

Mukanshin

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Hallucination Station: Kannenka

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Chapter 1 – Lack of Proof

“I remember her innocent face; she was so pure and kind. Yet was scarred unwillingly and involuntary. She didn’t have to do it. They took her away from us, I couldn’t protect her the way I wanted to. It saddens me every day knowing that she will never come back to me. Hopefully, I can get over it and try to live my life the way she would’ve wanted me to.”

Tyler opened his eyes to see that he was lying in a pool of blood and tears. He didn’t know where he was or how he got there. He looked around to see a girl’s lifeless body lying on top of him. He moved her long curly hair from in front of her eyes and he proceeded to sob all over again. He remembered why he was there and what happened and how he ended up in that situation.

“Desi, why did you do this?” He said. “Why didn’t you come to me to help?”

Six Months Earlier...

Desirae, or “Desi” as she liked to be called, was Tyler’s younger sister. And she committed suicide by hanging, but no one notified Tyler of her suicide because he had no way of contacting her. Before she committed suicide, he left his aunt’s house when he was eighteen, he only saw her one more time after that when she was 12 or 13 years old. He couldn’t remember, it was so long ago according to him. The only thing that he remembered was that his aunt told him that if he tried to go to the police about what she was doing to Desi, that she would cut off all communication

between them. Of course, Tyler, being the kind of guy to make people mean what they say, went to the police for alleged child abuse. When a worker from child protective services came to investigate what Tyler had told the police; their aunt, daughter, Desi, and their mother weren't at their aunt's house. The aunt had a feeling that Tyler was going to the police to show his "manliness" and brushed off whatever threatening message that she told him. So, their aunt forced Desi and her mother into a car and drove to another part of the city to live with one of their aunt's boyfriends.

"We went to your aunt's place of residence—"

"Step...aunt. She's our step-aunt." Tyler interrupted.

"Right, my apologies. Step-aunt." She said. "Well, we went to her place of residence, and she wasn't there—"

"Bullshit!" Tyler shouted. "How do you know?"

"Well, we knocked on the door and tried looking through the windows. We believe that she was aware that we were on to her and left the area abruptly."

"Wait... what do you mean 'we believe'? What are you saying?"

"We have been informed by her school's teacher and principal that she had bruising, scars, and burn marks on her legs, neck, and wrists."

Hearing this, Tyler was enraged. He tried to remain calm as the social worker was telling him the awful things that were happening to his sister. But in the back of his mind, he knew that something needed to be done. The only thing that was concerning to him was that he couldn't take his sister and mother away from his aunt.

“Do you know the name of your step-aunt?” The social worker asked.

“Her name? It’s Andrea Stevens. Why is that important?”

“So, we can send this information to the police so they can track her down and hopefully find her, and then when that happens, we will go out there to talk to her.”

“So, by ‘we’, you mean...?”

“Child protective services and also the police to confront your step-aunt about the abuse.”

Tyler stood back and thought about the fact that he couldn’t do anything to help his sister at the moment because he didn’t know where she was. The only thing he could do was hope that by giving his aunt’s name to the police that they would be able to find where she could’ve taken them to.

“Umm... excuse me? Mister?”

Tyler started to see his aunt standing in front of him. She was just standing there looking down at him like he was beneath her, like how she did when he was younger. As he stood there looking at her, he started to see blood dripping from her nose and eyes and then started to see bruises and rope marks all over her wrists and neck, like someone had tortured her violently. Then he had a flash of him standing above his aunt and her daughter lying in a pool of blood. He started to hyperventilate and felt very dizzy after having that thought.

“Sir, are you alright?” The social worker asked concerned.

He couldn’t respond, he didn’t know what was happening. What was causing him to have that sudden dark and violent thought about his aunt and her daughter lying there dead in a pool of

blood? He couldn't understand why he was thinking about a thought so vivid and demented. He had a couple of these thoughts before, but they weren't as violent as that one. After being guided to a nearby chair, Tyler was handed a cup of water and was told to take a deep breath and was asked to be taken to a hospital; to which he declined, saying that it was just a sudden intrusive thought and that it shouldn't worried about too much. But in the back of his mind, he still knew that something was wrong that needed to be resolved.

“Since you just had a slight episode of panic and anxiety, I'll just come back in a few minutes. Please feel free to walk around the office to stretch your legs or ask for water. I'll be back shortly.”

The social worker stepped out of the main room and walked into an office room, presumably her office room, but Tyler wasn't sure. He wasn't sure about a lot of things at the moment, he wasn't sure about where his sister was, or why his aunt just up and left without saying anything and decided to run from the child protective services and the police. Nothing was making sense to him, and he couldn't understand why all of these events were happening. He was worried about the situation that his sister was in and the living conditions that his aunt has them living in.

“That bitch is responsible for this,” Tyler muttered. “I would find out where she is, and I would kill her my damn self. She doesn't deserve to live, let alone a chance to explain herself. She did this. I want answers, that's all I want. Are some fucking answers.”

Tyler proceeded to get up and started pacing back and forth in long strides and was shaking his entire body in anger and frustration. He was so aggressive and loud with his movements and was muttering so loud to himself that some people started staring at him and were looking at him like he was a psychopath because of his unexpected actions. But he couldn't help himself because

of what was happening to his sister. He knew he had to do something about it and potentially find his sister and save her from whatever hell she was in.

After twenty minutes, the social worker came out of the office, but as she was walking out of the office, police were walking into the building. This concerned Tyler, yet it made him feel at ease just a little because he knew that he could go to the police and tell them about his aunt and what she was doing to his sister.

“Officers, I’m so glad you came.” The social worker said. “This is the man I was talking about.”

Tyler looked at the social worker with confusion because he didn’t know what she meant by he’s the man she’s talking about. However, that didn’t matter because the police were already walking to the building with a skeptical perspective about Tyler because of what the social worker had told them while she was in the office. She told him that Tyler had a “panic attack” and then while Tyler was just venting out loud to himself, she made it sound like he was a crazy, deranged person of his odd behavior. So, instead of Tyler getting the opportunity to explain to the police what had been happening with his sister; the police instead decided to ask Tyler some questions down at the police station. That confused Tyler because he didn’t understand what was happening and why the police officers traveled down to the child protective services building for those reasons that Tyler wasn’t aware of.

“Is there a way we can speak to Mr. Wilson in private, ma’am?” One of the officers asked.

“Oh, yes, of course.” She said. “Right this way, follow me please.”

They all followed the social worker to an empty office room towards the rear of the building, however, the room that she put them in was intentionally decided on by both the social worker and the police officers. Because of Tyler's abrupt behavior, they felt it was necessary to put at least one officer in the room with him while the other one sits outside of the room, just in case something bad were to happen and backup needed to be called.

"Hello Mr. Wilson, I assume you're wondering why we're here speaking to you in a situation such as this." The officer said.

Tyler looked around the room and saw that there was a big window and also a big, long station-like section in front of where they were. There were more social workers and the other police officer standing out there trying not to look like they were listening, even though they were.

"Well, I don't know why I was brought into this room to speak to you privately, I was only wanting to talk about my sister and what was going on with my aunt. I wasn't expecting to be thrown into a situation like this, let alone be talking to a police officer." Tyler said.

"Well, whatever you have to tell the social worker; you can tell me. I can help you just like she can."

"But you're not the child protective services."

"But we can together with child protective services to better help your situation with your family."

