him feel. But most of all, he hated how whenever she was around, his father would smile in a way that only one other person should make him smile.

Flynn realized his Dad was speaking. "Want some apple pie? It's almost ready. We've also got some hot chocolate if you-"

"No thanks." he said flatly, as his stomach growled in protest. "I'm not hungry."

Zoe looked at him with that infuriatingly wise stare. "Not even some cocoa? You must be cold. It's freezing out there-"

"No." Flynn interjected, hiding his shaking hands behind his back. "I'm fine. Just... Just forget it. Go back to what you were doing."

He could feel the stares of the pair of them as he quickly trudged up the stairs, opened the door to his room, and collapsed onto his bed.

~

In reality, Flynn didn't particularly hate his father for moving to Hjeslin. In fact, he understood the need to get away from the city and that house as quickly as possible, and to maybe escape the hustle and bustle of the city as well. But for whatever reason, ever since he had seen this place for the first time four years ago; an obscured view from the back of his Dad's car, the place always made him feel tired. It was always too cold, for one thing. Yes, it had been cold in the city too, there weren't much places in this country you could go without it being cold, but at least there you might get to wear a T-shirt a few times a year. Hjeslin wasn't just cold most of the time, it was cold *all* of the time, and in the winter, like now, the temperatures dropped to sometimes dangerous levels. Almost every day, it snowed at least a little. Of course, this wasn't all the unpleasant weather that the town had to offer. Because somebody had had the fantastic idea of putting the town between the coast and the mountain range, it was windy all the time; the kinds of wind that chilled you to the bone and occasionally blew over small children.

But it wasn't just the physical atmosphere. While the town had a couple of sightseeing spots (the dock and the out-of-the-way mountain vantage point Heaps Peake were two notable ones) the people who lived in Hjeslin were often irritable and unhelpful. Everyone was much too tired or much too cold, and as a result, even during the daytime, it was uncommon to see even a couple of people roaming the town's streets.

Flynn turned over on his bed, and pulled the blanket closer to his neck.

*It's like this place covers your heart in ice.*

But not anymore. Someone had interrupted the cold daily monotony of the town. For the first time since in the four years Flynn had been here, the town's typically frozen occupants had begun to stir and move around, like the town has risen up from a deep slumber that nobody had realized they hadn't woken from. Something was changing, slowly but surely; like the air of the town itself had taken on a different flavor. There

was a murderer on the loose, and events were accelerating, more quickly and more drastically than anyone could have predicted.

One victim, impaled in twenty-nine different places.

Another, stitched together and thrown away into the river like a piece of garbage.

A girl, attacked by a mysterious assailant armed with a syringe, who for some reason, had left her unharmed and untouched, if thoroughly spooked, then accusing *him* of perhaps having something to do with it.

It was horrible.

It was ludicrous.

Flynn clutched his chest, digging his nails into his jacket, as if to cover the heart that was beating so fast with excitement that it felt like it would burst open.

It was so very interesting.

The sun had long since set. While Flynn himself might not have realized it, and it was too dark in the room for anybody else to see, the smile he had on his face now seemed to chill the very air around it.

~

Morning did not come quickly for Hjeslin. Winter was infamous for shorter days, but whatever reason, that sentiment seemed to hold especially true for the town. The sun seemed to take forever before it finally peaked over the mountain range, and even then, thanks to the constant overcast of clouds, it never really seemed to be present. It was like the town had three states: cold in the morning, slightly less cold whenever the sun appeared for a few seconds behind the clouds, and freezing when it set behind the sea, simultaneous too soon and not soon enough.

When Flynn didn't have any school, like today, he would typically stay in his room and not do anything, after all, why go out in this absurd cold if you didn't have to, he had always thought. However, today, Flynn was on a mission. He wanted to know if his hypothesis from the previous night was correct, was there somewhere isolated yet close to the bridge where the Gary Velvet's body could have been dumped. The more Flynn thought about it, the more likely that it seemed that whatever location it was had been used as a disposal for the body, and not where the actual murder had taken place. The victim's limbs, for whatever reason, had been sewn up with wire, which is something that would have taken a lot of time and effort, and if Boessen's report about the cause of death was correct, that Velvet died from his injuries, it seemed unlikely that he died without a fair amount of screaming. Therefore, the murder must have taken place somewhere private, most likely the killer's house or maybe deep in the forest that ran up the side of the mountain. Still, Flynn thought that there was merit in discovering exactly where the body had been dumped, it might be useful to understanding the killer's thought patterns, and therefore, giving more helpful advice to the student body on how to avoid them. Right. That was definitely the reason.

*Well, that was the plan anyway.*

Flynn had snuck out of the house earlier this morning, and had made it perhaps a couple hundred feet before the cold paralyzed him. He hadn't been prepared for the how strong the wind was, which almost sent his scarf flying from his neck, and neither had he been ready for when the snow began to fall, gently but steadily. It reminded Flynn of how the snow inside of a snow-globe fell, as it scattered around him with every step he took, or movement he made through the air. Desperately cold and very miserable, Flynn attempted to take shelter in the town's library, and then in accessory store, but nothing was yet open. Cursing his own stupidity and shortsightedness, Flynn sat down on a bench next to the river and hugged himself for warmth, tucking his

mouth into the inside of his jacket. Suddenly, he didn't really feel like investigating the murder, but neither did he feel like going home. He didn't want to have to think about explaining himself to his father, who was probably starting to wake up now, and would see him if he tried to sneak back into his room. Flynn sighed, and looked up at the milky white sky. Without warning, a wave of anger washed back over him. Who cared who where the killer had dumped the body? Why was he even here?

*What's wrong with me?*

"Flynn?"

Flynn looked up slowly, to see somebody trotting through the thin layer of snow toward him. He was tall, had acne covering his nose and a shock of huge red hair, and wore the most stupid smile on his face. "Holy shit, it is you!"

Flynn tried to keep his face neutral. "Hi Percy."

Percy had been in at least once of his classes since the very first year of highschool, and somehow Flynn had never gotten anymore used to him. Percy was stupid, and not just that, he was the kind of stupid that Flynn particularly hated. He latched onto people who were either smarter or more popular than him, and hung around like some annoying insect, trying to act like he knew what was going on around him, though he was completely oblivious to even the most obvious sarcasm or body language.

"Shit man, it is you! I don't know if I've ever seen you out of school!"

Flynn nodded and attempted to smile a little, fervently wishing that Percy would go away.

Percy clearly didn't notice the antagonism radiating from Flynn, and flopped down beside him on the bench, stopping Flynn from scooting away from him with a nonchalant arm over his shoulder.

"Dude, how you been!"

"Fine, I guess."

"You guess? What's that supposed to mean?" Percy tilted his head back over the top of the bench, a movement which send his puffy hair flopping back and forth, laughing heartily. Personally, Flynn had no idea what was supposed to be so funny.

Percy giggled for a few more seconds, then sat back up straight, wiping his nose, collecting some boogers onto his hand. He stared them blankly for a few seconds, that wiped them onto his pant-leg. "So anyway," he said turning his sheepish grin toward Flynn, "why are you out here so early? I don't even think the sun's out yet!" He stared at the sky for a moment afterwards, like he wasn't sure.

"Oh... you know," Flynn said through gritted teeth, "I could ask you the same thing."

Percy laughed again, slapping his knee. "You know me dude. I'm a wild soul-"

*Yeah, sure.*

"-so I've been out all night getting wasted."

Percy yawned, as if to prove how tired he was. "Let me tell you man, you gotta *create* your own entertainment in a boring-ass town like this."

"Right."

"Me and a couple of friends were up by Heapes Peake. Dude, let me tell you, it's so dark up there at night that you can't even see where the cliff face is. We were so drunk we started betting each-other how many steps towards the edge we could take."

"That seems kind of dangerous."

"Well yeah!" exclaimed Percy, like it was the most irrelevant thing in the world. "That's what makes it fun! Fun... let me tell you... fun... let me..."



He exploded into a series of mucous-filled coughs. A bit of phlegm landed on Flynn's cheek. He slowly wiped it off with the sleeve of his jacket.

"Shit man," he said, wiping his nose roughly, "I think I got a cold from that fucking mountain. Shit."

"Maybe you should go home and rest." said Flynn, putting a great deal of emphasis on the *maybe*.

"Yeah, I might... wait no! Oh, you clever dog! Dude, you never told me what you're doing out here! I never see you on the weekends or break. We should hangout some time. Some beer would brighten that serious face of yours."

Flynn's face was starting to hurt from smiling. "Yeah, *dude*, you know me. I just love... beer and shit."

"Don't change the subject, you!" said Percy much to Flynn's horror, he then laid his head on Flynn's shoulder.

"So, yeah, whatcha doin." He said it with with a slur, and Flynn could smell the alcohol on his breath.

Flynn stayed silent for a moment. "Just... club stuff." he said after a long pause, not untruthfully.

"Wha? *You* joined a club, bro? That doesn't sound much like... (Percy stopped to burp) ...like you.

Getting out there huh!"

"Not really." said Flynn tonelessly, "more like I was forced to join it. Every student that wasn't already part of a club had to participate."

A distant light seemed to ignite in Percy eye. "Wait... wait I think heard about this."

"What?" said Flynn, genuinely surprised. "How? We only had our first meeting yesterday night."

"No man, I... uh, you know Shea from the other class? Me and him are friends-"

*Of course you are.*

"-he was bitching about that club yesterday. 'Round noon. When we went over to the dock... SAY..."

Percy's voice was suddenly deep and earnest. "Dude, he said, you guys got that hottie in that club right?"

"What, Lily?" said Flynn, instantly.

"Nah! No... not her. Shit, what was her name?"

Flynn was confused. "You don't... you don't mean *Nina* do you?"

Percy clapped his hands together so loud and so suddenly that Flynn actually flinched. "THAT'S HER!" he said, probably way louder than he meant.

"You guys know each other?" said Flynn, sincerely curious.

Percy waved his hand back and forth like he was conducting an orchestra. "Well, *yeah*. We were in the same literature club sophomore year. Damn, that was a long time ago."

*Nina was in a club?*

"What happened?" said Flynn, trying to inch closer yet still trying to ward off Percy's alcohol tainted breath.

Percy looked confused. "What do you mean?"

Flynn gritted his teeth in impatience, trying to keep his voice level. "I mean if Nina was in a club, why is she in ours? Did she leave? Why?"

Percy seemed to be confused and overwhelmed by the barrage of questions. He looked blankly at Flynn not really saying anything. For a moment, Flynn wondered if he had passed out, but then the boy let out a sigh and sat back up straight, finally skirting away from Flynn. "What does it matter?" Percy said with a yawn, his eyes starting to droop shut.

He was losing interest, his irises starting to dart back and forth, probably thinking about going home to warm up and get some sleep. "Well!" interjected Flynn, trying to keep Percy's attention, "I was wondering because... she's such... a hottie, you know?"

Personally, describing Nina as a “hottie” seemed to Flynn as something that was wrong on a fundamental level, and it left a weird taste in his mouth. He hadn’t seen much of her that hadn’t been covered by the blanket, but still, while she certainly wasn’t *unattractive*, he didn’t ever think he could see her like that. While Flynn had never given much thought to what his type was, (even as the mental image of a smiling girl with long brown hair flashed through his head) Nina seemed to be someone too shy, too fragile to be really looked at in that light. Like an egg, that would shatter open if tampered with too much. If he had to choose a girl in the club purely on a looks basis, Lily seemed to him like the obvious choice.

Flynn pinched the bridge of his nose.

*Seriously, what am I even thinking about?*

Meanwhile, at the mention of the word “hottie”, Percy’s eyes seemed to have come alive with some kind of feverish anticipation, like he some middle schooler at the lunch table ready to gossip about the new transfer student. He sneezed again, but this time didn’t even bother to wipe his nose. “I know right?!” he proclaimed, as a string of snot slowly descended onto his lap. “But let me tell you man, she’s a little...” Percy stuck out his tongue and put his index finger to the side of head, twirling it in a circular oscillation.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Dude,” said Percy, leaning forward, whispering in a hushed voice, “she’s weird as shit-”

For a moment, seemingly for no reason, Flynn remembered Nina’s expression when he had first entered the club. Curious, unfocused, and somehow... off.

“- we were in that club together for the whole year, and I don’t think I heard her speak for than a couple of sentences during that time. And that freaking blanket! I swear, always had it with her, no matter what, and never, *ever* moved from her seat in the corner. She would always be in the club room before everyone else, and she would always be the last to leave, no matter how late it was. With some book or something, of course. Listen to this: one time, my and some bros snuck back into the school one night on a dare, around midnight, and we saw the light in the club room on. We went to check it out of course, and that girl, Nina, was *still there*, in the same position with the same goddamn book. Creeped me the fuck out, let me tell you! I mean seriously, how was she even allowed to stay that late? All the teachers had gone home, you know?”

Percy whistled, his eyes concentrated on something distant and only visible to him. “But bro, I haven’t even told you the weirdest part.”

Flynn leaned closer to listen, despite himself.

“Dude, during the last half of the year-”

“So, still sophomore year, right?” asked Flynn, not wanting to miss any details.

“Yeah, yeah.” Percy waved his hand dismissively. “But anyway, she just straight up disappeared after winter break. Quit the club and everything. Never saw her again.”

He sighed. “Wasn’t much point in sticking around that place any longer after she left. All the other good-looking ones were gone too.”

Flynn felt the tightness grow in his chest.

Percy was still talking. “Found out later that she never came back to school for the rest of the year. Had to repeat the year and everything; too many missed days. Ain’t that bizarre?”

“But wait,” interrupted Flynn, “she’s a senior now. So...”

He trailed off in thought.

*She’s a year older than me?!*

“Let me tell you man, I wouldn’t. She’s bad news that one. You know what they say about sticking it in crazy-”

Flynn had stopped paying attention. He rose from the bench, tucking his hands into the pockets of his jacket, his scarf buffeting around in the wind.

