

The Tranquility in Fire

Chapter 1: Serena

Serena could feel her head pounding, begging her to stop making the thoughts in her head dance. Naturally, Serena blamed her “slight headache” on the sun beaming into her eyes and car sickness. The throbbing in her head couldn’t even compare to the whirlwind consuming the inside of her stomach; twisting in a blender-like motion. Serena couldn’t think about it for too long, she thought she may actually get sick. *It’s too soon*, she thought to herself. Of course, she didn’t voice her concerns. After everything that has happened, the last thing her family needed was to deal with yet another problem. Instead, she leaned back into her car seat, watching her family’s car turn down the windy Philadelphia road. It took almost an hour to reach their destination; Serena’s family’s mountain house. It was different than she once remembered it. Darker. The moment she walked into the door, she could feel his presence. Almost like he was still there.

“Axar,” Serena heard her mom whisper while gently touching the wooden mantle. For some reason this angered her, like the flames conducted from the fireplace into her soul. *It was your idea to come here*, Serena thought in fury. But yet again, she kept her mouth shut. The rest of the evening was filled with Serena’s family basking in the nostalgia that they associated with their mountain house.

“Remember that time when you and A—” Her mom stuttered; mouth still agape, eyes wide.

“It’s okay,” Serena replied. *It’s not.* She could feel the tension in her body tighten. *At least it’s only for the weekend.* This thought was the only thing getting her through this dreadful trip. Unfortunately, thanks to one of her mom's other ingenious plans, Serena would have to sit through a morbid family dinner. Loud chewing and utensils scraping on plates were the only sounds conceivable. Nobody wanted to speak. Nobody wanted to slip up again. It wasn’t her mom’s fault. Deep down, she knew it was her own. It was selfish, but grief wasn’t what Serena was feeling, it was guilt. Tears filled her eyes, threatening to spill over.

“Sweetheart,” her mother remarked, “are you okay?” Serena could tell her mother was trying to sound composed, but her voice was laced with concern.

“No, I’m not fine!” The fire that Serena built up inside of her exploded. It became too massive of a burden to hide, too immense to suppress. Her flame spewed rapidly, desperate to find a victim to burn. Her mother’s words were her gasoline, the source that caused her fire to erupt. There was no going back. Serena was ready to burn down the whole forest.

“It was your idea to come here! It’s too soon! Nobody here has seen him in years! I’m sick of pretending like we were some great family to Axar!”

“Ser—”

“Don’t!” The heat from Serena’s body left; what remained was cold and frozen. She was no longer angry, only remorseful. She regretted her words the second she said them. They left a slight tingle in her cheeks and a sour taste in her mouth. Serena didn’t wait for her family to rebuttal before running upstairs into her temporary bedroom. She slammed and locked the door before burying her face in her hands. She flopped down onto the bed, the same one she would share with Axar as kids. *He loved this place.* In an attempt to catch her breath, Serena looked up. A shadowy figure had appeared in front of her. A pale configuration, an orb, of a tall, slender

man looked solemnly at her. Something about it was familiar. It was the same feeling Serena got when she first walked into the house. With a low voice, Serena decided to investigate it, questioning the impossible. “Axar?”

Chapter 2: Axar

“Fire!” All of the soldiers, including Axar, shot their bullets at the opposing soldiers. Within moments, Axar felt a sharp pain in his chest. He was on the ground withering in pain. The stabbing in his chest eventually stopped to be replaced by a burn that fuelled his body from the inside out. Perhaps it acted as the last burst of energy before he was gone. In his final moments, Axar struggled to get a pin out of his pocket. It was green, and had pictures of the steep mountains that he and his family loved to visit. As kids, he and his sister both had pins, but Axar quickly lost his. When he joined the military, he snuck up into his sister’s room and stole hers as a keepsake, a good luck charm. He gripped onto the pin until his body was no longer able to; until his body was cold and dead.

Axar soon realized that death doesn’t occur how the movies portray it. After Axar’s body stopped fighting, there were a few moments of peace before he went, almost like he was ready to die. Then slowly, carefully, he felt his soul float above his corpse. For a second, Axar felt like there were two of him. The version of him that he could see; a wounded version of what he knew. Then there was this new version, a simple spirit of what he once was; his ghost. Axar wasn’t exactly sure what happened, but since that moment he has resided in his family’s mountain house. Axar has always loved that place. It was his safe haven. He always assumed that there would be life after death, but he wasn’t sure why he was unable to leave. Time and time again, Axar would walk to the front door and try to push his hand out. Every time he was

unsuccessful. There was a force keeping him from freedom. When his family came to visit the mountains, it became clear to him why he was sent to his family's home. His sister needed to move on. It pained Axar to see his sister struggle so much, especially over him. He wanted to show her that he was alright; he needed her to know that she would be alright.