Tyler was feeling very skeptical about this police officer and what they were saying, he didn't know whether to believe this person or not. Because, he didn't really trust anyone except for his sister and mother. So, asking Tyler to basically put his trust into this person that is coming

off so aggressively towards him, is almost ridiculous in Tyler's eyes. But what other choices did he have? His sister was nowhere to be found; God only knows what their aunt may be doing to them. Only if their aunt was doing something to his sister in the first place.

Was she?

Tyler was sure of it, that's why he went to child protective services, to begin with, because of the abuse that was going on when he wasn't there. The only problem is that...

"...You don't actually have proof that any abuse was going on at all, do you?" The police officer asked.

"What do you mean 'actual proof'? I'm sure of it!" Tyler exclaimed. "Find my sister and she'll show you!"

"So, you're saying that there are actual marks and bruises on your sister's body?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm telling you!"

"When was the last time you saw your sister?"

Tyler had to think about that question for a long while. The last time he spoke to his sister, he was eighteen years old. That's when he was going off to college, or in his words, "trying to get away from the hell that God put me in for some reason". But then, he remembered that he saw her one last time a couple of months ago because he got a letter from his sister saying that she missed him and that she wants him to get her and their mother.

"...So, when I arrived at the last known location that our step-aunt was living at, I knocked on the door; she opened it..."

Tyler paused for a long time. The room was still as Tyler tried to prepare himself for the daunting memory that his aunt bestowed upon him. Tears started falling from his eyes.

“She told me that if I were to go to the police or anyone about my sister, t—t—that I would never see my sister again.”

Tyler was basically in tears at that point, he couldn't control himself. He knew that he had to get it out eventually.

Chapter 2 – PTSD

Tyler woke up lying on a hospital bed. That evening when Tyler was telling the police officer about what his aunt said to him; he went into a complete frenzy and started having severe anxiety and started to cut himself with a knife that was in his pocket. The police officer tried to restrain him, but they couldn't do it by themselves, so they had to get the other police officer and had to call for backup because of how erratic Tyler's behavior was.

There was a knock on the door.

"Mr. Wilson, are you awake?" A woman says.

He didn't respond.

"Alright, I'm coming in."

A nurse walked in to see Tyler dazed and confused as to what happened and he got in the hospital, to begin with. She walked over to the end of his bed and picked up his medical chart. She looked surprised to see that Tyler was admitted for severe anxiety and self-harm when he looked completely innocent at that moment.

Tyler groaned and reopened his eyes to see the nurse standing at the end of his bed.

"Hello? Mr. Wilson?" The nurse asked.

"Yes?"

“Hi, I’m the nurse on call for today and tonight. I was just checking your medical chart and it said you were admitted for severe anxiety and... potential self-harm. Would you like to tell me about that?”

Tyler looked up at the ceiling trying to formulate an answer for this nurse that just came in and tried to ask him a bunch of random questions.

“Well, first... who are you? The last time I begin to open up to someone I didn’t know, I ended up in the hospital.” Tyler said.

The nurse laughed and grabbed the chart with both hands and pulled it to her chest.

“Well, if I give you my name, will that make you feel better?”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

She was a little taken aback by his blunt response, but she wasn’t all that surprised because of the anxiety and self-harm and the notes that were left by the police officers and social workers saying that he was talking to himself and was aggressively pacing back and forth. But she held her composure.

“My name is Kaiya Holland.” She said. “I’m... also not a registered nurse. I’m actually in medical school right now, so I’m just an intern. Or a medical student. I just wanted to say that I wanting to actually talk to you.”

“Oh, great. Another person to cause me to lose my shit again.”

“Oh no, I’m studying psychiatry. You know, mental health and things like that. I just like pretending to be a nurse.”

Tyler thought that this girl was completely crazy and was basically playing a prank on him. He wasn't sure whether this girl was a legitimate person or if she was just trying to get under his skin and get all into his business.

“So, why do you want to talk to me again?” Tyler asked more aggressively.

“W—well, I just interested in why you ended up here. Maybe I can help you.”

“You want to help me? Alright, sure.”

She put the chart down on the counter behind her and sat down in the chair next to his bed. She was determined to make him trust her because she had a feeling that he wasn't as crazy as the social workers or police officers made him out to be. She just needed him to believe her and trust her, but she didn't know how to do so.

“Look, you may not believe me or trust me. But please listen to me. I believe your story; you seem too much like a caring brother and son to make up a story like that. Most people that come up with the child abuse story that come in here or report it to the police or child protective services either get ignored or don't believe them because they're lacking the proof that they need to make a case for them.”

Tyler flashed back to the police officer asking him if he had proof of his sister getting abused and how that led him to have that extreme episode. That caused him to start having a panic attack and he sat up and started to feel his heart race and his blood boil. He was breathing very heavily and was started to tear up.

Kaiya was sitting there with a confused yet concerned face because she didn't know what to do in that situation. She wished that she could help more, but she didn't know what to do. She

was speechless and started tearing up herself. But she didn't know that saying that lacking proof of abuse could cause such a negative trigger.

“Well... maybe if you can tell me your story, I can make sure you can get the help you need.”

Tyler looked at her with a menacing glare. Kaiya sunk into her seat with fear, not knowing if she said the right thing or if she caused another trigger. His face loosened up and his glare disappeared into a neutral melancholic face.

“What will telling you do?” He asked.

“If you let me go with you, I can write down the events that took place while you were still leaving with your aunt and sister. And then, if we can try to track down your aunt, we can potentially confront them.”

“You really expect us... to go out of our way to find my aunt and where she went. And then when we happen to find her; confront her? Are you fucking stupid or what?”

Kaiya's happy and optimistic attitude was quickly shattered and dwindled into a melancholic depression.

Tyler noticing this started to feel bad because he realized that this person is willingly giving up her time and potentially her life to helping him find his sister. No one has done such a thing for him or his sister as long as they've been alive. They literally had to fend for themselves ever since their stepfather died when Tyler was around eleven or twelve. Desi would have been too young to remember since she was only three or four when he passed away. The only reason that she even knew about her father's passing was that her mother told her about it when she got a little older.

But that still didn't take away the pain that she felt afterward. And Tyler seeing this pain enraged him because he didn't know what to make of it. He didn't know who was to blame for that situation and why his sister was in tears constantly.

So, when he finally realized that he was starting to take his aggression out of this person that was willing to help him; he started to tear up.

"L—I—listen," He said. "I—I—I'm sorry. I appreciate you offering yourself to help me, I can't thank you enough."

Kaiya got out of her chair and walked up to Tyler's bed and knelt on the side of the bed.

"There's no reason to feel sorry. You are hurt, yet you are so protective over your family. Who am I to not want to help you?"

"Most people at this point would be like, 'yeah, that's nice and all, but how does that help me?'"

"Well, I can do my best. I can at least give you that much. If you're willing to take it."

Tyler sat back in his bed.

"Might as well." He chuckled. "Who can turn down free help?"

"Now if you say it like that it sounds like I'll be doing all the work."

Tyler realized that he got himself into an awkward predicament.

“Well, how about this; I do the talking and bash people skulls in. And you do the searching.”

“Orrrrr... you can try to not get us arrested, please? That would be nice.”

“Wow, you really took the fun out of this.”

They both laughed.

Tyler started to feel that maybe this girl was a blessing in disguise. Albeit, in his mind, that term is a bit of a cliché, but it worked for him.