“Hey man, where you goin’?”

Around Flynn, the snow began to fall faster, the wind picking it up and swirling it around in a little tornado around where he stood. There were a lot of things that he wasn’t sure of when it came to Nina, but she hadn’t seemed stupid, or the kind of person who would just stop going to school for the last half of the year. Which meant there was something in her personal life that was interfering in her studies? Or was it something else?

Flynn began to walk briskly up the riverbank, still digging his hands as deep as they would go into the nylon.

“Uh, okay man, see you later.”

Flynn’s breath was visible in front of him. To his right, from a house on the street next to the river which, a door opened and a outburst of cursing could be heard, undoubtedly from someone who had discovered first hand how cold it was outside. So many irregularities of the town’s daily life had fallen into his lap in such a short amount of time, and Flynn could hardly believe his own luck. Slowly but surely, the picture of what was really happening around here was becoming visible, and Flynn suddenly felt a surge of passion.

Why not him?

He was in this position, and probably the only one who could figure it out. It wasn’t like anybody else took much interest in this matter, or would be smart enough to piece together the clues even if they were.

Why shouldn’t *he* solve these mysteries?

Of course, putting himself into any direct danger was completely out of the question. There was, after all, some sort of psycho with a syringe stalking the streets at night, and Flynn liked his body as it was, free of pieces of timber and wire, so he would keep to himself. Try to solve this thing in the background, unbeknownst to anybody.

Flynn shook his head, attempting to clear his thoughts. Obviously, this was all just for fun. It wasn’t like he would *actually* become a detective, put on a fedora and sunglasses and stalk the streets by night while monologuing in his head. But there wasn’t any harm in playing along with the idea, maybe snooping for information every now and then.

It would all just be a laugh.

A joke.

None of it was real.

Which brought him to matter of the moment.

Flynn looked up from his thoughts, then he looked down.

For the last minute, Flynn had been hiking along the riverbank, taking careful steps as to not slip and fall into a river that was surely cold beyond belief. Along the bank, shriveled plants covered in frost licked the water, either drifting nonchalantly in the tide or sticking straight up in the cold. Those that were bushes or small trees were completely covered in snow. For some reason, the sight of them reminded that Christmas was only a few days away. When he was a kid, something like that would have made him excited. It seemed a long time ago.

It was worth noting that the little pathway that ran alongside the riverbank was actually adjacent to it, rather, it was mounted on a hill above it, its perimeter made up of a stone wall. Pedestrians could walk on the higher side, while plants and the such cold grow on the lower side without being disturbed by people. However, there was one exception along the river.

Flynn began to walk down a steep slope of stairs, ducking to avoid the ceiling of earth that rose up to meet him. The snow suddenly stopped, and Flynn found himself in a dark space, which suddenly had become eerily quiet, though it might have been his imagination. He wasn't technically underground, since the side of the "room" that faced the riverbank was open, allowing anybody to step onto the lower portion below the stone wall that separated Hjeslin from the river, but he was *underneath* the ground he had been walking only a few moments previously.

Flynn sighed breathed out, releasing a white cloud of breath into the air, and sat down heavily on the stone bench that had been carved out of the wall - really just a slab that stuck out horizontally from the wall. The cold stone stabbed right through his pants, so he tucked his jacket underneath his butt and sat on it.

In all honesty, it was pretty obvious, though Flynn hadn't thought of it until he had seen the stairs come into view as he walked down the riverbank. He wasn't entirely sure what the point of this place was, maybe just a way for the people who cleaned up the riverbank every few months to get down from without having to jump the length of the wall. By any rate, this spot was one of his favorite hiding places; somewhere to chill if he wasn't up to looking at Zoe's face after school, or just wanted to be alone, which recently had been a lot of the time. However, it wasn't his little secret. The place was a favorite spot, besides from Heapes Peake, for teenagers to hang around, drink alcohol and mess around. As such, the "room" typically was extremely messy; ashes from cigarette buds on the floor, and cans of soda scattered around the edges.

Flynn took a look around, out of the corners of his sharp eyes. The place was clean. There were no twigs in the corner nor bits of rubber and paper spread across the floor. Somebody had cleaned up, whether that be the police of someone else.

*Don't waste any time, do they?*

Flynn went over it one more time in his head, his theory about how it had all went down.

The killer had likely kidnapped Gary Velvet at some point either at night or before morning, though the former seemed more likely, Flynn didn't think much people besides Percy would choose to wander around the town after dark, when the cold and wind became almost unbearable. Then, probably after he had been bound and gagged in some private location, the killer had tortured him for a bit, at some point dealing a blow to his skull, one which would explain the crack in the skull that Boessen had mentioned. Then, the arms and legs had been cut off and then the stumps sewn up with wire, a detail which just seemed out of place. Gary had probably died from his injuries at that point, so the killer had dumped him in the river, hopefully only a few feet from where he was sitting, hoping that the body would float out to sea. But it hadn't, and instead had been caught underneath the bridge. There was just one problem. A little, almost innocuous leap of logic that had been bothering him ever since he had come up with this theory last night.

Personally, if he was a serial killer trying to keep a relatively low profile and disposing of his victims with precision and prudence, why the hell would he try to dump a body in Susquando River? Yes, the dock was probably way too open to try to go through with the deed without being seen, but banking on the fact that the river, which was pretty shallow and didn't really have that strong of a current, would carry the body out to sea without anything going wrong seemed like an unnecessarily big risk. ...Contrarily, it seemed more likely that something *would* go wrong.

*Almost like whoever did this wanted the body to be found.*

Flynn thought back to Linsley Shorsheck, the girl who had been impaled in 29 different places with lumber, some through the eye. It wasn't exactly a discrete way to kill someone. In fact, everything about the way these two students had been murdered seemed predisposed to cause as much attention as possible. It wasn't a thought that made Flynn feel better.

## 东末

## Chapter 3 | People Aren't Simple

"Tonight, the dream was weirder than usual.

It progressed in largely the same way, but not nearly as visceral as it usually is. It was like I was watching everything through some kind of distant window. When I reached forward with my hand, and when the door opened, at first I didn't see anything, nothing except the four walls of the room and the dangling lamp on the ceiling, barely being held by a thin strand of string, not giving off enough light to even see the room properly. Somehow, that moment was more scary than almost anything else.

Eventually, I did see it. Her feet swinging back and forth, the shadows dancing behind her, painting a yet disturbing yet engrossing picture on the back wall.

But somehow, it was hard to see this time. The details were obscured. Or maybe I just wasn't looking all that closely.

I wonder if it's because I'm used to this dream.

I wonder if it's because I just don't care anymore.

I woke up, the same as usual, and, as usual, I'm shivering and hugging myself, like I want to protect myself from something. I feel cold, even though I'm buried underneath as many blankets as pillows as my bed will allow. I look outside my window, just in time to see the sun to begin to peek over the edge of the mountain. The light pours into my room, blinding my view in a bath of orange light.

The light stings my eyes.  
It starts to make me cry."

~

"Is this everybody?"

Boessen's voice seemed to echo throughout the small room, making it feel even emptier than it already was. Though he tried to keep his tone neutral, Flynn could practically taste the disappointment in his voice, though he wasn't sure why the teacher had expected much of anything else. Flynn sighed and pressed his cheek against the table, as the heater rattled off on the corner of the table, while Shea absentmindedly flicked a piece of lint that was dangling from the felt inside of his hoodie. The wind could be heard whistling through the old school building, and even though Flynn knew he was imagining it, he could swear he saw Boessen's breath visible as he coughed into his ugly coat. The teacher seemed to peering at a list of some sort from behind his frosted glasses, holding it up to the light of the room like he was trying to decipher some secret code.

"I know Nina wasn't going to be here," said Boessen, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, "but Shea, where is Lily?"

"Wait, what?" Shea looked up. He had clearly been too interested in playing with the lint to pay attention to anything that had been happening.

Boessen's stare was unreadable. "Your sister. Where is she?"

"Oh... um..." muttered Shea under his breath, his eyes darting around the room looking for an excuse, "she is a little bit sick. The air is kind of cold, you know?"

"I see," said Boessen, nodding slowly, somehow not realizing that he had been just blatantly lied to, "that's a shame. You kids have to be more careful. Well in that case, I've got some hot chocolate with me—"

"You know," Shea interrupted, getting slowly to his feet, and tucking his red hoodie more closely to his body, "she wasn't doing too good when I left this morning."

Boessen hand has halfway into a brown backpack. "Erm... that, I'm really sorry to hear that, Shea. Please tell her that I send her my regards. Now—"

Like, *really* not good." Shea's voice sounded a little more energetic than it had a moment before, and his eyes shone with some sort of childlike glee.

"Um." Boessen looked confused, like he didn't know what to do. His hand kept pulling in and out of the backpack, a small of cocoa mix and a thermos of hot water dangling between his thumb and forefinger. "That's... bad."

"In fact," Shea said, taking a step towards the teacher, "I'm worried that she might not make it until tomorrow if I leave her alone too long."

Boessen's eye started to involuntarily twitch. "P-Pardon?"

Flynn wasn't quite sure what was happening, but at the very least it was more entertaining than watching as small flakes of snow collected in the frame of the window. One could only watch snow fall upon a sleepy town like Hjeslin without beginning to feel like the situation had been playing on repeat for the entire winter.

Shea was already halfway to the door, pausing to look back at Boessen over his shoulder, his left foot hanging cartoonishly in the air. "I'm worried you know, love my sister, always have, and her dieing wouldn't help spruce up this club room very much. I'm sure you wouldn't want her to die, would you Teach?"

"W-well, no, but-"

"Gee, I'm so glad you agree. Thanks for understanding Teach."

"Wait, Shea-"

The door had already closed. Flynn and Boessen were alone in the room. Flynn started to cough audibly into his jacket, trying to hide the smile that had suddenly and unexpectedly appeared on his face. Boessen seemed a bit stunned, looking distantly at the door with a befuddled on his face. His mouth moved slightly, before he turned back to Flynn, shrugging his shoulders. "That was a little unexpected, huh?"

"Yeah, he sort of gave you a *sick burn*." Flynn doubled over snickering, half at Boessen's confused face, and half at his own unexpected awful joke. As he smiled, his chest began to feel a little bit lighter.

Boessen started to smile too, though Flynn was sure he didn't really know what was going on. He squirmed in his seat, before reaching back into the brown backpack and withdrawing the packet and thermos. He gestured at Flynn with his hand. "I d-don't suppose you would like some hot chocolate would you?"

*Oh, what the hell.*

"Yeah, sure." said Flynn, brushing his hand across his mouth, as if to wipe the smile off of his face.

Boessen laughed awkwardly, and opened the thermos, probably with more effort than it should have taken a grown man. Steam hissed from as it escaped from the thermos, evaporating into the cold air instantly. It was a welcoming sound, and despite himself, Flynn inched closer to Boessen's seat, perhaps to just get closer to the momentary cloud of heat. He was breaking character a lot today.

Taking a couple of small cups from the pocket of his hideous coat, Boessen filled them to the brim with the hot water, before mixing the cocoa powder from the packet into them. As the cups' contents swirled together, his face became a little more somber. "Um, Flynn?" he said, his voice even more soft than usual.

"Yeah?" said Flynn brightly, taking the cup nearest to him and raising it to his lips.

"Do you hate me?"

The teacher's question took Flynn completely by surprise. He paused his hand before the cup and the delicious smelling hot chocolate reached his lips, and set it back down on the table. It made a tiny sound, but it still seemed loud in the silence of the room. "Why are you asking me that?"

Boessen shifted again, clearly uncomfortable, his eyes looking everywhere except than at his young student. He tapped the table with his nail a couple of times, like he was trying to break the uncomfortable silence, even if he couldn't figure out what exactly to say. He swallowed, and then began to speak, saying each word like he was afraid they would break if he said them to fast or forcibly. "W-well, as a- as a teacher, my relationship with my students is one of the things I hold most important. Teaching is about passing your failures, and you can't do that without some sort of connection with those you want to pass them onto. ...I've been looking over, well, been placed in your class as a teacher for about two months now. Not once have you ever answered a question or participated in a discussion of your own volition. You never look like you want to be there. You always look so sad. And-and I w-was wondering if maybe that was my fault. If it is, I want to talk with you to see if we can change that together, as stereotypical as that sounds coming from an educator. The irony is not above me, let me assure you Flynn, not above me at all."

Now it was Flynn's turn to sit awkwardly speechless, with his mouth open stupidly. He didn't know what had taken him aback more, the fact that Boessen's words seem to be legitimately sincere, or the fact that he

found himself agreeing with everything that that sincerity seemed concerned about. He took a deep breath, trying to get his composure back, slowly but surely searching his head for the right words.

Not a cutting slab of sarcasm or a dismissive and meaningless insinuation.

But something genuine.

Easier said than done.

"I.. I don't *hate* you." Flynn hardly recognized his own voice. It sounded vulnerable, almost he was still the kid he had been four years ago, watching that horrible shadow dance along the back wall. "I just... can't stand how you try so hard."

Boessen took a slow and deep sip of his cocoa, then breathing out so that a shapeless and swirling haze of white air appeared from his mouth, like something was escaping from it. His brown eyes were subdued and contemplative behind his glasses. "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

Flynn felt strangely self-conscious. He could feel his throat tightening, the dryness of his lips, as he tried to talk, simultaneously trying to be honest with his teacher and keep him from knowing more than he would care to reveal about himself. "I.."

He swallowed, starting again. "I know I'm not the most expressive person. It's hard for me to get into or excited about much of anything."

"I guess..." Flynn's chest started to hurt. "I guess I'm just boring. So... when I see people like you, trying their best and whatever-"

*Trying to be happy in the face of all the shit they go through.*

"I just..."

*Not ever thinking about or appreciating how easy it all is for them.*

"...I suppose it just..."