When the opportunity presented itself, Axar appeared before her. Her frail body was curled on her bed as he watched her weep to herself. Axar started to panic. *Maybe this isn't the best time.* It was too late to second guess himself. Serena looked up at him with baffle written on her face. Axar couldn't tell what she was thinking. *Is she happy? Did I scare her? Is she going to call for help?* Even her tone when she gently called his name was unrecognizable. It was the first time somebody had talked to him since he had been dead.

"Yeah, it's me," Axar replied sheepishly.

"What? How?"

"I don't know how." Axar took a long pause to choose his next words. "I think I was sent here to help you. Maybe in a way, you came here to let me help you."

"How can you help me? You- you're..." Her dim voice trailed off completely.

"Dead." There was an awkward silence before Axar continued their conversation. "Talk to me Serena. You're the only one in the family who can't even say my name without exploding or bursting into tears." This erupted even more sobs from his little sister. *Nice going, genius.*

"You just died! None of us were even there. There was no warning. One day you're fine, and the next there is a soldier knocking on our door telling us you're dead!" Serena took a moment to catch her breath while attempting to comprehend what was happening before speaking again. "I should have been there." This time she spoke even softer than when she first reunited with her brother.

“Is that what this is about! Serena, there was nothing you could have done!”

“I should have been there for you. I could've written more. Maybe even called.” Axar finally understood why Serena couldn't get past his death. She blamed herself for him dying. He pulled her into a tight hug. He wasn't sure how, but he could feel her warm skin. It was the first time he wasn't freezing in months.

“You were— are an amazing sister.” His next words were spoken slowly and clearly. “I love you.” Axar then opened his palm to reveal something. The only thing he kept after his death; the pin. Serena cautiously took the round pin before giving him a weak smile.

“Thank you,” she said, giggling a bit. It was music to Axar's ears.

Chapter 3: Serena

The pin was rusted, but the picture of mountains in the spring was still visible. When she looked back up from the pin, Axar was gone. *He's free.* Serena swiftly ran down the wooden staircase to her mother. Serena's body slammed into her moms as she squeezed her.

“I'm sorry.” With the pin still grasped firmly in her hand, Serena melted into her mother's embrace. There was no more tension. No more rage. Like Axar, Serena finally found peace.

Artist's Statement

My multi narrative story is set around two narrators. I decided to have Serena and Axar be siblings to show the dynamics that brothers and sisters often have. While siblings usually fight, they always love each other. I chose to connect Serena's grief and guilt about Axar's death to the essential question "what does it mean to be a family." Someone you love dying isn't something that you move on from instantly, and I made Serena's character portray that. However, after the death of a family member, you must eventually move on. This is why I felt it was important to have Axar appear, and help Serena find peace. When Axar first presented himself, Serena was initially taken aback. I used a snapshot to slow down time for readers to understand what Serena was seeing, and reveal the mystery that was building in the story about her brother. When readers view this scene from Axar's point of view, they know why Axar decided to reunite with his sister. Serena is not aware why he stood in front of her before he explained his situation. This was the effect of dramatic irony. Both characters feel disheartened by the other's sorrow, but only Axar is aware of Serena's pain. This creates many thoughtshots for Axar. He wonders things such as why he resided in his old mountain house, and how his sister will react to seeing him, making his thoughtshots about curiosity. Axar soon finds the answers to both of these questions throughout the story. Serena's narrative more focuses on her own pain, and the burdens she keeps hidden. The pain that rises within Serena led to the motif of fire throughout the story. For Serena, the emotional fire within her, which burst and caused the climax, is the motif shining in her point of view. This motif was different for Axar, and was used to describe the physical pain he felt as he was dying. The second motif that can be found in my story is the pin that belongs to Axar and Serena. This pin is used by both characters as a way to remember one another. When Axar joined the military he took it as a keepsake. When he died, he returned it to

Serena to prove that he loved her. Apon Axar's return, Serena voiced that she didn't feel like a good enough sister for him. He responded by telling her she was wrong and handing her the pin. This let Serena get rid of her guilt and move on. This was foreshadowed by her name; Serena is latin for tranquil. Foreshadowing is also seen in Axar's name, meaning "ghost" in Gujarat. The title of the story was inspired by my fire motif, and the meaning of Serena's name. This represents my story because while both narrators had to endure suffering, they were both able to find peace in the end, and be able to be set free from their burdens.