Tyler was eventually released from the hospital after some more days of testing and blood work. And after seeing a psychiatrist, he was given medication for those thoughts and for depression.

“Hey, wait up!” A girl yelled.

Tyler turned around to Kaiya running up behind him waving her right arm signaling him to slow down and wait for her.

“Hey Tyler, what’s up? *Breathing heavily* WHEW! I’m exhausted!” She said gasping for air.

“Oh, hey, Kaiya...? What are you doing out here? Shouldn’t you be interning with some doctor or something?”

“Oh, that? Don’t worry about that. I took a year off. I was starting to lose my shit whilst in classes.”

“I see. Well, at least you’re doing better, right?”

“Nope, I admitted myself into the psychiatrist hospital a few weeks after for sleep deprivation, delusions, depression, suicidal thoughts, nightma—”

“Alright, alright...” Tyler interrupted. “Let’s just calm down, okay?”

Kaiya composed herself and took a deep breath and then let out an exhale with a major exaggeration.

Tyler had a feeling in the back of his mind that he was going to have two major problems to deal with. One was finding his aunt and his sister. And the second was this new “friend” that he just made.

“Oh! Hey, you want a ride? I got my car; we can get lunch if you want.” Kaiya said eagerly.

“Sure, I guess. Thanks.”

They started walking towards the parking lot. Tyler held out his hand and let the snowflakes just fall and melt into his hand.

He sees Kaiya walking beside him and can’t help but stare at her. This girl, who seemingly came out of nowhere, offering her help to him. Either she was an undercover social worker herself, or she was actually a med student that actually wanted to help him. But at the same time, Tyler couldn’t help but have his suspicions about her. After all, she came to him out of nowhere. No one had done that before. So, to Tyler, this was making him pretty paranoid.

But he could help but look at her face, he actually started blushing a little bit. He just wanted her to look in his direction. She wasn't in a nurse's uniform, so to see her in her causal outfit was something that he hadn't seen before.

She glanced over to see that he was kind of lost in her eyes.

"Hey? Tyler?" She asked.

Tyler immediately realizing that she was looking at him, quickly looked away in embarrassment.

"Oh, sorry. I was just looking at your... hair. Yes, your hair, I like the way it's styled."

That was a lie.

"Oh, you think so?"

"Yeah, it looks great."

Now he couldn't back out of the situation, he had to continue with the lie that he started. Quickly, he tried to switch topics to something else as they approached closer to Kaiya's car.

"Welp, this is it," Kaiya said presenting her car to Tyler.

Flashes of his aunt flooded into his mind; she had that same car model when he was younger. They got into a car accident when Tyler was about eleven or twelve. There was no one on the road that night, it was just Tyler and his aunt.

That face.

That look she gave him.

He looked at that car and saw that accident right before his eyes.

It was intentional, wasn't it?

No, it couldn't have been. That would've been absolutely absurd.

Wait, wasn't it when he was sixteen? He couldn't remember. He just remembered those moments leading up to that accident, then...

Nothing.

"Hey, Tyler?" A voice said.

He snapped back into reality to see that Kaiya was standing close to him, looking at him with a concerned look on her face.

"Something must've happened to you, you went all mute and zoned out on me." She said.

"Oh, it's nothing. Everything is fine, we can go."

He quickly walked around her and walked up to the passenger side door and waited for her to unlock it. He got in the car and then it hap—

"So, are you ready to go?" Kaiya asked eagerly.

"Y—y—yeah..., sure."

"Where would you like to go eat?"

"Somewhere that's not here, anything is fine with me."

"Great, I'll just surprise you."

She started the car, and they began driving to wherever Kaiya was taking them. It didn't help that Tyler had literally just said that he didn't care where they ate. With that notion, she could have been taking them anywhere. Tyler tried to not get too concerned because he knew that she was driving to get something to eat, right? To think that she wasn't going to get something to eat would have been a complete misjudgment.

But at the same time, what choice did he have?

He couldn't just turn this person down, right?

Right?

Tyler was sick to his stomach; he couldn't formulate any coherent thoughts at all. He was starting to sweat. His legs were fidgeting, his eyes were twitching. His thoughts started to race.

It was happening again, that same situation. He didn't want to look to his left.

He took a deep breath and slowly turned his head to see that Kaiya wasn't in the car at all. She just disappeared.

Tyler anxiously looked around to see where she went, but he couldn't find her. He couldn't move his body at all, almost like he was glued into the seat. He started to panic; he knew he had to get out of that situation.

He started to move his body around to try to break free of the seatbelt, but nothing was working. The car looked like it had been just sitting in the middle of nowhere. All of that was weird to Tyler, he couldn't comprehend what was going on.

He finally was able to break free from the seatbelt. He tried for the door.

Locked.

He jiggled the door handle. Nothing.

He looked outside to see if anyone was around; there was no one.

As a last-ditch effort, he took his elbow and shattered the glass, and quickly crawled out of the car. He was hyperventilating, he was scared, he didn't know what going on. He walked for what seemed like miles (it was only a few hundred feet). He walked into the middle of the road.

Silence.

He could hear his thoughts vividly. He could hear his sister's cry for help, he could hear his aunt telling him that he'll never see his sister ever again.

He kneels down and covered his head; he was losing it.

Then suddenly he looked up and everything went black.

Tyler opened his eyes; he wasn't feeling all that great. He stared at the ceiling for what seemed like an eternity.

There was a little girl that walked into the room, he didn't realize who it was at first.

"C'mon Tyler, mommy's waiting for us." She said.

He remembered that voice so well, it was her voice. He finally found her. He quickly sat up and jumped out of his bed and immediately followed his sister down the stairs into the kitchen. He saw his mother and his stepfather.

“So, I must’ve gone back in time to when I was twelve. Before all this happened.” He thought out loud.

Then there was a sudden flash.

Maybe it was just his imagination.

He sat down at the table and ate with his family, but then again; it felt off for some reason. He just couldn’t put his finger on it. But he didn’t care, he just got to see his sister and mother again.

“Hey, Tyler,” Desi said. “I wish you could’ve saved me sooner.”

“W—what do you mean?” He said confused. “You’re fine, sis.”

“Mmm... well, at the moment, but something is going to happen, and I don’t know what you’ll do to fix it.”

What compelled her to say that? There was no reason to say that; she’s fine. Right?

Right?

She’s only four years old, why would she say something so outlandish like that? It was very strange. There had to be a reason for that.

Tyler tried to talk to his mother, but she was so exhausted from walking all day at the hospital going from appointment to appointment. Since she was so sick and was literally dying at every waking second, she had to expend her energy in places that she really needed to use it. But Tyler still wanted to say hello to her. He did love her a lot, but she wasn’t the most approachable person because of her sickness, but she did love Tyler and Desirae equally and very much.

“Hello mom, it’s me, Tyler. H—how was your day?” He said anxiously.

She looked up at him as if she was somewhere else in her mind. She smiled.

“Hello son, it was fine. How was your day at school?”

Tyler didn’t recall going to school today. He’s still questioning how he got there and what was going on. But he knew that his mother would’ve been disappointed that he didn’t go to school that day.

“It was alright. Just a typical day.” He said.

That was a lie, obviously.

“How were your appointments? Hopefully, we have some good news…?” He said.

She shook her head in disappointment and a tear started to shed from her eye. She always tried to shield her sadness from Tyler and Desirae. But she wasn’t the best at it.

Seeing his mother cry always made Tyler so angry with the world, he could never understand why those things were happening to his mother. If he could fix it, he would. But he slowly started to realize that it would’ve been harder than he expected it to be.