*Pisses me off.*

Boessen was silent for a long time. He took another sip of his cocoa and looked off into the distance, through the window that Flynn had his back to. He looked older for some reason, and Flynn took that moment to reflect on his teacher's ungraspable personality. He had known Boessen for only a short time, but he still found himself surprised by the myriad of different emotions Boessen had shown over the last few days, when all Flynn had seen of him prior was a bumbling, anxious substitute for one of his favorite teachers. The way Boessen had spoken to Nina, in that soft, almost protective tone, or how serious and cold his eyes could become sometimes.

It was a little disconcerting.

Though his coat was still one of the most ugly things Flynn had ever seen.

The loud thud of Boessen placing his mug back onto the table jolted Flynn suddenly and unexpectedly out of his thoughts. The teacher's expression had now softened, and he fixed his brown eyes on Flynn. "Do you.."

He coughed. "Flynn, do you like school?"

Another question he was completely unprepared for. This conversation was becoming increasingly uncomfortable to sit through.

Boessen adjusted his glasses. "I've seen your transcript, your grades that is, and they're not half bad. I expect one or two half decent colleges would let you in if you applied. But... you haven't joined any clubs in your four years with us, and you always head straight home whenever my period is over. I would encourage why that is?"



A small prickle of annoyance started to jut out of Flynn's brow, and he irritably rubbed it with his finger. "What the hell do you mean by that? What do you know?"

Boessen raised his hands in front of him, still with that same maddingly soft expression, like he was *pitying* him, and the thought only made the throb of annoyance grow bigger and hotter. "No, I won't stop." Flynn lashed out, his mouth moving before his brain had time to catch up, "you're just... you're..."

"Flynn." There was not a hint of warmth in Boessen's voice, and despite himself, Flynn stopped talking, momentarily shocked by the hardness of his teacher's tone.

Boessen sighed, and slowly took off his glasses, placing them gently on the table. Without them, he could have been a decade older. He rubbed the crevices of his eyes with his index finger, before placing his face in his hands, letting his finger slide down from his forehead to his chin, like he was trying to wipe himself clean of something. "Flynn, please don't misunderstand me. I'm not trying to discredit you or condescend. I just want you to consider something for a second, and I say this as an educator and as someone who is concerned about your well-being."

Flynn didn't say anything. The kindness of the words seem to stab into him, hurting more with each word.

"Flynn I want you to consider, that maybe, just maybe, people aren't quite simple as you take them to be." Their eyes met a moment, and Flynn's mind felt strangely blank. "Especially given what happened to your-"

The door to the room flew opened with immense force, and Flynn spasmed in his chair, his whole body turning towards the source of the sound. Shea McAdams had returned, his body posed dramatically in the frame of the door, his eyes wildly searching the room until they landed on Flynn. "Ah, Flynn, old pal, how is it going?"

Recovering from the initial surprise of Shea's entrance, Flynn repositioned himself in his chair in a more supportive way, and found he was unexpectedly relieved by the appearance of the other boy. It was like he had been saved from taking a plunge into a lake of icy water.

"Shea?" Boessen said, also turning in his seat, "I thought you went to go see your sister."

"Oh, but I did Teach." Shea grinned, taking long and exaggerated steps into the room, "but I was only gone for but a few minutes when I remembered I had something to talk about with my buddy Flynn."

Flynn's short-lived relief evaporated. "What?" he said weakly.

"You don't mind, do you Teach?"

"Oh, of course not." said Boessen, standing up and starting to pour the cups of cocoa back into the thermos, even though Flynn still hadn't taken a sip of his own. He turned to Flynn. "We'll finish this conversation another day, okay?"

Flynn still hadn't finished processing all the things that were happening at once, but before he could open his mouth, Shea wrapped his arm around Flynn's shoulder, pulling him out of his chair towards the open door. "Cool, Teach. I'll see you tomorrow."

Flynn stared helplessly at the retreating Boessen as he was dragged out of the room. He tried to make an expression to plead for the teacher to not let him be alone with Shea, but Boessen only smiled, and raised his hand in farewell. As they passed through the doorway, Flynn only had time to say: "wait no, don't let him take me!", before Shea closed the door behind them.

~

They were outside the old school building now, the shadows it cast covering the two boys with an eerie darkness, making the space even colder than it would have been. Flynn had become somewhat used to the

relative warmth of the “club-room”, and even with his jacket on, he wrapped his arms around himself, taking deep breaths of the cold air. He wished that he had at least taken one sip of the cocoa that Boessen had prepared.. Shea was standing a few feet away, facing away from Flynn, looking out over the sloped road that led back to town, the lamp-posts lining it on both sides. Shea himself was hanging from one arm from the lamppost at the top of the hill, his feet planted on the iron base of the pole. His blond hair blew lazily in the wind, wrapping messily around his face.

Flynn wasn't quite what Shea had dragged him outside for. The expression the other boy had on his face didn't reveal anything, having neither this usually lopsided smile or the occasional competence that he seemed to switch back and forth from with absolutely no regards for consistency. Flynn prided himself on at least having an idea of what people were thinking, like his dad, or Percy, or the Boessen he thought he had known up until this week, who are seemed to wear their slim and simple characteristics on their sleeves. But between Shea, Nina, Lily, Zoe and the Boessen who had materialized during the last conversation, it appeared he was losing his touch at resenting them, since what was going through their minds was drifting further and further from his comprehension. He wondered faintly what had changed in this town, besides from the occasionally serial killer attack. He wondered if it hadn't been the town that was changing, against its will or otherwise.

It was Shea's feet which broke the silence.

They made the stiff cold earth crunch underneath them as Shea lightly dropped from his perch on the lamppost, his hair swinging wildly around his head. He brushed the a mess of long blond strands out of his eyes, untangling the parts that had knotted and stick to the corner of his mouth. Shea turned to look at Flynn directly, and despite his own judgement, the chill that went down Flynn's spine wasn't entirely about the cold. There was something different about Shea's face right now, even if it wasn't clearly desirable in his features or his mannerisms. It was something that you couldn't see that was different, something underneath his face that had always been there, just not immediately visible to those who weren't paying attention.

*Screw that, thought Flynn disdainfully, I pay shit amounts of attention.*

“Hey”, Shea said, his voice pleasant and assuming, even as his blue eyes flashed with some sort of passionate indignation, their stare almost seeming to invoke some sort of challenge.

“Uh, hey?” Flynn tried to make the unsaid question in his voice abundantly clear.

Shea turned away again, took a few steps down the hill, before tilting his head back to look at Flynn. He wore a grin, but it had none of the warmth of his typical smile. “Walk with me, *buddy*.”

Without waiting to see if Flynn was following, Shea tucked his hands into the large front pocket of his hoody, and began to walk slowly down the hill, his figure small and retreating in cold light of the early morning sun. Flynn watched him go for a moment, not following immediately, his head still cluttered with too many thoughts and too much uncertainty.

*Seriously, I really don't understand any of you people.*

By the time that Flynn had caught to Shea, the blond boy has halfway down the hill. His long legs had made his walking pace slightly faster than average, meaning Flynn had to jog a little to catch up to him, though even this small psychically exertion had robbed him of his breath by the time he reached Shea's side. Shea thankfully didn't say anything out loud, but his amused sideways glance was enough to make Flynn's cheeks turn red. It wasn't *his* fault that athleticism was a trait his family had a tradition of steering clear of, at least ever since his grandfather had passed out in the last 1000-meter sprint of the 1900 Olympics.

The two boys walked in silence for a time, the only sound between being the constant whistle of the wind coming down from the mountains and the bark of a distant dog, which immediately made Flynn clench his fists a little more tighter than absolutely necessary. But it didn't seem like words were needed for the present

moment. The reticence between them was thick and heavy, and it was hard for awhile for them to speak, or do anything besides trudge through the cold and listen to the ambient noises of the town. Surprising to even himself, it was Flynn who first found the will to speak. When he did, his voice sounded cracked and brittle from lack of use.

“...Um, so where are you taking me?”

Shea cast a faint sideways glance at Flynn before turning his head to look at the sky. “I told Boessen, didn’t I? Lily isn’t feeling too good, so I’m going home to take care of her.”

“Yeah, but I thought that was a lie.”

Shea chuckled, some of the warmth in his face returning. “Not so much a lie as it was an excuse. An excuse to talk to you, specifically.”

Flynn was becoming more and more confused by the moment. “...Okay, but why do you want to talk with me?”

“What, I need an excuse to talk to a buddy. Come on, man! There’s some weirdo with a tendency for murder walking around. When in danger, always bring a buddy, as they say.”

Shea’s voice was light and breathless, like he had just finished telling some incredibly funny joke, making it even the more jarring when his voice slowed down to a more somber tone. “Yeah. Yeah, right. Like me and you are friends.”

Shea said it so easily and casually that Flynn could hardly believe it. He simply stared at the side of Shea’s head, unable to form an adequate response. A smile started to play around Shea’s mouth, one that seemed to have no real emotion behind it, like it was an instinctive move by a face that didn’t know what else to do.

Putting his hands behind his neck, his elbows sticking straight up in the air, Shea continued to speak in his unbelievably easy-going manner. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d *like* us to be friends. I’m the kind of guy who wants to make friends with everybody he meets, more the merrier after all. Initially, you weren’t going to be an exception, but I just-” he said, putting emphasis on each word, “-*don’t think it’s going to happen* with you.”

Flynn’s initial shock had worn off, replaced with a moderate anger that seem to burn within the belly of his stomach. Clearly, Shea thought he had the moral high ground in this conversation. Every word he said seemed to drip with condescension, like he thought he knew exactly what to expect from what Flynn said next. *Well than*, Flynn thought, the fire in his belly blazing, *I’ll show him who is better at talking down to people.*

“Really?” Flynn said tersely, the venom in his voice surprisingly even himself. “I thought I was doing a pretty good job of dealing with your annoying antics and your weirdo sister.”

The air around Shea’s smile seemed to dip a few degrees, though the sun had finally poked out from behind the clouds, making his hair glow golden. “You know, I’m so glad you brought that up. Actually, the reason I wanted to talk to you was to discuss my *weirdo* sister.”

Shea had tried to change the point of the conversation, but Flynn could sense he had touched a gaping and ugly wound. All he needed to take control was to poke and irritate it just a little more...

“Right?” Flynn said nastily, “what with her freaking out and shit, it was pretty bizarre you know, rolling around on the floor and screaming-”

“Word of advice.” Flynn was satisfied to see that Shea’s voice had dropped all pretense of good-will and humility, instead being cold and toneless. Like his own. “You’re allowed to slander and criticize me all you want. Everyone knows I’m a colossal shit-head. But don’t ever say things like that again about my sister.”

They reached the bottom of the hill. Shea was looking downward, his hands tucked into the pocket of his red hoodie. Flynn stood mutely besides him, feeling a little bit worse about himself than he would have

expected. He had only wanted to wipe the stupid smile off of Shea's face, but he had the feeling he had touched on something a little more hurtful. Why had he done that? Why did he feel almost like he needed to?

"Anyway," Shea's voice was cool, as they turned left and trotted down an old-looking road, "as I was saying, what I really wanted to talk to you about was Lily."

"What about her?" Flynn tried to keep his voice neutral. There was no point to being defensive or petty anymore. It might be better to just listen to what Shea had to say. At the rate this day was going, it might even be something kind of interesting.

"I don't think we're going to be friends-"

"Yes, you already said that."

"-because I don't like the way you looked at her."

Flynn stopped in his tracks for a moment, his mouth dangling open idiotically. "Wait... wait, do you mean mean by that? I wasn't- I mean, I didn't, but wait..."

Shea grinned, sincerely this time, as Flynn stumbled over his words, trying to get out a cohesive sentence. "You have no idea how much better that makes me feel."

Flynn looked at him in confusion, making Shea elaborate. "I mean it's nice to know that you really had no idea what you were doing. It's not enough to make me like you, but, you know... it's just nice to know."

Flynn found his voice. "But wait, what do you mean? How was I looking at her?"

Shea sighed, looking at his feet, almost like he was uncomfortable. "Look, I'm used to guys looking at my sister. She's pretty, I guess, so it's... it's whatever. But when you saw Lily, especially after she-"

Shea waved his hand aimlessly in the air, as people do when they try to express the inexpressible. "It was like she saw her as... I don't know, a cute little plaything or something."

Flynn tried to open his mouth to defend himself, to let Shea know that he honestly and sincerely had no idea anything about this, but Shea interrupted him before he could.

"It wasn't just her either. You looked at everyone like that. Me, Boessen, Nina, even when you heard about those two messed-up, murders. And that's fine, I guess, I mean, I'm a professional shit-head and I don't even know Boessen or Nina, but I can't have anything happen to her, okay?!"

As Shea had talked, his voice and sped up and become more breathless, and by the end of his tangent, he was breathing hard, like he had just dumped something that had been on his chest for a long time. Despite himself, and whatever he was being accused of (for the second time this week already), Flynn couldn't help but smirk a little.

"Wait," he said, trying to keep his voice neutral, despite the snicker that seemed to be forcing its way out from his throat, "are you jealous? It that all this is?"

Shea instantly turned red as he struggled to get a retort out, and for the first time, the flame in Flynn's stomach didn't bother him much anymore. It was a nice feeling. "What! No! Are you stupid?"

Unable to keep the smile from spreading across his face, Flynn opted to bury his mouth in the folds of his green nylon jacket, as if he trying to breath into to warm up. "Hey man," he said, the shrill of his voice giving away his expression, "don't worry. I'm not going to take your cute little sister away from you."

"She is not my little sister," Shea protested, "we're twins! Shut up! I'm trying to be serious here!"

"So am I."

Flynn withdrew his face from the nylon, his smile gone, and breathed out heavily, releasing a cloud of white into the bright, cold sky. "I honestly have no idea what you mean. If I really was looking at Lily like that, I apologize."

The word "apologize" felt rusty. He might have pronounced it wrong.

"I honestly have absolutely no intentions of doing anything to her. Relax."