Tyler tried to spend as much time with his sister as much as possible that day and at that moment.

It was finally time for her to go to sleep; she rubbed her eyes and yawned.

“Tyler, I’m sleepy. Can you read me a bedtime story?” She asked.

“Of course.” He said smiling.

He picked her up and took her to her room. He tucked her into her bed and wrapped her up in her blankets. He picked out a book that he thought she would've liked. He sat down on the edge of the bed next to her and cleared his throat to start reading. He opened up the book and saw that there was only one sentence that was on the first page.

This is not real.

That wasn't supposed to be there. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes and looked back at the page again. The sentence was gone and the actual words to the book appeared there.

He took a deep sigh of relief and looked at his sister who had drifted off to sleep without him knowing. He chuckled softly and smiled. He rubbed her forehead and a tear fell from his eye; he was just happy to see his sister again. He couldn't believe that he was about to see that she was okay. He closed the book and put it back on her shelf, then he walked back over to the bed and gave her a kiss on the forehead. He turned off her light and quietly walked out the door.

"Tyler...?" She said groggily.

He turned around and looked at her from the doorway.

"Yeah, Desi?" He said.

"I love you. And I miss you. I hope you'll find me someday."

He laughed and tried to brush off the comment.

"Oh c'mon, Desi." He said. "I'm right here, you're fine. Nothing will happen to you, I promise."

Desirae then rolled over to face Tyler, but her hair was covering her face. He could hear her silently crying. He walked over to her bed to reassure and comfort her. He lifted her hair out of her face and literally almost jumped through the wall in terror.

“Desi! W—w—what the fuck? What happened to you?” He said in horror.

Desirae’s neck had rope marks wrapped around it, her eyes were filled with tears and her mouth was dripping with blood. Tyler had a vision of this same thing, but it was when he was a lot older. He didn’t know where it came from, but it was terrifying him.

“Desi? Desi! Please, are you okay? Say something…” He said tearfully.

She wasn’t moving. He couldn’t believe it. She was dead right before his eyes.

He ran out of the room screaming. The walls were closing in around him, everything was becoming claustrophobic, and he couldn’t escape. Then suddenly, black.

“Tyler, are you alright?” A voice said. “It’ll be all over soon.”

Tyler screamed as he sat up in a panicked state. He quickly looked around to see that he was in someone’s apartment. How did he get there? Who helped him get there? Why was he there?

“Hey Tyler, are you alright?” A familiar voice said.

Tyler managed to look to his right to see that Kaiya was sitting in the chair next to him. She overheard him scream out of his sleep and that in itself scared her out of her sleep. As soon as she heard that he was awake, she quickly got up and made some tea that would hopefully calm him down.

“Kaiya, h—h—how did I... get... here?” He asked.

“Well, the important question, is ‘are you alright?’” She said. “You were literally talking in your sleep and then suddenly I heard you scream at the top of your lungs, and it literally scared me out of my sleep! What happened?”

Tyler was having a lot of trouble putting together how and when he got into this apartment. Kaiya looked to be in her pajamas, so it was safe to assume that this apartment belonged to her, right?

“Where am I?” Tyler asked.

“I will tell you what you want to know when you tell me if you’re alright or not.”

“I don’t know how I am.” He said. “Everything has just been so... crazy.”

“Well, I guess I’ll get some more out of you soon enough.” She said sternly yet softly. “But to answer your questions. Firstly, you’re in my apartment. Second, how you got here? Oh! I literally found you lying in the middle of the street in some other part of the city. It wasn’t hard to find you, you didn’t walk very far. You collapsed before some car almost hit you. Can you believe that?”

Tyler was so confused as to what she was saying. What he saw was an empty white void with a four-way intersection. And he was certain that a car did hit him before he blacked out.

“What are your car window and your seat? Are they damaged?” He asked.

“Nope, not a scratch. Why did something happen?”

He couldn't believe what he just heard; he swore that he broke that window and broke that seatbelt to escape from her car. But now she's telling him that nothing happened to her car. What was going on?

"Kaiya, I don't know what's going on anymore," Tyler said tearing up. "I can't seem to fix it. And it literally kills me that I can't. But I saw her face."

"Your sister's, hmm?" She said softly.

Tyler nodded his head and started crying softly. He couldn't believe that he was opening up to this person that he had never met before, what was he supposed to do in that situation? He was literally exposed to this girl. He tried to be strong, but he couldn't. She got up from her chair and sat on the couch next to him and held him while he cried in her lap. That was the first time that Tyler was able to just let his emotions out. He had always kept his emotions sealed in for his sister because he didn't want her to see him cry because he didn't want her to start crying either.

"I saw your face when you looked at my car today. Did my car remind you of something?" She asked.

He was already in a vulnerable position, and he felt that he could slowly open up to her. He wiped his eyes and positioned himself to where his head was in her lap, and he was stretched out on his back. He opened up his eyes and looked up at her.

"Do you really want to know?" He asked. "It's a long story. And there's something else that I saw too that also startled me out of my sleep."

She was brushing his hair and looked over at an adjacent wall.

“Well, I’m basically running on adrenaline at this point, and I did say that I would help you.” She said smirking. “I’m all ears. Let’s start from the beginning.”

Tyler looked up at her in disbelief; finally, a person who was willing to listen to him and not judge him.

“Well, it started out like this...”

Chapter 3 – Introduction

“Alright, let’s start from the beginning, Tyler. Talking about this may jog your memory somehow and maybe some pieces may start to find together.”

“Alright... let’s see. Ahh shit, we have to through THAT part, don’t we?”

“Yep, everything.”

“I don’t really remember everything; I have a lot of gaps in my memory. I blocked out a lot of stuff from my childhood.”

“Well, let’s see what happens. You’ll start to remember when you begin talking.”

I

Eight years earlier...

There were nightmares some nights. Pleasant dreams on others. Didn’t help that most of the time there were gaps in my memory. At least, that was what was supposedly said by those around me. But that doesn’t make sense because this is a further flashback, so that statement shouldn’t exist in this part of the timeline. Right? It gets really confusing from this point on.

The alarm clock woke me up out of his sleep as usual. I would roll over and look at the alarm clock in an agitated state.

“Not this shit again.” I thought to myself. “I just want to go back to sleep.”

The door would swing open right about...

“Tyler! Wake up!”

...Now. Thank you to whoever said that.

“C’mon, c’mon! Get up! Mommy and daddy are waiting for us!”

“C’mon Desi, five more minutes, please?”

She always gave me a pouty face and a stern look of disappointment.

“You always say that.” She said.

“I’ll give you my bacon if you’ll leave now and come back in five minutes.”

“Deal!” She said sprinting out of the room.

That “Desi” girl that just ran out of the room is (was) my little sister. I love(d) her very much, h(e)r and my mother (a)re very near and (d)ear to my heart. I would do anything from them. Desi was just a little girl that didn’t know anything about how harsh and cruel the world was around her. Her life had just begun, she was only four years old. Or was she three? I sometimes forgot her age, that was usually something that would upset me about myself. Not knowing when my own sister’s fucking birthday was. How great was that?

I finally rolled out of the bed and came crashing down onto the floor where I laid dormant for the remainder of the five minutes that I told Desi to give me. Finally, there was peace and quiet for another three hundred seconds. They were slowly ticking away.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. There are two-hundred and ninety-six seconds left. How great.