"Hold on, what is that supposed to mean?" Shea's voice was suddenly prickly. "Are you trying to say my sister's not cute enough for you?!"

Flynn looked at him incredulously. Okay, Shea, what do you want from me? Do you want me to say I'm attracted to your sister or not? You got to give me a bridge that you won't burn down."

"Look, that's not the point." muttered Shea, deflecting the question with ease. "I'm trying to say that I have absolutely no intention of letting you near her."

"Why?" Flynn was getting a little annoyed again. "I haven't done anything."

"You looked happy."

Flynn's mouth became suddenly very dry. "What?"

"You looked happy when Boessen told us about the murders."

Flynn cast a look at Shea, and found that he looking at him extremely seriously, in an almost concerned way. Whatever levity the conversation had had a few moments ago had disappeared like the sun above them behind the clouds, replacing everything with a dark unsettling light. Flynn tried to speak, to say anything that would defend himself or change Shea's mind, but he couldn't. The memory of that indescribable feeling in his chest that had appeared when Boessen had talked about the possibility of there being a serial killer targeting Hjeslin Academy students. It had been a weird feeling, one that had filled his chest close to bursting. But it hadn't been uncomfortable. He had wanted that feeling to stay, as long as it possibly could. He had liked it. He wanted to feel it again. A terrible jolt of terror rushed up Flynn's spine like a spear of electricity, paralysing where he stood. Shea was right. He was happy, excited even, about this whole situation. After all, hadn't it been him who had gladly settled into some sort of make-believe detective role? He paused, trying to remember the names of the two students, the two people, who were dead, murdered, something he should undoubtedly feel something, anything about. He couldn't.

*What does that say about me?*

Flynn hadn't noticed how long he had been standing still for. Shea was a few steps ahead of him, looking at him with that same serious and concerned expression. Somehow, it reminded Flynn of the look he had seen on Boessen's face, when the teacher had asked him whether he liked school. Had everyone noticed that there was something wrong with him? Why hadn't he?

"And that's why you don't want me near your sister." Flynn thought out loud, casting a brief glance at the back of Shea's head.

"Yeah, pretty much."

Shea, a few paces ahead of where Flynn was walking, turned around as he spoke, walking backwards like he already knew the path ahead. "So, what's your deal?"

Flynn hadn't been paying attention, lost completely in his own dark thoughts. "What?"

I said, what's going on with you? Do you just have one of those faces that doesn't reflect what you're really thinking, or...?"

Flynn struggled to fight through each syllable. "No, I'm not. In fact, I think you're right on the mark."

"Really?" He was still walking backwards.

"I'm pretty impressed, really. I thought I was pretty good at hiding things from people."

It surprised Flynn when Shea let out another snort, turning back away from him to walk normally.

"What?" he said, annoyed.

"Are you being serious right now?" asked Shea, nonchalantly swinging his arms back and forth.

“Yes. Of course I am.” Flynn replied, through gritted teeth, trying to not lose his temper again. Shea was starting to annoy him again.

“Dude, you wear your feelings on your sleeve. Do you really think it wasn’t obvious to Bossen and everyone else how much you detested him, and being there in the first place?”

Flynn didn’t even need to reply. It only took Shea a momentary look at his face to know the answer to his question.

“See, that lack of self-awareness is the reason why we can’t be friends.”

“What, not the fact that you almost certainly suspect me of being a murdering psycho?”

“Oh no,” Shea stopped in front of a bare iron gate, slowing down his speech as he reached forward and traced the lines of its design with his fingers. “I don’t care if my friends are drunkards, freaks or ‘murdering psychos’, as long as I know that they have a good heart which I can rely on when mine isn’t strong enough.”

“You,” Shea said, tilting his head again to look at Flynn, his body clinging strangely to the gate, “I have no idea what your heart looks like. And until you confirm my suspicions one way or the other... stay the hell away from my sister.”

Flynn chose not to reply. Shea readjusted his neck, and pushed open the gate gently with one hand. The slow, creaking sound made Flynn look up and really notice his surrounding, and was surprised to see a large modern-looking house loom over him, its walls shiny, white, and filled with windows which peered into spacious, well-furnished rooms. The surprise didn’t come from seeing the house itself, after all, in a town where the go-to design for building houses were small plaster boxes with white-tile roofs, the modern house stood out like a sore thumb, not only because of its design, but because perched on a hill, it overlooking the town but was still below where the school sat. It was extremely hard to miss, especially if you lived in Hjeslin for as long as Flynn had. What did surprise him was how Shea casually opened the gate, and started down the long cobblestone path to the front door.

“Wait a minute,” started Flynn, his foot not crossing the invisible threshold of the gate, “do you live here?”

He had always assumed the house had been empty, at least during the winter.

“Um, yeah.” said Shea, almost too quiet for Flynn to hear him properly.

“So... you’re rich?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Huh.”

“You’re not coming in.” said Shea, in an over-elaborate defensive tone. “Not after everything we’ve talked about. It’s bad enough you know where I live, you murdering psycho.”

Flynn recognized the joke, or at least he thought it was a joke, but couldn’t find it in him to laugh. He instead tried to play it off, but his voice sounded less enthused than he would have liked. If it was possible, he would prefer to not reveal just how much he was bothered by the conversation, and how much his head swam with a nauseating mix of confusion and disgust.

“Bite me, blond boy. Like I’d want to come see your gross rich house.”

Shea seemed to recognize the half-hearted jab, and his face softened, just a little. “Though... I do appreciate you talking with me so honestly. I recognize it couldn’t have been easy to hear all that stuff about you.”

He aimlessly shuffled his feet. “I don’t take any of it back, but maybe you were right, maybe I was getting a little defensive about Lily. It’s not easy, what with her being... well, you know.”

A lump filled in the back of Flynn's throat, and he instinctively turned away from Shea, not wanting him to see the moment of hesitation.

Shea was still talking. "However, we're not friends until you fix that look in your eyes, got it?"

"Yeah." Flynn's voice quivered, just a little.

He listened as Shea's footsteps retreated by the path, tapping one by one over the cobblestone squares, and only let out a deep breath when he heard the door open and shut behind him.

The wind whistled.

Flynn was bothered.

*Shutup, he told himself, that idiot was no idea what he's talking about. Why the hell would I be happy about a bunch of people I don't know being murdered.? What is he stupid? Yeah, he's stupid. Both him and Boessen. Where the hell do they come of with talking like they understand me? Nobody understands-*

Flynn stopped himself, abruptly stamping his foot once against the frozen earth. The once was out again, but he couldn't feel any of its warmth.

Rather, it was like he was avoiding it.

~

Flynn was walking alone along the edge of the coast, past the spindly wooden piers and aging sailboats which retirees sometimes used to catch fish in the sea, when the weather was bearable and the waves weren't hungry. Rock ptarmigans were perched on the top of buildings or on the rotting guardrails of the piers, their white feathers giving the impression that a thin layer snow had covered the town. For some reason, the ptarmigans seemed to have a particularly affinity for Hjeslin (maybe were attracted to the surrounding mountains and forest), and on a typical winter days, like this one, it wasn't uncommon to see more of them about than the town's actual residents. Flynn thought it was a pretty depressing sight, a town with seemingly more birds than people, though it wasn't like that didn't go for everywhere you looked in this goddamn town.

He hadn't wanted to go home. It was already mid-afternoon, which meant Zoe would be taking a walk around Hjeslin, since it was her lunch break. He didn't know why she would want to walk outside in this bitter cold of her own volition, maybe she was half-hoping to bump into his father. However, she knew perfectly well that his father took the train to the nearest city and back for work, and was only home early in the morning and late at night. He supposed it would just be another thing he would never understand about the enigmatic doctor, something he learning to accept more and more about more and more people.

There was an old man in the distance, his legs dangling off the edge of the pier. Flynn hadn't noticed him at first, surprisingly because the man was huge, his large back painting a pronounced figure against the backdrop of the sea. Flynn watched him for a time, for no particularly reason with no particularly inclination to stop. Maybe he was just bored, but there was something about the sight of the old man, the harsh wind blowing his long white hair wildly around his head that drew his attention. Flynn wondered what an old man like that was doing on a bitter cold afternoon like today, all alone, with nobody else around. What was he looking for? Once he had that thought, Flynn's eyes instinctively slid towards where the man was facing, but all he saw was the icy sea, the pale yellow sun, and a sky more white than he could have possibly believed.

There was nothing.

There was never anything in this town.

But he looked for a time anyway, seeing if he could find something.

When the hand firmly and suddenly clasped onto his shoulder, Flynn had been lost in a daydream of thought, aimlessly floating inbetween question to question without any intention of answering any of them. He had been relaxed, his eyes glazed over in some sort of unmediated meditation, completely, for the first time that day, not thinking too hard about all the things that had been happening to him, what they could mean, what he thought they meant, what he was scared they meant, and what they most likely meant. The suddenly contact of the hand, the abrupt yank back into the world of touch and sight and smell, was so unexpected that Flynn very nearly fell over as he stumbled over his own feet. His arms rose up in front of him in some sort of intrinsically self-defensive reaction, where they flailed uncontrollably, until two hands, much stronger than his own, grasped his wrists to stop them from moving.

“Kid!”

The word didn’t register. The shape in front of him was an enemy. Everybody was an enemy.

“Kid! Jesus, hold still!”

Like a blast of air had hit his face, Flynn suddenly began to see properly. He had suddenly ended up on the edge of one of the peers, the spray of the gurgling white water cold on his cheeks, and at some point, someone else had arrived, stepping into viscerally into the world.

“Geez, you calm yet? Good, easy does it.”

It was a police officer. He wore a crumpled blue uniform that matched his kind eyes, and his hair was pure white, short and messy, sticking up in random places without any rhyme or reason. He was older, around the age where it seemed like he should be too young to retire but so far past his prime that it didn’t seem safe to be putting him into active duty anymore. He was looking at Flynn with concern. “Kid? Are you okay?”

Flynn was still somewhat dazed, not hearing the question clearly. His heart was pounding too loud.

“What?”

“Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah.”

Lost in dreamland, weren’t ya?”

Flynn shook his head to clear it. “Yes. ...Yeah, a bit.”

The officer shook his head as well, though he did it in disbelief. “You wouldn’t believe how much you jumped when I tried to turn you around. Almost jumped a foot in the air. Scared me half to death. I mean, I tried to call to you, but you just weren’t responding. Like you were possessed.”

Flynn noted the strange choice of words in his head, but out loud said: “Um, I don’t think, I’ve seen you around here before, officer.”

He purposely glazed his words in adolescent probity in order to distract the officer from his strange behavior, trying to come across as a wide-eyed youth startled by the sudden appearance of an authoritative figure. “I mean, golly officer, I know everyone from the academy to the coast, and I’ve never seen a man like you in a place like this in all my youthful years.”

*Okay, maybe that was going too far.*

If the officer noticed the superficiality emanating off of Flynn’s words like a bad smell, he didn’t give any indication of it at all, and instead smiled, nodding gently as he prepared to speak.

*Damn, it’s nice for someone to act like I hope they would for once today.*

“Right on kid.” said the officer, giving Flynn what he probably thought was a wise and comforting look, “I just got here on the train from the city - transferred actually. As long as I’m here, no more of that terribly business will be-”

He stopped, looking uncomfortable. “I mean, this town will be... you know.”



Flynn dropped the act for a second. “Sir, I know why you’re here. For the serial killings right? Of course a small town with only a few officers wouldn’t be properly equipped for crime on this scale.”

The officer dropped his shoulders, his youth-instilled confidence deflating like a loud and overly obnoxious balloon. “So, you know about that, do you?”

*Oh my god.*

Taking a deep breath, Flynn looked up at the authority of law, widening his eyes as far as they would go without looking overtly sarcastic. “I mean, *golly officer*, somebody got impaled through the eye socket with a blunt piece of lumber. It was the talk of the town, it was. I heard from my goat-herding uncle that it took *daysto* the clean up the blood.”

To anybody else, the term “goat-herding uncle” would have been a pretty clear indication that Flynn was either not completely truthful or completely serious, but the officer only shook his head in resignation. “Days, you say? What a terrible tragedy. It’s always some sicko who has to go a paint sadness on a town as picturesque as this. No need to fear though kid. We’ll get ‘em eventually. Freaks like this never get away with it for too long. Always think they can get away with anything. Always think they’re smarter than the police or anybody else.”

The officer grimaced with some sort of reserved determination, nodding his head slowly. “That’s where we’ll get ‘em, kid. Right damn in the middle of his own criterion!”

Flynn supposed it was a good thing that he meant well, but he didn’t find it very likely that someone who didn’t even know how to use the word “criterion” in its appropriate context would catch a murderer who had managed to evade capture for almost two months. All the same, it was almost comforting to see someone actively working on the case, someone who wasn’t himself or seemed to consider him as the prime suspect.

“...Right damn in the middle...” muttered the officer under his breath, as if trying to remember the words. He then fixed his blue eyes on Flynn. “That reminds me kid, why I wanted to talk to you in the first place. What are you doing here?”

Flynn narrowed his eyes. “I live here. Not of my own volition, I assure you.”

“No, no!” exclaimed the officer, shaking his head and waving his hand dramatically, “no, I mean what you doing *out here*? There’s some scumbag sneaking around the place. You shouldn’t be out by yourself, all alone! You, they say that going alone at night is the most dangerous thing, but let me tell you, there are some lowlifes out there who will try the darndest things in the middle of broad daylight! Maniacs, they are!”

This guy was too good. Flynn coughed to disguise the smile creeping along his face.

“Yeah,” said the officer, smiling too, “they’ll even try to pull things on arrogant brats like you!”

Flynn’s smile evaporated. He stared up at the officer, his eyes wide, this time not in sarcasm. “Wait, what did you just say to me?”

The officer snorted. “Christ kid, it was fun, but you kind of overstepped your boundaries with the whole “goat-herding uncle” thing. Though, that said, I thought I did the same by saying *right in the criterion*, so I was kind of disappointed when that one went right over your head. I suppose you weren’t as smart as you built yourself up to be. Some advice kid, before you start playing a game, make sure you haven’t cast yourself as the joker.”

The officer winked at Flynn, who was completely at a loss for words. “Though I was serious about the being alone thing. If you have any friends by some miracle, get ‘em to walk you around, trust me, two people is a lot better than one. Reason those kids were killed, by any rate. Not that I blame them, what with this town’s history of almost no crime for the last 20 years. Was that incident way back, though. Well, that was a long time ago anyway.”

With that, the officer turned away from Flynn and the pier, and started to walk off, one of his hands raised in farewell. “Also, have more respect for your elders!” he yelled, his voice becoming dimmer in the wind and cold, “*golly*, I know some of them will slap you for less sass than you gave me, let me tell you!”

He turned the corner, and was gone.

Flynn watched him go, thoroughly stupefied. He didn’t notice that the old man he had been watching had disappeared from the pier, seemingly without a trace. He didn’t notice that about a mile behind him on the coastline, the faint but still visible outline Matthew Boessen had just finished tearing up a photograph, letting its fragments be snatched by the wind and dumped into the white sea. He didn’t notice that above him, flakes of gentle snow had begun to fall. All Flynn did for the moment was watch where the officer had vanished for a minute or two, he turned around, and started walking the path back to home.

~

It wasn’t until that evening that the bizarre encounter started to make a little more sense.

Zoe was working late that night, so Flynn had decided to actually stay up and wait for his dad so they could eat dinner. He bundled together some yellow and brown gulf that could have passed for eggs and toast, and sat down across his father, chewing slowly on the food he had cooked.

“So...” his father said carefully, as if not to set off a landmine, “...how was your day?”

“Surreal.” answered Flynn truthfully, absentmindedly using the salt-shaker to season his eggs.

His dad coughed. It might have been a laugh or a gag reflex upon tasting the toast. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he chuckled, patting his chest to make the food go down.

“Did you know they’re installing more police in the town?” asked Flynn, trying to dodge the question. “I ran into an old officer guy this afternoon at the pier.”

His father’s brow furrowed. “He wasn’t this Telly Savalas-looking kind of guy was he? More hair of course.”

Flynn furrowed in the same kind of way, thinking back to the afternoon, and deciding the comparison worked for all intensive purposes. “I suppose so, why?”

“Zoe was mentioning that.”

Flynn fought back the urge to get up from the table and leave at the mere mention of Zoe’s name. He hated how his dad always seemed to find a way to ring her into conversations, when he would completely ignore other people he should be talking about.

“Was mentioning what?” Flynn mumbled.

“About how her dad was coming into town to help with the investigation.”

Flynn’s anger disappeared to be replaced with surprise. “What, that guy is Zoe’s dad?”

“He’s not ‘that guy’, his name is Officer Cicilia. Make sure you talk to him respectfully next time you run into.”

His father’s tone was jovial enough, but Flynn did not miss the hidden message that was present right underneath it.

*Do not make a bad first impression with the man who might be your future grandfather.*

*Sorry dad, grimaced Flynn, it might be too late for that.*

Trying to keep the good present however, he said something else out loud. “I suppose that explains why he scares the shit out of me.”

Not entirely untrue.

Flynn's dad laughed heartily. As he did when he laughed hard and long, his green eyes twinkled. Green eyes. Green eyes which were, so, so similar to his own.

It was then that Flynn had a thought, and instantly, completely regretted it.

Because it was a stupid idea. A stupid, stupid idea which had neither evidence to back to up or logic to support it. But it stayed in the back of Flynn's head, like an annoying bug, a proclamation that had had him wondering its true meaning ever since he had first heard it.

*You have their eyes.*

Flynn tucked the idea deep into his chest, where he could neither scratch or irritate it. But he could feel it there anywhere. Like a stone in the center of his belly. It was cold.

He could feel it when he tried to laugh naturally at his dad's stupid jokes during the rest of dinner.

He could feel it when he smiled arguable as he wished his dad goodnight.

He could feel it, still, lying in his bed alone, looking up at the ceiling without moving.

Flynn didn't get much sleep that night.

It was too cold.

东末

## Chapter 4 | Grass is Always Greener

“As much as I’m flattered that you invited me over as one of Shea’s friends,” Flynn carefully explained, turning the teacup over in his hand to inspect the contents, “I think it would be in both of our best interests if you invited over one of Shea’s actual friends.”

The man seated across from Flynn laughed, tilting his head back to bellow euphorically at the ceiling of the room, clearing thinking that Flynn was joking. He was a unusually huge man, not as fat as he was big-boned, with arms and legs like tree trunks and a small round head that was placed almost comically on top of his large body, the neck completely invisible. He had small kind blue eyes, and his face was wrinkled in the way that suggested he smiled wide and often. His mouth was almost completely obscured by an enormous bushy blond moustache, which color matched the messy clump of blond hair placed directly on top of his head.

“Mr. McAdams,” said Flynn, putting the teacup onto the table to interlock his fingers, “truly, I am graced by the joviality of your company, but I think this is all a huge mistake.”

The man roared with laughter again.

“My dear boy!” he said, his voice as loud and guttural as the sound of a trumpet, “First of all, you can call me Herman. Everyone does, so you should too! Secondly, I don’t make mistakes! Ever! Never made them, never have! Ask my wife! Hah! Now, you know my idiot son, he’s always getting involved with the wrong crowd and making poor decisions, but you!”

He reached over the table between them to pat Flynn on the shoulder with one of his huge hands, which was easily three times the size of Flynn’s own. “You’ll keep him in check, I can tell! Make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid for me, will you!”

“Hey Dad,” came Shea’s voice from his chair in the corner, sounding unusually quiet and hurt, “how about not talking about like I’m right here? I can hear every word-”

“So, dear boy, how do you two know each other!”

“-okay, nevermind then.”

“Um...” Flynn drew out the syllable, buying for time, looking at Shea for help, who only shrugged and kept drinking his tea, “we met at our club, I think?”

Mr. McAdams squinted at Flynn, then held up one of his pudgy fingers, and pointed to Flynn, to Shea, and then back again. “You two... hmm. Awfully suspect.”

Shea put his face in his hands in exasperation. “Dad, for the last time, I’m not gay. I just have a lot of guy friends, okay?”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that kid.” Mr. McAdams said, emptying his tea with one enormous gulp. “I had a friend who only realized he was “playing for the other team” after being married to this lovely woman for 20 years! Came as a surprise to all of us, let me tell you! Ask my wife! Hah!”

Mr. McAdams looked in disappointment at his bare cup. “Rats! Out of tea. Just a second boys, I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

He lifted himself from his seat, the chair squeaking audible, and waddled out of the room, seemingly taking all of the warmth of the room with him. Flynn watched him go, making sure the loud sound of his footsteps were almost gone, before emptying his tea back into the saucer.

“Your dad seems... nice, I guess.” Flynn thought out loud.

Shea sighed, getting up and crossing over to the table to follow suit with his own tea. “Yeah, I guess. Kind of exhausting to be around all the time, though. Big reason why I stay out of the house and Lily is always in her room.”

“Yeah, that great.” Flynn said, trying to sound interested, “but can we get to the more pressing matter?”

“Which is?”

“Why am I here?”

“Oh.” Shea clicked his tongue, as if trying to think to think of an answer, “yeah, there is that. Well, I think my dad might have seen us yesterday and gotten the wrong idea. And when he gets the wrong idea, he tends to invite them over them over for tea, even only only he likes the gross stuff.”

“Great.” sighed Flynn.

He let his eyes slide around the room. Shea’s house was as impressive on the interior as it was on the exterior. The rooms were bright and spacious, and everything had the sleek style and scent of something having had spent a great deal of money on all of it. It seemed someone in the household was fond of plants, almost every single room was at least one small shrubbery or flower pot, either in the corner, hanging from the ceiling or displayed on a table or handrail. The foyer was especially guilty of this, which literally had a tree growing out the floor, its trunk only separated from the rest of the house by a small hand-rail around its circumference, the leaves free to extend out into the impossible spacious ceiling area. Everything was also white for some reason, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the only significant splashes of color from the greenery or the furniture, which was also kept relatively minimalistic.

“You know,” Shea said, annoyed, “you didn’t need to come if you didn’t want to. It would have made me more than happy to tell Dad you couldn’t accept his invitation.”

“Yeah, except I thought it would be something actually important.” Flynn used elaborate hand gestures to express his disappointment, “not tea and shit. Plus, I can’t just leave. I feel like it break the big guy’s heart. Is he overly enthusiastic like this all the time?”

“No.” Shea relented, returning to his seat in the corner, “he can get pretty mad at me, sometimes. You know, when I’m out too late with friends or fail a test at school. It’s actually pretty scary. Though, it’s pretty hard to compare to Lily on those two fronts, even on the best of days.”

“What does that mean?” asked Flynn, tracing the lip of his tea-cup with his index finger.

“She’s sort of a genius, I guess.” Shea said, though he didn’t seem sure of it, “academically, anyway. Broke test scores all over the country, and she’s already going overseas to some big-shot law college. Not that you could tell. In every other way, she’s just my plain old sister. Can’t even give an oral presentation without freezing up and stumbling over her words.”

He laughed. It sounded oddly mean-spirited.

“She gets all of Dad’s attention because of it. Not that she doesn’t deserve it, it’s just... you know...” He shrugged, then leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling. “Not easy for us normal folk.”

“Normal folk, huh? Flynn murmured, mostly to himself.

There was a loud creak by the doorway, that cut off their conversation. Startled, Flynn looked in the direction of the sound, and saw that Mr. McAdams was standing in the doorway, his huge body almost filling up the entire space. His blue eyes were disoriented, confused, and look at his son and his guest like he had never seen them before. He put a large foot forward, and stepped back, like he couldn’t get his body to do what he wanted. He had no tea saucer in his hands.

It was Shea who talked first. “Dad, are you okay?”

His voice was concerned.

“Yeah... yeah.” Mr. McAdams’ voice sounded cracked, and to Flynn’s astonishment, large tears started to form in his eyes.

“That’s funny, there I go again.” he said, wiping his eyes, though some tears had already fallen and been caught by his mustache, “always happen when I least expect it.”

He sat down in his previous squeaky chair, and looked apologetically at Flynn. “I’m sorry, dear boy, I didn’t want you to see any of this. It just happens sometimes. More often since Evangelene died.”

Even though though it was only on the edge of his peripheral, Flynn saw Shea’s body tense.

Mr. McAdams wiped his eyes again. “I come into a room and forget why I’m there. Usually she would help me out, but ever since…”

Unexpectedly, he chuckled. “You know, it’s funny. I always expect her to appear when I least expect it. Like she’ll just come through the front door like normal. She never does.”

For a long, uncomfortably agonizing moment, he stared at the door to the room. Nobody appeared in it.

“Hey Dad.” Shea’s voice was harder and louder than it absolutely needed to be. “Don’t you think you should get to work soon?”

“What?” Mr. McAdams’ eyes were distant.

He turned his head slowly to look at a grandfather clock that stood tall on the opposite wall. His eyes suddenly lit up. “Oh! Oh, yes! Dear, dear dear.”

He bolted up from his chair, and ran over to the coat hanger, grabbing a large yellow overcoat, and dashing out of the room, only stopping to turn back to Flynn. “My dear boy, I really am sorry to bolt out like this in the middle of your visit, but I really am running late. Please, help yourself to as much tea as you like. Now, yes, I need to go, goodbye!”

He disappeared from, and seconds later, Flynn could hear the door open and slam behind Shea’s father. Suddenly, it was silent. Too silent. And while Flynn preferred the silence, this one made his heart race a faster than he would have liked.

Shea got up abruptly from his seat, his gaze fixed on Flynn. He looked furious. “Flynn, I’d appreciate it if you could please leave.”

Flynn didn’t move. His mind was racing, too quick to even process it himself. Their mom was gone. Shea’s mom was gone. Their mom was gone. Gone. Mom was gone.

“Flynn!” She’s voice was getting louder, and his face so so cold that it seemed hard to believe that he was someone usually happy and energetic, “go right now.”

Slowly, Flynn rose from his chair, and looked at Shea, really looked at him, maybe for the first time. The other boy’s face was angry, yes, but it also had something else in it. A silent plea to not talk, to not say anything more, to just silently leave and never speak of this day again.

“...Shea... Shea I’m...”

A yawn suddenly interrupted Flynn, something he was simultaneously grateful and ungrateful of. Almost in sync, both Flynn and Shea turned their heads to the source of the yawn, and for the first time, Flynn noticed the staircase in the corner of the room, small in comparison to everything else in the house, spindly steps steeply winding up against the wall to a room above. The yawn had come from someone walking slowly down the steps, her stretching arms behind her, her mouth open with tiredness, clad from head-to-ankle in pink silk pajamas that draped around and hanging down from her outstretched limbs. Somehow, the pajamas made her body seem even more lithe and lovely than usual. Her long blond hair hung down freely behind her back, much more ruffled and messy than Flynn had seen it two days ago. In the light of the room, it seemed to glow, like it belonged to a divine goddess, which in that moment Flynn might have been tempted to say that it in fact did. He couldn’t help but stare at Lily McAdams as she picturesquely descended the staircase, somehow,

despite having no makeup or stylish clothes like Flynn had seen her wear before, even more beautiful than he remember.

*Oh shit.*

Lily didn't seem to notice Flynn at first. She fondled with hair a bit as she walked down the steps, absentmindedly calling out: "Hey Shea, I heard the door. Is Dad's visitor gone yet?"

When Shea didn't immediately answer, Lily looked up, and noticed.

"Oh."

Flynn tried to grin in a way that he hoped was nonchalant and confident, though he was almost certainly it came across as the opposite. "Uh, hi, Lily."