I swore I closed my eyes from literally a wink because as soon as I dozed off, I heard her voice again.

“Tyler! Get up, it’s been five minutes already!” Desi yelled running into my room.

I knew that the peace and quiet would’ve ended eventually, but it didn’t help that I had to get up and face the world that I knew hated me. I rolled over onto my back and looked over at Desi. She walked over to me and literally sat on my chest and smiled at me. I couldn’t help but poke her little nose and watch her reaction to me doing it. I always looked at my sister as someone who would be just too innocent for the world, especially since she was only four years old. But that didn’t stop her from being the most outgoing four-year-old that I ever knew.

“What are you doing, Desi?” I laughed.

“I’m sitting on you.” She laughed back. “See? Bouncy! Bouncy!”

She would always pretend that my chest was a trampoline or some kind of bounce house that she always wanted. I don’t know why that didn’t bother me as much as it should, but I was okay with it as long as she was happy.

“So, mommy and daddy want to see me, yeah?” I asked.

“No, silly. It’s time for breakfast! Now c’mon, you owe me bacon!”

She hopped off my chest and pretended to pull me off the floor. Since I was twelve years old, it would have been literally impossible for her to lift me up. But to make her feel big and strong, I would go along with it.

We would walk downstairs and be greeted by my mother and stepfather. My father was never really had an intricate impact on my life; seeing as that he left my mother when I was really young and before Desi was even born. Fucking piece of shit, I have always hated him for just abandoning us like that. I just hoped that my stepfather wouldn't just get up and leave us either because he couldn't handle our shitty little family.

“Good morning Tyler.” My mother said. “Your plate is on the counter, try to eat as much as you can before you have to catch the bus.”

“Alright, thanks for making it mom.” I always said.

Talking to my stepfather wasn't always the easiest thing to do, since he came into my life so much later than most stepparents would; it was hard to try to create a solid relationship with him. Don't get me wrong, I did speak to him; it was just that... he had his own problems that he was dealing with. His own family, so that would have been my in-laws, haven't always been the greatest of people. At least, that's the first impression I got from them when first meeting them.

Especially after meeting his aunt... Andrea Stevens.

She was... how can I describe this? An “interesting” read, to be honest. At that time, I didn't care for her like the way that my sister did. Since my sister is my mother and stepfather's child, Andrea would be considered her biological aunt. Somehow and somehow. What a joke.

“You can call Aunt Drea or Auntie if you want.” She would always tell me.

I didn't care for calling her, my aunt. After all, we had no relations at all, the only reason why she was even somewhat close to me in any way was because of my stepfather. I had zero

reasons for speaking to this person. It didn't help that she had a daughter as well. Elise, I think her name was. I had no idea; I barely saw her...

I heard a book close abruptly.

"Good morning, Tyler." He said snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Oh, good morning," I responded.

"Did you sleep well?"

"I slept alright, as always."

"Alright, well, hurry up and eat then. You have that bus to catch."

"Alright."

That was how the conversations usually went between us; always so boring and meaningless. Like, what was their purpose? I never had the opportunity to develop a somewhat decent relationship with my stepfather because of his shitty family. They always got in the way, and also... it was because of my inability and stubbornness to open up and talk to him. I mean, fuck, I didn't even have a name to call this guy! Like, that was how shitty and awkward our relationship was.

The days when I was twelve weren't the greatest. Constant nightmares about pointless shit, seeing those thoughts in my sleep. I had envisioned thoughts on violence, horror, and mutilation. You know, the usual shit. Nothing too major, at least, I didn't think so. There would be some nights that I would have nightmares about Desi and how something bad could happen to her and that there would have been nothing that I could've done to prevent it. It was always a terrible experience

to have. Mainly because I would usually run away screaming in complete terror and the walls would begin to close in and it felt like I was going to get caught by whatever or whoever was chasing after me. And at the end of it, the walls would close at the last second, and just before they completely closed in and crushed me, I would snap awake. Reassuring that I wasn't dead on that my lungs weren't completely crushed by collapsing walls.

Usually, after a horror show like that, I would get out of bed and make my way to Desi's room just to make sure that she was alive and that nothing had happened to her. And usually, everything was fine. Usually.

One night I found her wandering around in the backyard by herself, and when I approached her, she disappeared and then I woke up in fright. I don't know why that happened. I went and asked her about the incident, and she replied saying that she was asleep and doesn't remember getting up to go into the backyard. However, I had reassured myself that it was just my imagination playing a cruel trick on me and that there was nothing wrong with me. After all, things like that don't happen to people, right? At least, that was what I was told by Andrea.

And I regretted the decision of ever listening to her words.

“How about calling him... Pops or something?” My mother asked. “You have to call him something, Tyler.”

I thought to myself that I would never call him “Pops”, that's such a weird thing to call him. I never thought about a name to call my stepfather because I never actually got close to him, like I said, every time that I tried to do something with the guy; it just fell apart. We really don't

have any common interest aside from some sports or something like that. I remembered him telling me that he used to watch anime growing up, which when he told me that; I thought that was pretty interesting. Finally, we had something in common; at least that was what I claimed to be true.

It didn't help that most of the time he would always be outside either for work or for more personal reasons. Like doing drugs or some shit like that, I never really asked what he did, nor did I care for what he did. It was never my business to ask. All I knew was that if it affected my mother, then I wasn't too happy about it.

Unfortunately, that was as far that our relationship would go.

I would usually have dreams about nothing sometimes as well. It was just blank, empty, and black. Practically, just... nothing. I would go to sleep and then I would wake up. That was it. Nothing more, nothing less. And those nights that those "dreams" happened; I sat up in my bed and just sulked with anger because I didn't know what to think about the dreams, or in this case, the blank, empty void that laid dormant in my head.

Sometimes I would see flashes of words like, "This isn't real. She's going to die. You can't save her."

Things like that. But I usually just ignored them because I knew that they weren't true, to begin with. Like c'mon, why would I have believed some bullshit like that? Like "she's going to die"? What a load of shit, seriously!

But... at the same time, I couldn't help but feel like that was true. I didn't know why, but it lingered in the back of my mind periodically. Almost to the point where it kept me up at night. Then nights turned into days. I had the energy to get through the days where I didn't sleep,

somehow. I had no idea how, I just literally... “went with the flow” as they called it. Point is, I couldn’t sleep so fuck the world, right?

I still couldn’t come with a name for that fucker. I was becoming aware that eventually that fact would’ve caught up to me and ran me down. Mom was continuously on my neck about it. Why couldn’t she just have left it alone? Why was a name so fucking important? It wasn’t like he was going to die or something.

Well, that was the hope at least.

I hope I didn’t screw myself over with that sentence.

Occasionally, his family came over to our house. Primarily, his sister, Andrea, and her daughter, Elise. Or “Eli” as she preferred to be called. She was a weird kid. She was about three years younger than me but around four years older than Desi. So, literally, I was the oldest out of all of us, and whenever something bad would happen, like someone would get hurt. I usually got blamed for it. Even if I was on the other side of the house, or upstairs in my room away from those two and something happened to Desi, it was my fault. Elise never got blamed for anything.

Her reason? “Desi did it to herself.” She always said.

What a load of shit.

Why I got blamed for it and not her was because I wasn’t there to stop Elise from doing whatever she was doing to Desi. Whatever that was.