Lily peered at him, like she couldn't see him properly. "Oh. Hi... um..."

"Flynn."

"-Flynn, I knew that. It just wasn't coming to me."

They stared awkwardly at one another, while Shea watched on in mute horror.

Lily eyes darted around the room. "So... I'm going to go change, okay?"

"Please do."

Trying to be dainty, Lily slowly walked back up the stairs backwards, never taking her eyes off of Flynn, rounded the corner, was gone. Suddenly, remembering how to breath, Flynn nodded his head once, awkwardly tapped the table with his nail, and stared longingly at the door.

"So..." he said, "I'm just going to go-"

"YOU," growled Shea, materializing behind Flynn and placing a scarily stiff hand on his shoulder.

"Holy shit, when did you get behind me?!"

"ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE."

"Why?!" Flynn almost shouted incredulously, "This is ground zero. I need to escape!"

"If you leave know, she'll think it's because of her." Shea's voice has dropped to a bestial whisper, "She'll be upset."

Flynn squirmed, trying to escape Shea's tightening grip of his shoulder. "*She'll* be upset?! What about me?! I'm very upset! Take my feelings into account!"

"YOUR FEELINGS DON'T MATTER ANYMORE!"

~

When Lily came back down the steps about ten minutes later, she seemed a little more composed, similar to how she had been that first day in the clubroom. Her hair was back to be shiny and straight, and she was dressed in an impossible cute white shirt and frilly black skirt. However, she was still apprehensive, and approached her brother and Flynn with the air of trying to defuse a large and very dangerous bomb.

Flynn was doing his best not to look at her, or anything besides his feet for that matter. Shea had been glaring at him perpetually for the last ten minutes, and he was scared that if he didn't do anything to acknowledge Lily's presence or establish his own psychical existence in this world, Shea would inexplicably fire lasers from his eyes or something.

Crossing the room, Lily occupied herself in the chair across from Flynn, where Herman had sat, which didn't make it much easier to not look at her. It was hard to tell without lifting his head, but she seemed to be staring at him in a strange mix of amusement and weary reprehension.

"I take it our father invited you over?" she asked.

For the first time, Flynn realized that he didn't really know what she sounded like. True, she had spoken a few times the day they had met, but they had always been short and to-the-point sentences, and besides, he had more pressing things to occupy his attention at the time. However, today, there were no distractions, and the first thing Flynn noticed was how different she was from everyone else in her family. While they were certainly different, he could see the clear family resemblance between Shea and Mr. McAdams; how they were both generally good-natured but could switch moods very quickly, or how they were both relaxed and flexible with how they dressed and how they talked. Lily exuded a completely different aura entirely. She seemed uptight and proper, her voice stiff and cold, and she clearly put a lot of effort into her appearance, something that her brother who seemed to always dress in the same red hoodie. He supposed this was why she was the genius of the family, though at the back of his mind, Flynn still remembered her strange episode which nobody had bothered to explain - how vulnerable she had seemed in that moment.

Flynn realized he had not answered her question., "Yes," he croaked, his voice thick from not speaking.

"If you're not looking at me because of something my brother said, please ignore it." sighed Lily, pulling out her book to read, "he's an idiot, so whatever he says doesn't really count for anything."

"No, no, no." protested Shea, though his presence seemed to be retreating further and further back into the corner as Lily's expanded, "Lil' you don't get it, this guy is seriously bad news."

"Really?" murmured the girl, only half-paying attention as she grinned about something on the page. She spared a look at Flynn, who chose to smile in way he hoped would reassure her that he was, in fact, a very trustworthy fellow who could be depended on.

She didn't seem overly convinced.

"Yeah," continued Shea, "and listen -"

"Shea," said Lily, still not looking up, "I'd appreciate it if you could leave me and Flynn alone for a moment. I need to talk to him about something."

Shea looked absolutely horrified at the mere thought. "What? Lil' no, didn't you hear anything I was saying."

"I heard, I just didn't care. Leave please."

"You know," piped up Flynn, not wanting to be left in a room alone with an angry girl, "if you want my opinion -"

"No. Shut up." the twins said together.

"I'm not going." protested Shea again, crossing his arms exaggeratedly to show his resilience.

"I won't talk to you for a week if you don't leave right now."

The arms uncrossed. "But Lil'"

"Calling me your stupid pet-name isn't going to change anything."

Shea glared at Flynn, who shook his head to convince him that none of what was happening was his fault or premeditated. To be honest, he was just as confused about what Lily might want to talk to him about as Shea was; it wasn't like they knew each other very well, and he wasn't even sure if they had had a proper conversation yet. Yet Lily was now putting down her book, and staring at him intensely, as if trying to communicate how important this one-on-one meeting would be.

Shea looked at the point of despair. "Fine." he growled through his teeth, "but if he does anything, just yell, I'll be right over."

He then walked slowly over to the door, drawing out each step, and stared wide-eyes at Flynn in a way that he supposed was supposed to be threatening. He slouched out, tucking his body behind the corner, until only his wide eyes were left staring at Flynn. They glared, then vanished from sight.



“Shut the door!” yelled Lily at the area where Shea had disappeared.

The door followed suit, closing and creaking as slowly as humanly possible. It was only when she heard the door click did Lily finally turn to Flynn to speak. “I’m sorry about my family.”

“No, it’s fine.” muttered Flynn, not especially sure if Lily could hear him, “you get used to it pretty quickly.”

Lily took the tea saucer and poured herself a cup (Flynn decided to stay quiet about where the tea had come from) and took a sip. “They mean well, honestly. Both Shea and my father. They’re just a little overprotective is all.”

Flynn decided not to pry into that. At least not yet. “From what I can tell, you’re the pride and joy of the family.”

Lily smiled, her teeth seeming to radiate sunlight. “I’m nothing that special, really.”

“Yeah, I don’t buy that.” Flynn replied instantly, “I can’t imagine how hard you have to work.”

*Pisses me off... though maybe I’m just jealous of things I don’t have.*

Lily narrowed her eyes. “As much as I’m flattered that you would think that, why do you assume that I work hard? Most people who meet me just consider me a natural academic genius.”

Flynn sighed, leaning back in his chair, quoting advice his father had once told him, advice that he had quietly ignored. “In my experience, all that you have to do to become a genius is be a huge weirdo with way too much enthusiasm.”

Flynn smiled, remembering a fond memory. “Oh, and also do something completely inexplicably so people think you work on another level or something. Like eating pickles straight from the can... or shitting yourself every Wednesday.”

It was the first time Flynn had heard Lily truly laugh, and he found that it didn’t even come as a surprise that it might as well be an angelic choir. It filled the room with warmth, like her father, completely opposite the coldness that she usually exuded. However, the smile faded quickly, to be replaced with a look of contemplation.

“Enthusiasm, huh?” Lily pondered, staring out the window at the town of Hjeslin, “I’m not sure if I’d call my condition that.”

“What would you call it then?”

Lily grimaced, placing the tea-cup back on the table. “Look, I’m not like my brother. I can’t just attract people around me without even trying. In fact, I probably have the opposite issue.”

*Yeah, wonder why that is.*

“So what you’re trying to say is that you don’t have any friends because you stay in your room and study all day.”

Lily grimaced again. “You didn’t have to say it so bluntly.”

“It’s my nature.”

Taking another sip of tea, Lily stared at the cover of the book she had put down on the table, and subconsciously, Flynn followed suit. It was a little hard to tell upside down, but it seemed to be a mouse carrying a sewing needle. Personally, Flynn didn’t like books. He always felt like they were judging him somehow.

“I mean,” Lily started aimlessly, picking each word like she didn’t know what she was trying to say, “people only really consider me that because my brother is always building me up. I’m sure he was bragging about me to you a bit before I came down.”

“Yeah, a bit.”

“See! That’s what I’m talking about. I know he feels sorry for me because he’s knows I’m more helpless than he is, so he’s always acting like I’m some sort of prodigy.”

Flynn still hadn't taken his eyes off of the book. "You sure about that, Lily?"

"Yes," she sighed, "he gets along with the people at school so easily while I'm so... I just think he's trying to make me feel good about myself."

They stayed silent for awhile after that. Flynn continued to stare at the book thinking about everything and nothing in particular. Lily kept looking at the window, her face painted by the mid afternoon sun that kept appearing and disappearing behind clouds. With the table between them, the boy and the girl concentrated on different things, not openly acknowledging one another's existence, but knowing that they didn't completely dismiss them either. The silence wasn't awkward, per say but it seemed like they had run out of things to say to each-other. They floated around topics of conversations like a marble in a bowl. A marble rolling around the rim of the bowl, constantly getting closer and closer to the middle, where hopefully, something would finally happen, justifying the time and energy it had taken to get there. Fumbling for a lifeline, Flynn defected to the only thing that he could think at the moment, and it turned out to be exactly the thing that they had been circling around to get to.

"So, why don't you come to the club? I mean, if you want people to talk to?"

Lily lips tightened, and for the first time, a look of distress crossed her face. "Actually, I'm glad that you brought that up. This brings us to the reason why I wanted to talk to you in the first place."

"Oh, yeah."

Flynn had almost forgotten that they were supposed to be discussing something in particular. Even though his impression of Lily had been someone cold and stiff, she was surprisingly easy to talk to. He supposed this was the weakness she had been talking about, though personally, he found Shea's overabundance of confidence and familiarity towards everyone he met to be much more of a weakness than some inept social skills. In fact, he was sure Shea would agree with him.

"See, there's a problem." Lily took another sip of tea.

"A problem?"

"You saw me."

"I saw you? ...Oh wait, yeah I did."

Lily looked at her hands, fumbling around with the tips of her white fingers. "I have a favor to ask you. I'd really, *really*, appreciate if you never, ever mention that to anybody. Ever. And please tell that teacher and the other girl too."

Flynn felt his fist clench a little. "Why don't you just come tomorrow and tell them yourself? They would take it better from you than they would from me. Especially Nina, which is her name by the way."

He hadn't meant to speak so roughly, but once again, his mouth was moving quicker than his head. Little annoyances towards Lily had started to build up and his chest, and suddenly he felt like spilling them all toward her at the same time.

Lily's brow also started to furl. "Of course I can't go back. Not after what I... look, why is this so hard for you? Just, please do what I say."

"Because *Lil*, I'm not your brother", Flynn shot back, "I won't just blindly do what you say for the sake of building up your worthless confidence."

This time the silence was awkward, and a little tense. Lily looked hurt, and Flynn was surprised to find that he was sorry about that, but there was something about the way that Lily was acting that was making my sincerely angry.

*Because she reminds you of yourself?*

*Shutupbrain.*

“How about this?” Flynn presented, trying to put out the fires he had started, “I won’t tell anybody about your... episode... and I get to ask one extremely personal question about you.”

Lily looked suspicious. “Why would you want to know something like that?”

“Why do you think I’ve stuck around in this weirdo household for so long?”

Recognizing the truth in his voice, Lily sighed took another sip of tea, and leaned back in her chair, putting her hands behind her head. She seemed to be thinking to herself very hard, but finally, it seemed like she couldn’t find a reason to not reciprocate his request. “Okay, fine. Ask away.”

Flynn took a deep breath, trying to steel himself. This was after all, going to be extremely awkward, but this entire visit would be pointless if he didn’t get this question out of his throat though his lips seemed to be doing they best to stay firmly closed.

*Okay, here we go.*

“How did your mother die?”

Lily’s face went through a few stages. At first, it was shock, pure unadulterated shock, that widened her eyes and left her unprotected. Then it a flash anger appeared. Only in her eyes and only for a second, but saw it there, brief and intense, that almost made Flynn sorry for asking. Then finally, her face retreated into a tense, emotionless shell, so, so similar to how her brother had reacted. It was a face that revealed nothing and everything at once; an inclination to not talk, to never talk, to not reveal and never reveal about this topic, about this person. At first, Flynn thought Lily wouldn’t speak. Her lips were so tightly pressed together that they almost seem white, but after a moment that could have been an eternity, her mouth moved. Only slightly, her lips parts the tiniest and most insignificant inclination, and when her voice forced its way between them, it was a dead sound that didn’t have any emotion behind it.

“I can’t talk about that.”

“You promised.”

“Ask something else.”

“This is the only thing I want to know.”

“Why?”

“If I told you it wouldn’t be the truth.”

The two teenagers stared at each other, sizing one another up, trying to find a chick in the armour they had placed around themselves. However, Flynn knew he had an advantage, and sure enough, the chick he knew was always there slowly opened and fell apart.

“If I tell you,” Lily spat, “you promise to not ever tell Shea I word that I say.”

“I take it you know what I’m really asking then?”

Lily’s eyes could have been made of ice. “I think so.”

“Then by all means,” Flynn said, prying the armour open, “tell me.”

Lily didn’t speak for a few minutes. She seemed to be trying to figure out where to start, or if to start, but she couldn’t seem to come to a decision on either. She kept shaking her head after a moment of being still, and her fingers were restless. Sometimes they traced the rim of the tea cup, sometimes they ran through her hair, and sometimes they rapped restlessly on the table between herself and Flynn. It was as if she was being forced to slowly open words that she had kept imprisoned inside of her for a very long time, and the hand that held the key kept shaking uncontrollably. Finally though, it opened, so viscerally that Flynn could have sworn that he could hear it.

“My family sort of has a history of types of mental illness. We have all sorts of stories from my family, two of my great-grandparents spent the last half of their life in a mental institution, and one of my distant uncles

went crazy one day and killed his wife. Didn't remember anything afterwards. We call this the family curse, and my mother had it worst of all. I don't remember a whole lot about her, but she was a wonderful person. She used to wash my hair in the morning, and she had the most beautiful singing voice you've ever heard. We all loved her. A lot. Then... she started acting weird. She would forget things. Small things at first, like our lunch for school or to lock the door when she left the house. But it just kept getting worse. When relatives would come visit, she wouldn't recognize them. She wouldn't go to work some days because she didn't remember she had a job. Eventually, my father had to take care of her all the time, but she would be freaked out by him, because to her, it was just some scary man trying to keep her in one place. Didn't recognize me, of course. Or my brother. Or anybody really. One day, when I guess we weren't paying close enough attention, she wandered out of the house. Got hit by a car five miles west. No idea what she thought she was doing. What a stupid way to die."

Lily smirked. "Seems like I'm going the same way. I lose control of my emotions -as you saw- and start freaking out. There's never any warning for when it happens, but it's usually when something shocking or unexpected happens. You happy, now?"

Flynn didn't say anything at first. Instead, he rose from his chair and crossed the room to look at the grandfather clock, even if he didn't really notice it. "Yeah, I'm happy. Well, not happy, but thank you for telling me. I think I get it now."

"Get what?" Lily asked abrasively.

"The reason you don't want to come to the club. It's because you're punishing yourself, right? Like your mom going crazy and escaping was somehow your fault."

"It *was* my fault." Lily glared, "I was supposed to stay home with her, and I got distracted. By some stupid show on TV. Besides, that's a stupid idea. What makes you say that?"

"If it's so stupid why don't you come to the club? You want friends, right? Well, here's a perfect opportunity."

"It's not that simple Flynn."

"Of course it is," Flynn scoffed, "do you really think anybody is going to think twice about what happened. Everyone is weird as shit there. Your crazy, your brother probably has a sister complex, Nina might be homeless, and half of everyone I know thinks I'm a serial killer by night."

"Did you... did you make that last one up?"

"Look the point is that if you want friends, go make some. Don't just sit around in your room studying all the time, then go complain about it to me."

"I really don't appreciate you talking to me like this." said Lily.

"Too bad," grinned Flynn, "I talk to everybody like this."

He brushed off his nylon jacket. "I'm going to go now. I've spent way too much time in this goddamn house anyway."

Lily looked her eyes both annoyed and curious. Flynn began to inch toward the door, hoping and praying that his sudden and unexpected outburst would go unnoticed. He had just crossed the threshold of the door and turned toward the entry hall, when Lily called out to him.

"Why do you care so much?"

"Goddamit." whispered Flynn to himself.

Pretending to not hear her, Flynn slouched out of the door, his head filled with clouds.

“What the hell was that?”

Flynn had literally only taken one step out of the house, zipping up his jacket against the sudden drop in temperature, when Shea materialized from behind a tree, his eyes not quite angry but still defensive.

Flynn didn't even take a glance at him, instead beginning his walk down the cobblestone path out of the property. “Listening, were you big brother?”

Ignoring the question, Shea followed Flynn out of the yard on back onto the road which overlooked the town. “Why did you say those things?... also we're twins!”

“What,” grumbled Flynn, tucking his hands into the pockets of his jacket, “pissed because I corrupted your precious sister?”

“No,” said Shea evenly, “I'm more pissed off because you actually gave her good advice.”

Flynn stopped in his tracks, furrowing his brow. “Come again?”

“I mean, don't get me wrong.” Shea elaborated quickly, “you still were a total ass the whole time, but you actually told her to get out of her room. Which is something I've been trying to get her to do for awhile. She never listens though, because, you know, I'm her brother, and I'm too scared to talk back to her.”

Flynn rubbed his temple in irritation, starting to walk again. “So, wait, what is your issue with what I said exactly?”

“My issue isn't what you said,” Shea explained, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, “it's why you said it. You're not exactly the most charitable person in the world, so why the hell are you giving my sister advice?”

“You've know me for like, a day. Why do you think you know so much about my personality?”

“Have you met you?”

“Shut up blond boy.” Flynn muttered, speeding up the pace of his walking.

Shea did the same, staying at Flynn's shoulder, hovering over him while staring at him with focus. Flynn tried to ignore him, but it was hard. Slowly but surely, he began to walk faster and faster. Shea walked faster and faster. Flynn broke into a brisk jog. Shea was still at his shoulder, his eyes wide and waiting for an answer. Flynn started to sprint down the road as fast as he could, cold air dashing past his ears and into his throat. It burned, but Flynn continued to run, ignoring the pain in his chest, as he ran under the freezing sun. When he finally had exhausted his meek stamina, he was all the way at the bottom of the hill, facing the Hjeslin. Wearily, he looked over, and saw Shea still right besides, breathing heavily, but clearly not completely winded like he was. Glaring at the other boy, Flynn sat down on the cold earth, and rolled over onto his back, trying to catch his breath.

“I'm not going anywhere until you answer my question.” remarked Shea, as Flynn lay on the ground, gulping down breaths of air, “also, did you really think you could outrun me? I'm on the soccer team.”

“Shut up.” croaked Flynn.

He watched the sun disappear behind the clouds again. He supposed it was almost lunch time. His stomach growled. If only he can get away from Shea so he could eat. He supposed it was possibly to simply ignore Shea and walk home anyway, but Shea knowing where he lived didn't really appeal to him at all either.

“Okay, fine.” Flynn said, straightening back up to a sitting position, “what do you want to know?”

“I told you already,” Shea responded, “I want to know what your motivation for all of that was.”

“Let's just say that I had stock in the situation.”

No,” said Shea forcefully, surprising Flynn with the force of his voice, “you don't get to weasel your way out with vague answers or crap. Tell me the exact reason.”

Flynn considered running again, but it was probably pointless. “Does it really matter?”

“Yes!” Shea said forcefully, “this is about my family!”

*Actually it's not.*

Flynn got up and started to walk again. “Go away.”

“Flynn you’re being immature.”

“I don’t care.” he snapped.

“I don’t care that you don’t care.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“I am?” laughed Shea nastily, “you’re the own who’s trying to pry into the private life of my family with absolutely no negative repercussions! You don’t get to lay bare my sister’s soul like that without showing some of your own!”

Flynn could tell Shea was getting mad, which was fine. He was too. He knew all he had to do was tell the truth, and Shea would most certainly go away.

But he didn’t want to.

He didn’t want to tell the truth. Because telling the truth would reveal himself, and that was something that scared him far more than any random serial killer stalking the streets of his town. Especially not to this blond git.

*Didn't you just criticize Lily for running away?* said that annoying voice in his head again, *you don't want to be a hypocrite?*

*Screw you,* Flynn shot back, *I've always been a hypocrite. That's why I'm the way I am.*

He knew this was all just lip service, an excuse for not doing the difficult thing. That it was all just running away. That was fine. He’d been running away for a long time now.

“Flynn.”

Shea’s voice was reaching a tone that was almost pleading, like he knew that Flynn was drifting further and further away, and if he didn’t act fast, the chance would be gone forever.

“I can’t thank you if you don’t tell me.”

Flynn stopped.

“What?” Flynn said carefully.

“Look,” Shea looked uncomfortable, but despite that, he still kept talking, “maybe I misjudged you-”  
*No, you didn't.*

“-I took you for a bad guy, and made an ass of myself because of it, but you helped my sister, and I need to acknowledge that-”

*No, you don't. That was all for my own benefit.*

“-so if you could stop being so goddamn stubborn-”

“Shut up.”

“Then tell me why?”

“Because...”

“Because why?!”

“Because my mother’s gone too!!!”

Flynn flinched. He hadn’t meant to say that so loud. In fact he hadn’t meant to say anything at all. But suddenly, the words had erupted from his throat, and like they had been held back by a wall that had been toppled over, they spilled over, one after the other.

“She gone, okay?! That’s why I had to say something, because it was all so goddamn familiar! ...And she’s doing the exact stupid thing I’m doing, and I hate watching it. I don’t care, but I hate it. Don’t ever, *ever*, think I did this for you, or for her, or for anybody besides myself, because I didn’t! Shit!”

Flynn stomped the ground angrily with his shoe, wanting to hit something to take out his frustration.

“How?” Shea’s voice was so quiet that it barely rose above the sound of the wind.

Flynn opened his mouth to answer, but found that his temporary roar of emotion had faded as quickly as it had come. He swallowed. His throat hurt from the yelling and the cold. Calm down. Just talk.

“Hit by a car. Just walk yours. Probably why it got to me so bad in the first place.”

“I see.”

More silence, silence that Flynn was getting quickly tired of. However, before he could yell at the sky or throw a snowball at someone, Shea spoke.

“Flynn... I’m so sorr-”

“No.” said Flynn coldly, turning to Shea, “don’t pity me, or patronize or anything. I just... want you to forget you heard that, okay?”

“I can’t do that,” Shea protested, “that was the first time you’ve actually come across as someone I can call a friend.”

“We are *not* friends.”

“Obviously. But I’m not patronizing you. How is expressing my sympathy patronizing?”

“Because you don’t know anything about it,” Flynn said, “just like I don’t know anything about your mom, and really should have kept my fat mouth shut. I don’t want to be pitied for something that was my fault.”

Shea looked confused. “You said she got hit by a car. How is that your fault?”

When Flynn didn’t answer, Shea grimaced, exactly like how his sister had. “Fine. But don’t you run away either. I’ll make sure Lily comes to the club tomorrow. If you don’t, it’ll be a huge waste of time.”

Flynn stayed silent.

Shea’s blue eyes rested on Flynn for a second longer, then he turned, his blond hair carried away by a sudden gust of wind, and walked away. Flynn stood in the cold, the intense wind whipping his scarf from his neck. He made no move to grab it as it was carried away, dancing wildly. It was cold. He shivered, and look around himself. There was nobody in sight, not even on this unusually sunny day, nobody walking their dogs, eating lunch on a bench or even simply trying to get some fresh air. He was alone. Again. The product of nobody’s fault but his own. Again. Flynn arched his neck to look at the white sky, which was today almost a shade of blue that was pleasant. He closed his eyes as the sunlight passed over his, caressing the notches of his nose, eyes and lips with faint and momentary warmth. When he opened his eyes again, the sun had disappeared behind another huge cloud. He wondered when it would appear again.

The sound of walking caught his attention. At first, Flynn wasn’t entirely sure where it was coming from as it seemed to echo, coming from every direction and nowhere at all. The steps were soft yet resonant, like the approach of something unassuming yet powerful. Then he saw her, almost ghostly in a distance cloaked by the glare of the horizon, her **black** trenchcoat being blown to-and-fro by the wind in a way that almost gave her an ephemeral feeling, like her body was made of nothing but the wind and the cold and fabric. It almost felt that if he looked away for an instant, she would be gone without a trace, and once more, he would have nothing but the howling of the wind for company. She was carrying something in her left hand, a briefcase where she kept all all medical supplies, and most likely, her lunch for the day. As Zoe approached, Flynn thought about how easy it would be to run away from her. Knowing Zoe, she had already seen him as he had her, but if he quickly walked away and turned a corner to break into a run, there would be no reason to talk to her. Even if she

asked him about later, perhaps when his father invited her over for dinner, he could always say that he hadn't seen her, that the wind was too loud and the sun too bright. Of course, she would know he was lying, but neither her or his father could prove otherwise, so they would simply accept his answer and continue to eat. Flynn would pretend not to notice the momentary flash of sadness on his dad's face, as if he did, he would also have to feel the pain of a piece of their relationship being silently but painfully chipped away by his own hand. He wanted to run. But he didn't want that pain either. Flynn felt his left foot begin to scoot backwards, but he forced it not to move any more. As much as he disliked that blond git, Shea had a point. If he ran now, everything that had happened today would be pointless. If there was one thing he hated, it was wasting time.

Zoe had come to close for either of them to pretend that they hadn't noticed each other. Zoe's almost impossibly violet eyes, sharp, wise and gentle, held Flynn's gaze. She came up to him, slowly, like she was afraid that if she was too aggressive, she would scare him. She was exactly right. He was very afraid.

"Hello Flynn." Zoe said delicately, she handling the words with care and respect, almost like she was saying the name of someone who she loved.

Flynn chose not to think about that.

"Hi Zoe."

His voice was pathetically meek. He cleared his throat and tried again.

"Hi Zoe." Flynn said, this time a little more loud than was absolutely necessary.

A hint of a smile of a smile played along Zoe's lips.

"Can I ask what your doing out here all alone?" she asked, looking him up from head-to-toe and most certainly recognizing the lack of the scarf he always wore.

When Flynn replied, he tried to make his voice and speech sound normal. As if he was his typical self, but without the resentment that so often permeated his words when he talked to Zoe.

"Is that that a question someone wandering around by herself should be asking?"

His voice sounded unsteady and uncertain, sounding to himself like he was testing the waters of the conversation, or maybe trying to say to her that this time, he would do his best not to run.

The smile became a little more visible.

"Touché mon trésor ." Zoe replied coyly in impeccable French, "so, from one lost soul to another, can I ask you where you hope you destination to be?"

Thinking for a moment, Flynn replied: "home, I think. I've only had tea today, so I'd eat lunch."

"Home, huh?" said Zoe, almost wistfully.

"Yeah," agreed Flynn, "though it might take awhile to cook something up."

Zoe peered at him with intense eyes. "Is that right? You know, I just so happen to have sandwiches and soda all ready to go."

She pointed playfully at her briefcase with her index finger.

"I can't take your lunch," protested Flynn, "I'm hungry but not that hungry."

"Aw, thanks for your consideration Flynn," Zoe said, "but I just so happen to have two sets of lunches in here. Gee, what an amazing coincidence."

Flynn stared at her, amused and shocked at the same time. "How did you know..."

"Oh, I don't know anything all. I just eat way too much food and feel awful about it later." Zoe responded, a twinkle in her eye, "you have to watch these things when you get to be an old woman like I am."

"You're not old."

"Oh, really?" Zoe raised an eyebrow, "I suppose you can tell me what's your favorite episode of *The Television Ghost?*"



“The television what-now?”

“Exactly.” Zoe chuckled, smiling for real this time, “now, I would wager I have about an hour-and-a-half before Mr. Kelting comes to see me about another problem with his medication, and I have to warn you that I did not go easy on the dressing. Shall we?”