One night, Andrea and Elise just happened to be staying the night for... some... reason. I couldn't remember why. But I remember seeing Elise playing with a lighter, presumably her mother's lighter as Andrea liked to smoke. And then, I saw that Elise was holding the lighter really close to Desi's arm and then she proceeded to get close to Desi and whispered something in her ear. Whenever it was caused Desi to cry and then my parents ran upstairs to see why she was crying. It was good that I just happened to be standing there because I spoke out and said that Elise had held a lighter close to Desi and whispered something to her that cause her to cry. When questioned by my parents, Elise said that she did no such thing. And when my mother asked Desi if she was telling the truth, Desi slowly nodded her head.

I felt my blood boil. How could she just lie to my parents' faces like that? And what did she say to make Desi cry?

"She's lying, mom!" I yelled. "I swear she was holding a lighter! Ask her!"

"Is that true, Elise?" My mom asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about, I don't have a lighter. See?"

She emptied her pockets and held out her hands revealing that she didn't have a lighter on her.

"Tyler, I don't know what you saw. But this is not a funny situation." My mom said.

I couldn't believe what just happened. How could she have gotten rid of the lighter so quickly and played it off as nothing happened?

"How am I making a funny situation out of this?" I asked. "Why would I do something like that?"

“Because maybe, you don’t like Elise. For whatever reason.”

“So, you would believe her over me?”

“Tyler! Don’t you say that to your mother!”

I couldn’t win that argument. It was literally a losing fight, to begin with. I just put my head down and walked back into my room.

I saw out of the corner of my eye that Elise was giving me a sinister smirk as she was rubbing Desi’s hair.

I laid down on the floor and just stared up at the ceiling.

“Why would they believe me over her?” I asked myself. “What did they see in her to believe her?”

I started to feel a few tears fall down to the sides of my face. I rubbed my eyes, trying not to cry loudly. But I couldn’t help by weep to myself.

“Tyler?” Someone said.

I turned to see who said that, but I couldn’t see anyone. It was too dark in my room to make out anyone.

“Who’s there?” I responded. “Is that you, Desi?”

It didn’t sound like Desi, it sounded like someone a little older. Weird. But at the same time, the voice did kind of scare me. But I tried to ignore the fear.

“Don’t talk, just listen.” The voice said.

“You’re telling your parents that Elise held a candle to Desi was a lie, you didn’t see anything. It was all in your head. Remember that. Anything, and I mean, anything, that you see or hear is in your head.”

“That’s a load of shit and you know it.” I interrupted. “I know what I saw.”

I couldn’t really move my body; I knew that I was awake. But all I could do was speak and move my eyes.

“Now why do you think that your cousin would intentionally try to harm your sister, hmm?”

“I don’t know, you tell me.”

I felt the presence of whatever was speaking to me get louder and closer, also whispering into my ear.

“Maybe it’s because she just wants your attention. Maybe it’s because she’s lonely. Maybe it’s because she wants power. Have you ever thought about how she feels?”

“It doesn’t matter how she feels. She’s dead to me anyway.”

“That’s how you feel about your stepfather’s family?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Alright then, this conversation doesn’t need to go any further.”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

And just like that, the voice was gone.

I woke up the next morning with a pounding headache. I don't know why or what happened last night. It was almost a blur to me.

I looked over at my alarm clock to see that it had been unplugged. That was weird, usually, it was never unplugged. On top of that, there was a note next to it as well. I grabbed the note and my heart almost sunk into my stomach.

“So, about last night. I swore that you didn't see what I thought you saw. Hmm... maybe it was just my own imagination playing tricks on me. Ha-ha, nonetheless, you're a weird guy, Tyler. All I wanted to do was be your cousin, even to go as far to say, a friend to you. All the things that you saw or heard last night were false. You. Saw. Nothing. I don't understand why you had put me on the spot like that. What did I ever do to you? Nothing. Absolutely... nothing. Well, I'll be honest with you, Desi is a very beautiful little girl. It would be a shame if she were to get hurt. It's an evil world we live in, isn't it, Tyler? I know what you're thinking, 'Oh Elise, why did you write this?' Well, because I didn't get the opportunity to explain it to you last night, but you were too busy interrupting me. Even though I told you to shut up and listen. God, you're terrible at following directions. Anyway, thanks for letting me stay the night in your bed. It was very comfortable, seeing you laid upon the floor really gave me some weird vibes, but that's okay, we're all weird people. Anyways, I hope you have a good day. And... I would probably go and check to see if Desi's alright as well after you've read the message. Love ya to pieces. ~Elise <3”

I almost vomited. What the fuck was that?

So, she was in my room last night? It's starting to come back to me. I did remember hearing a voice last night, but it wasn't Desi's. And even when I went to ask who it was, they never responded with who they were. And if Elise was coming out and saying that she was the one talking to me, then why did I recognize her voice? Why did she ask about herself and if I cared about how she felt? Why did she stop the conversation after I said that about my stepfather's family? Why did I see her hold the flame of the lighter so close to Desi? What did she say to Desi that made her cry? I couldn't understand what was going on. I felt like I was being suffocated by the pressure of 100 elephants. I didn't have an answer for anything that had happened.

I covered my ears and closed my eyes in the hopes that whatever voices that I heard didn't try to invade my thoughts again. Whatever happened last night between Elise, and me had me pretty much on edge for the entire day.

I got up out of bed and walked out of my room and found my way to Desi's room, where she was still fast asleep in her bed. I just stood there in the doorway, just praying that she was sleeping alright and was having any bad or horrible dreams.

"She looks quite peaceful, doesn't she?" A voice said.

I quickly snapped around to see Andrea standing behind me. She had her arms crossed in her chest like she was freezing and just stood behind me. I didn't even realize that she walked up to me.

"How long were you standing there?" I asked.

"Oh, I, just walked up." She said. "I saw you just standing here, so I was curious as to what you were looking at. And now, I see that it was your little sister. She a beauty, isn't she?"

I couldn't help but feel kind of turned off by her sudden, yet nurturing behavior. I didn't know how to approach the situation. Was she trying to be friendly? Was she being deceptive? Like, what was going on with her? Did she realize that her daughter has been acting weird since they've been here? Has she done anything about Elise? Did she discipline her? Talk to her? Something?

"You alright there, Tyler?" She asked.

"Huh, excuse me?"

"You're sweating, like, a lot right now. Is something wrong?"

I look down at my shirt to see a small sweat stain going down it and then I wiped my hand across my forehead and felt some sweat there as well. I didn't know why I was sweating, but I was.

"Oh, no reason in particular," I said.

That was a lie. But I couldn't let her see that I was feeling paranoid.

"Have you seen Elise?" I asked.

"Yeah, she said that she wanted to go somewhere so she's taking a shower now, why?"

I knew that asking Andrea about her daughter would have been a risky yet suspicious thing. But I didn't take that she would any offense to me asking her about her own daughter. Right?

"Oh, alright. Where does she want to go?" I asked.

“Well, since we’re visiting you guys; your stepfather mentioned an amusement park that’s about an hour or two away from here and he asked her if she wanted to go, and well, she said yes.”

“I see. Are her and my stepdad going by themselves or...?”

Andrea looked around with a bit of nervous twitch, then she proceeded to scratch the side of her face with her index finger very suspiciously.

“W—w—well, no! No! I was going to go with her obviously. But then she said that she would just want to go with her uncle because she hadn’t seen him in a few years. So, I asked her if that’s what she wanted to do and she said yes, so I guess I’m stuck here.”

She proceeded to give off a very half-hearted chuckle as if she was sad that she couldn’t go, yet she was trying to play it off like she didn’t care. Either way, I had my suspicions.

“So, if you’re staying here, what are you going to do?” I asked.

“Well, get to know my new nephew, of course!” She said smiling.

She wrapped her arm around trying to give me a side hug. I wasn’t aware that she was going to do that, so I wasn’t prepared to give one back to her. But at the same time, I barely knew this woman, so I wasn’t too quick to give out a hug either.

“Well, that’s nice, I guess,” I said awkwardly. “Maybe you could spend time with my mother or something.”

“Well actually, your mother had told me that she had some appointments that she needed to go to and she... wanted you to go with her.”

“When did she say that?”

“Last night, remember? You were walking off and she that she wanted you to go to her appointments with her so you could get out of the house.”

I felt a chill go down the back of my spine.

“I wasn’t aware of that, are you sure she said that?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure, go ask her yourself.” She said.

I slowly walked away from Andrea and walked downstairs to my parents’ room and knocked on the door. My mother opened the door, and she wasn’t fully awake yet.

“Good morning mom,” I said.

“Oh, good morning Tyler.” She yawned. “What are you doing up so early?”

“Oh, just had an interesting night. You know, went to sleep early and got up early.”

“Oh, alright.”

I waited for my mother to say something about her appointments, but she never got around to them. I was curious as to if she forgot about them or that she was too tired to remember them at that moment.

“So, mom, about your appointments. Aren’t you supposed to be getting ready to go to them?” I asked.

She looked at me with a confused face, puzzled at the fact that I knew that she had her appointments today.

“How did you know I had them today?” She asked.

“Well, Aunt Andrea told me that you told me that you wanted me to go with you to your appointments today.”

“Oh? Did I tell you that? I wasn’t aware that I told you to do that.”

I felt a little concerned because of what my mother just said, but at the same time, it was a little later at night when she could’ve told me that. And also, she did take medication as well, so it was safe to assume that she took them before she talked to me or something like that. But then again, why would she take her medication so early at night though? She usually took them around ten or ten-thirty. And when Elise did that shit to Desi, it was around nine or so. So, there was no way that she wouldn’t remember.

At the same time, my mom was a fragile person. At least, in my opinion, she was. And it didn’t help that she was going to her appointments by herself, especially since my stepdad was supposed to be going outside with Elise. So, maybe it was better to go with my mom and at least comfort her as she was going from appointment to appointment.

“Hey, mom?” I said. “If you don’t remember telling me to go with you to your appointments, I can still go with you anyways to keep you company.”

When I said that, she couldn’t help but shed a few tears. She tried to hide them, but they were obvious to see, and she couldn’t help it. I mean, at the same time, I never bothered to go with her half the time because it was always so boring and there was nothing to do whilst waiting for her to get done seeing all those doctors.

She finally stopped tearing up and walked up to me and gave me a little hug. Just her hugging me, I could feel how fragile her body was. How helpless she felt, so frail. It was almost

like she did eat at all. Just looking at her made me so depressed every time. After a few seconds, I saw a few tear droplets fall onto her shirt.

“Sure son, you can come with me. We can make a mother-and-son day. Something that we’ve never done before, how does that sound?” She asked.

“That sounds wonderful,” I said tearfully. “I’ll go get dressed.”

“Alright, don’t worry about eating breakfast, we can eat before the appointments.”

“Okay, mom.”

I quickly ran upstairs and walked past Desi’s room to see that she was out of bed. I walked into my room to see if she was in there sitting on my bed. But when I walked in, she wasn’t in there. That was weird, she usually would be in my room waiting for me if I wasn’t there. I searched in the bathroom to see if she was in the toilet or brushing her teeth, but she wasn’t there either. Then I heard the sound of an older woman.

I walked into the guest room to find Andrea playing with Desi on her air mattress and the TV was on in the background on some little kids’ show. I was a little confused as to why she wasn’t waiting for me in my room on my bed. And why Andrea didn’t tell me that she was going to look after Desi when I went to go talk to my mother.

“Who’s a good girl? Who’s a good girl? You’re a good girl! Yes, you are! Yes, you are!” Andrea said bouncing Desi on her lap.

I tried to not get angry at the fact that she was holding my sister even though she was supposed to be still sleeping.

Andrea saw that I was standing in the doorway and turned to look at me.

“Oh, hey Tyler.” She said. “What did your mom say?”

I tried to hide my frustration.

“Oh, she said that she wasn’t aware or remembered telling me about it, but I asked if I could go with her, and she said okay with that. So, I was going to get dressed, but I usually check on Desi before I go into my room after coming from upstairs.”

“Oh, that’s your usual plan?” She asked. “I wasn’t aware of that.”

“Yeah, it’s our little ritual. If and when she wakes and I’m not in the room with her or standing outside of her door; she’ll get up and walk into my room and sit on my bed until I either wake up or come back from upstairs. I’m always up before her.”

Andrea didn’t really know what to say to what I was saying to her. I knew that she didn’t know the ritual that Desi and I had, but I would’ve preferred that she showed a little respect before doing something like that.

“Oh, well, my apologies. I will be sure to ask her next time if she was ready to get up.”

“Wait, she didn’t wake up on her own?!” I thought aloud.

“No, she didn’t. I thought she was sleeping in a little too late, so I thought I would wake her up and play with her.”

“Just because she’s a little girl, doesn’t mean that you have to wake her up when she’s still sleeping.”

“I mean, what’s wrong with that?”

“Everything. There was no reason to do such a thing.”

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready to go with your mother? I heard y’all are spending the day together.”

My heart rate started to increase. How did she know that we were going to be spending the day together if she was supposed to be up here with Desi? And what was the purpose of waking up Desi to play with her? She could’ve just waited to play with her after she got up on her own. Who did this bitch think she was?

I swallowed my anger and rage and walked out of the room back into my room and closed the door. I was super pissed at what she just asked me, yet I’m also now getting extremely paranoid because I don’t understand what is happening with those two people. Elise was apparently finding her way into the deepest parts of my thoughts, and Andrea was literally eavesdropping on my conversation and sneaking up on me. I didn’t know if it was just me or if I was starting to completely lose it. But I knew that I had to be strong for Desi, but I knew that I couldn’t be with her all the time. And she had to get older eventually, but I was scared of that fact. But death was inevitable too, it was only a matter of time.

II

I never had the opportunity to spend time with my mother, it was a well-needed day that I felt that we both needed. Aside from the fact, that my mother wasn’t ready phased about Andrea literally taking care of Desi and deciding to not take her with us. That was something that I would

never understand. But I guess I was supposed to trust her. I mean, she was my mother, after all, I had faith in her and her decision-making.

Sometimes.

“Well, Tyler.” She said. “I’m glad that you decided to join me today even though I always thought that you found these kinds of days to be ‘extremely boring’ according to you.”

Although I found it boring for the most part, for some reason I wanted to join her this time. I don’t know why, what was the point or purpose of me coming with her?

“Yes, it may be boring, but these appointments are to help you, right?”

“Yes, they’re supposed to.”

“What do you mean ‘supposed to’?”

My mother took a deep breath and took off her glasses to wipe some tears falling from her eyes.

“Well, there’s no easy way to explain this to you. So, I’ll give you some information for now, but I’ll explain it to you more in detail as you get older; if I can make it that far.” She said.

“What do you mean if you can make it that far? What are you talking about?”