For just an instant, Flynn felt his leg shake, vibrating it wanted to go somehow but couldn't. He forced it to take a step toward Zoe, rather than away from her like it wanted. Some fears don't go away so easily.

“Yeah, okay.”

He started to walk towards the house, but stopped when he saw Zoe wasn't following him. He looked at her, and she looked at him, and somehow, he already knew what she was going to ask before she opened her mouth.

“Tell me, Flynn.” she prompted reproachfully, “what's different about this afternoon?”

Flynn needn't of asked what she meant. He already knew.

He took his time answering, trying to find the words that would explain himself without having to tell her much. It wasn't that he didn't feel up to telling Zoe the entire story, in fact, his mood was currently so good that he might of if the doctor asked him. However, he knew that she would understand with just the slightest insinuation of what he meant, of what he wanted her to understand. Because he didn't want to share a story with her, he wanted to share a feeling with her. A feeling, fragile and a little bit warm, that would tell her, that at least for now, it was alright. Not that is would be alright forever, or even in the near future, but at this moment, in this second, it was alright for him to her in. He stood thinking, a little longer than a normal conversation would have been permitted, when inspiration emerged glowing from behind the clouds above him.

“Oh, you know,” he said evasively, “it's just such a nice day.”

东末

## Chapter 5 | Old People Know Stuff

Personally, on a still, shiver-inducing morning like this, Flynn wouldn't have gone with cold cereal with milk and apple slices. He stared at his plate with disgruntled apathy, wondering if he sulked at his breakfast long enough it would miraculously turn into delicious peppered scrambled eggs, the cheese on top still melting from the heat of the stove, like he would've made. His dad, however, had been insistent on making breakfast this morning, despite the fact that Flynn was the better cook by far, and his dad's idea of a typical nutritious was a cup of yogurt and a banana before running out of the house to catch a train that left before the sun even rose. It likely had something to do with Daniel Castle being absolutely over-the-moon about the fact that he had a rare day off, but also that for the first time ever, an event he had been trying to plan for months had finally come to fruition: him, Zoe and Flynn all sitting down and having breakfast together. Flynn supposed he had wanted to make sure the breakfast was adequate himself, but after almost burning the house down when he turned on the stove, his dad had simply opted for the colder and more safe approach.

However, if Daniel Castle noticed his son's clear unhappiness with his meal or the doctor's grimace as she sat down in her chair to be greeted by cereal that had been sitting in the milk for about twenty minutes, he didn't let on. His smile reached from one ear to the other, so clearly euphoric with the current situation that it was almost annoying. Scratch that, was *extremely* annoying.

"So, you're dad's been pretty busy, huh?" he said to Zoe, handing her a salt-shaker despite the fact that she had asked for a glass in which to pour some coffee.

"Yes," Zoe smiled weakly, taking the salt-shaker and putting it next to her meal like nothing was wrong. As usual, she cut an imposing figure with her outfit, wearing her indoor clothes, a traditional white lab coat over a red blouse (apparently not being worried in the slightest that she could get food on either) that accentuated her lean figure. "He's been a bit of a nightmare since he came into town. Pestering me non-stop, like that will make up for all the time we've spent apart. You'd think he'd have a job to do, but apparently not."

"I'll be honest, having met him, I can't really see him as the doting father type." Flynn cut in, diverting a little bit of concentration from his meal.

Zoe turned to him. "Speaking of which, he mentioned you in passing."

"Really?" replied Flynn, finally giving up on the metamorphosis and reaching for another apple slice, as if to help take the worry out of his voice, "what did he say about me?"

"Only that he ran into some 'bratty kid with an emo haircut'. That narrowed down the possible suspects for me quite drastically, as it turns out."

Ignoring his dad choking on his beverage in laughter, Flynn gave Zoe an exaggerated smile to make sure she knew just how goddamn clever she was, and returned to picking at his breakfast. "Well, you can tell him that I would prefer to have an emo haircut than his receding hairline."

"As much as acting as a mediator for a stupid proxy-proxy war between you and me father sounds hilarious Flynn," Zoe pondered, "I'm going to have to pass on that. My dad's high pressure is at dangerous levels already. I'd like not to aggregate him more."

"Not having much luck with the case then?" Daniel articulated through a mouthful of something that used to be cereal.

"No," said Zoe, her voice suddenly sounding a little sad, "I watched him go through tough cases all throughout my childhood. I know what he and the police's typical habits are, what they do when they know how to approach a case, and what they do when they are getting nowhere."

"And they're getting nowhere?" Flynn added helpfully.

"Yeah," Zoe said, her voice trailing off slowly. "Though... I guess that's not much of a surprise."

The rest of the breakfast continued in silence.

~

"What... is this?" Lily's voice did not hide just how unamused she was.

"What, are you stupid?" Flynn glared at her, "it's a map."

"I know it's a map," Lily said, "why do you *have* the map?"

"So, I can map things."

"Jesus christ."

All five of them were together in the club room, Flynn in the front, presenting a huge map of the town on the wall to the others, Shea and Lily sitting in their chairs watching with mild disinterest, and Nina in her usually corner staring blankly at the opposite wall. Boessen had gone out to his car to get some snacks, leaving the children alone for a short time. In this window, Flynn had saw fit to present his master plan to the others, whether it was met with extreme indifference or not.

"Okay, before you go on with this map," Lily said, peering closer at it, "where did you even get this? It's actually really detailed."

"Oh," Flynn replied, not really paying attention as he went over to his backpack to fetch a red marker, "it's my dad's. He was using for some law case he had a year or so ago, and since then it has been sitting in storage. Saw no reason why I couldn't take it."

"Dude, I think there might be a law or something against that." Shea's voice drifted to Flynn's ears as he rummaged through the backpack, "if you go to jail I hope you realize that none of us are willing to bail you out. The most I'll do is visit on weekends."

"Oh, silly Shea." Flynn elegantly twirled on the heel of his foot, red marker in hand, to face the map once more. "I am not a man of *thought*, but one of action."

"That is a blatant lie."

Ignoring him, Flynn uncapped on the marker. “Now,” he began, “there’s an obvious correlation between who the killer chooses for his victims.”

“They’re students from our school.” Lily prompted.

“Correct” Flynn agreed, “but by looking at this map, we can see that there is more than that that connects the victims.”

“Is there?” Shea was squinting at the map, “I don’t see anything directly obvious.”

“I didn’t at first,” Flynn confessed, “but try to look at the whole thing in a geographical sense.”

Lily let out a breath of exasperation at herself and started to nod, and Flynn could have sworn Nina’s wide eyes flashed momentarily with understanding. However, Shea still looked confused. He looked from Flynn to Lily to Nina, realized that he was the only one who didn’t realize what was going on, and rose his hand slowly into the air.

“Yes, Mr. McAdams?” said Flynn, pointing to Shea like he was a student in a classroom.

“Um, yeah, Mr. Castle” Shea sarcastically started, “I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

“That sounds like a personal problem, Mr. McAdams.”

“I would like to pin the blame on your arrogant demeanor that seems to presume that everybody is immediately on the same page as you and those who aren’t are somehow intellectually inferior... Mr. Castle.”

“Do you want to go see the principal again, Mr. McAdams?”

“Goddammit,” growled Lily, getting up from her chair, crossing the room, and snatching the red marker from Flynn’s hand. “Give me that.”

“You could have waited for an answer.” grumbled Flynn, letting her take the space at the front of the room and plopping into the chair she had previously occupied.

“Shea,” Lily said, turning to address her brother directly, “look at this.”

Uncapping the red marker with her teeth, and brushing her long hair so it fell behind her shoulders and didn’t get in the way of her hands, Lily bent over the map, her dominant hand wavering over it, like it was unsure where to start.

“Um,” interjected Flynn, “before you start drawing willy-nilly on that, just remember that that is our only copy. If you ruin it, I will make sure you redraw a second one from scratch.

“As if you could make me,” Lily replied quietly, half to herself, still absorbed in the map.

Flynn opened his mouth to respond, closed it again, and settled back in his chair. A few comments had risen up to the front of his mind, some of them hurtful, but he decided to shut his mouth for now. It was better to just let it go.

“Okay!” Lily exclaimed, as if she had finally come to a decision, “I got it. Pay attention, Mr. McAdams.”

“Can we move on from that?” protested Shea, “I mean it was sort of funny at first, but it’s getting kind of old...”

“What we need to pay attention to specifically,” Lily said loudly, pretending not to hear her brother, “is the actual location of each of the murders.”

Shea seemed resigned but still annoyed at being cast the butt of the joke. “What about the locations?”

“Well, look at the location of the first murder: the death of Linsley Shorsheck.” Lily explained.

She drew a small red circle around the timberyard.

“And then considering where the Velvet kid was murdered.”

She drew another circle, this time around the bridge. “...Check it out.”

Finally, she drew a fat red line from the first circle to the second, its diameter cutting straight through the center of the town as it raced up and to the left. When Lily was done, the entire diagram placed on top of the

map looked like some sort of badly drawn pair of cartoon glasses. “Look,” she said, her voice finally excited, “look at the distance between the first murder and the second murder! It’s almost exactly two miles!”

“I follow you,” Shea started carefully, as if scared he would be criticised again, “but does that really mean anything? You can draw one point anywhere and connect it to another no matter where that second point is. Simple logistics. Point A and Point B make a line segment. Yes, I grant you it’s a little unusual that the length is nearly two miles, but that’s just a coincidence isn’t it? I don’t think we can drawn anything from that.”

Flynn started to rise from his seat, ready to continue his explanation and counteract Shea’s points, but it seemed like Lily didn’t need his help in the slightest.

“Yes,” she agreed, “it wouldn’t be conclusive if it was only those two points, and there were only two murder attempts. But there isn’t.”

“Ooooh.” Shea drawled, finally getting it.

Lily turned away from the map, the red marker held between her ring and index finger, and pointed it across the room, straight at the girl in the back who had yet to speak. “Nina, if you would?”

Nina shuffled her feet uncomfortably and bit the underside of her lip, like something she had been waiting for in dread had finally come to pass. Despite that, she did indeed rise from her chair, the blanket falling lightly around her ankles, and she daintily stepped out of its wrappings around her feet. Almost as if she were a ghost, her face pale and without expression, Nina seemed to glide across the room, her feet making a seemingly impossible lack of noise. It was almost eerie, and Flynn her carefully, not being to stop a brief but powerful shiver from running down her spine. She could have died in that corner an hour ago, and he doubted any of them would have noticed.

Reaching Lily, Nina stared up into her blue eyes, as if waiting for instructions. Lily slowly handed the other girl the red marker. “I know you can’t be exact,” her voice said softly, “but can you please try to draw a circle around the area where you were attacked. As precise as you can, please.”

Nina nodded mutely, and Lily stepped aside, allowing Nina to have the map to herself. The small girl with the dark grey hair didn’t move for a long time, instead allowing her wide brown eyes to survey the map careful, cold and calculating. Her stare went almost robotically from one end of the road that led to the academy to the other, then moved to the surrounding areas, undoubtedly looking for landmarks that would allow her to mark the most precise space possible. Flynn found he couldn’t take her eyes off her. While he would never admit it openly, Nina fascinated him, and she had ever since the first time he had met her, in this very same room. While at been a few days ago now, he remembered nearly every detail of that first meeting. How her eyes had stared at him in a baffling mixture of fear and curiosity. How she almost seemed to blend into the background, that blanket always with her no matter what, as well as that school uniform, which Nina wore even now as she stood surveying the map. He remembered how when she had talked, it had cracked a little, like she wasn’t used to using, and Percy’s bizarre that only cast more and more mystery on what her past was and who exactly she was. And most of her, he remembered her inexplicable behavior towards Boessen, as if he was the one person in the entire world who she was comfortable talking to. And her last words to him before Shea and Lily arrived, words that even now made anxiety grow like a large plant in his chest, pressing against the inside of his ribcage, suffocating him from the inside. Those words had made him doubt himself and the one person he knew he loved in this world. As it turned out, Flynn reflected, as he watched Nina, the earlier ghost analogy held up pretty well. This girl was haunting him.

It was probably in reality only around half-a-minute, maybe forty-five seconds, but after what was undoubtedly an eternity, Nina’s hand finally moved. She reached up towards the top of the map, where Hjeslin

Academy was the sloped road that ran from it to the rest of the town. Her short arms struggled to reach, but after a short comment of effort, Nina carefully and deliberately circled a point on the hill, nearly halfway down.

From her perch near the door, Lily spasmed back onto her feet, and in a few strides with her long legs, reached Nina and unceremoniously took the marker from her, not even waiting to see if the other girl was done using it. She waved Nina dismissively back to her seat with her marker-free hand, like she was a worker who had finished her responsibility and was now useless.

*This is why you have trouble making friends, Genius.*

Moving fast and impatiently, Lily drew a sloppy line up and to the right on a very gradual slope from the site of Gary Velvet's murder to the new circle that Nina was drawn, then turned triumphantly back towards Shea, "see?!"

Her voice was breathless, and her face eager, as she was waiting for all of them to break into enthusiastic applause.

"Let me guess." said Shea, his voice dry, "it's almost exactly two miles away from where that Gary guy was murdered?"

"Yes!" nodded Lily in satisfaction, her voice condescending and intolerable, like she had successfully trained her dog to jump through a hoop, "and the place where Nina was attacked is almost exactly twice that distance from the site of the first murder! Tell me with a straight face that is only a coincidence!"

"Okay Lil' calm down." said Shea, "we get it, you figured out the pattern-"

*Technically I figured out the pattern first,* thought Flynn resentfully, but choosing not to talk.

"-but what does that tell exactly. Our killer is very geometrically minded?"

"Not exactly." cut in Flynn, finally breaking back into the conversation, and fixing Lily with a stare that he hoped signified that it was time for him to get credit for his research. She scowled, but did eventually sit down. "It means that these killings aren't as random and as pointless as the police would have us believe."

"I fail to see how they