She set her fork down and put her napkin on top of her plate. She looked around to see if anyone was near and if they could hear us. She cleared her throat and took another deep breath trying to hold back tears

“Well, Tyler. I’m very sick. I have a lot of diseases that can kill me at any time without warning. Well, some of them can, and others are slowly killing me as we speak.” She said.

I didn’t know what to do with that information. Like, that news just hit like an incoming train. How was I supposed to react to that? I felt a mix of emotions; anger, sadness, depression, neutrality, just... wow.

“Really?” I managed to say. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“I really didn’t know what to say or how to tell you without you overreacting or getting too concerned.” She said tearfully.

“How could I not get concerned or scared that my mom is literally dying right in front of me?”

“Tyler, I’m trying my best to get the help that I need to slow the diseases down and lessen the impact that they have on my body.”

I felt the anger flow through my blood. Did my stepdad know about these things? What has he done about it? He told us that he would make our lives better. What the fuck was he doing to fix that?

“Now Tyler, I know that you’re very angry. But please, try not to get upset. Getting angry won’t do anything to fix the situation.” She said.

She was right, I couldn’t do anything to fix it. What could I have done? I could barely protect Desi from Andrea, what could I do to protect my mother from those diseases?

Wait... why did I say that I couldn't protect Desi from Andrea? What would cause me to say that? She hadn't done anything to make me think about something that extreme. The one person that I needed to protect Desi from was Elise.

She couldn't be trusted.

Actually, they both couldn't be trusted.

But the more pressing issue was my mother and what was going on with her. Like, why was she dying on me? I knew that people had to die eventually, but why in her case would she go so soon? My side of the table had tear droplets scattered all around the space between my hands.

As we were sitting in the restaurant, it started to rain pretty heavily. Just to add to the melancholic atmosphere. Fantastic.

My mother looked outside to see the torrential downpour made her mood a little more depressed. We had this special day planned out for it to be ruined by the weather. She turned and looked at me still with my head down in sorrow and softly weeping.

"Hey Tyler," She said. "Don't worry. I'm not dead yet, I'm still here looking at you and your beautiful smile. You protect me every day whether you realize it or not."

I looked up at her to see her smiling.

"How's that? I can't do anything to take the pain away." I said.

She reached across the table and brushed my hair softly.

“You are the reason why I get out the bed every morning to deal with these diseases and the doctors not figuring out how to fix these problems. Even before you were born, I had these problems and after your father left, I had to manage by myself. However, I needed to find a reason to keep going because I was ready to end it all for myself. But then I had you, and I found my reason to keep going. So, with that I say to you, thank you for being my reason for living.”

I couldn't believe what she told me. I didn't know that I made that much of an impact in her life, like, how did she continue moving forward in her life even though that whole ordeal? On top of that, after my dad left, she had no reason to live. But she said that she continued because of me. But what about Desi? Clearly, Desi must mean something to her. Because Desi meant so much to me. Now that my mother had told me those things that had been plaguing her for the longest time, I had another reason to protect her and care for her.

We had to return home because of the shitty weather conditions, but it was alright because I finally got to spend some actual quality time with my mother. I opened the door to see Desi running up to me. I knelt down and grabbed her and picked her up and hugged her tightly.

“How are you doing, Desi?” I asked. “Did you miss us?”

She eagerly nodded her head. I couldn't help but look at her hair and how it was styled. That was very new to me, she obviously didn't do it herself. But at the same time, I did happen to notice that her eyes were a little red. Was she crying or something? Maybe it could have been because I wasn't here to care for her. But I tried to keep my anxiety down.

“So, did you have fun with Aunt Andrea?” I asked.

God, I hated calling her that.

“It was okay.” She said. “She did my hair and then Elise went to watch TV with us.”

So, Andrea did her hair and Elise was here talking to her again. I wonder what things she decided to do to Desi when I wasn't here. I only had my suspicions; I didn't have any hard evidence against her because I was there to determine if she was guilty of anything or not. But at the same time, on the outside, Desi looked okay. She didn't have any bruises or anything. At least from what I could see.

I handed Desi over to mom and I went upstairs to take my outside clothes off. As I approached my room, I saw Elise just sitting in front of the TV in the upstairs common area. I looked in her direction, but she was too engulfed in whatever she was doing to notice me. So, I proceeded to my room.

Once in my room, I stripped off my wet clothes and threw back on my shorts from last night because they weren't dirty. I still saw that note that Elise allegedly wrote to me this morning, it looked like it hadn't been moved.

“So, I see you read the note.” A voice said.

I quickly snapped around to see Elise standing in the doorway of my room. She had a very distressed look on her face for some reason. But I didn't want to know why.

“Yeah, I did. So, you did write this?” I asked. “When did you do it?”

She laughed to herself and slowly crept into my room inching closer to me with each step.

“Well, when you decided to crash on the floor after our conversation, I took the liberty to doodle a bit into your little notebook. Oh, there was a lot of good stuff in there. Like, your likes and your dislikes. How you feel about our family, your family, some secrets, you know the usual things a boy would keep from his family.”

I felt a cold sweat drip down the side of my face. I don't know what she saw in that notebook, but I was concerned that she may know something that my family doesn't. But at the same time, she could have been playing tricks on me as well, maybe getting revenge for what I allegedly did to her last night.

“Oh, and about last night.” She said inching closer and closer to my face. “That didn't happen. Nothing. Happened. You didn't see a lighter. You didn't see a flame. You didn't see me hold anything, and I mean anything close to your sister. What you saw was what you wanted to see. Have you ever thought about that?”

At that point, she was literally millimeters from my face. Our lips were barely touching at that point. All of her words were practically whispering into my ears. Her hands were resting on my cheeks. Then I stared into her eyes, and I felt my heart sink into my stomach. Her eyes had a deep and dark gaze in them, she wasn't opening her eyes very wide at all. It was more like a sinister stare that was giving me. It didn't help that she was giving off this demented smirk as well.

After the deep and dark altercation, she slowly released her hands from my face and slowly stepped back to a more comfortable distance. She covered her mouth as she laughed then she turned around and started to walk out of my room. Then she turned her head slightly so I could only see her right eye.

“Oh, and don’t worry about sleeping in terror tonight. I won’t be sleeping alone.” She said grinning.

She then smiled and exited my room the same that she came in.

Quietly.

I couldn’t help but feel sick to my stomach. What just happened? What was that? Elise can’t be trusted. There was something definitely up with her; I just couldn’t confirm what it was. But apparently, Andrea seemed somewhat normal compared to Elise. I mean, the only thing that she did that was completely out of character was taking Desi out of her bed and then allegedly eavesdropped on my mom and me when we were talking. All in all, I didn’t know what to think, it was all so confusing.

III

Six months later...

It was an unexpected turn that we weren’t expecting to hear at all. In fact, not one of us was expecting to hear what happened to him. It was like, he was here, now he wasn’t. They said that he died in an accident while working. He was sent away overseas to do whatever job that he was doing. I didn’t know what the job was, he never told me what his job was. Not that really cared; I mean, the man took care of us, so who am I to ask him what his job was or if he somewhat enjoyed it. Nonetheless, I was pretty neutral to hear about his death. The company’s CEO came from another part of the country to tell us that he had died in that accident. Desi, of course, was not present when the CEO came and told us the news. Mom didn’t want her to worry about what

had happened, but at the same time; I didn't even think Desi understood the concept of death at all. I mean, she was just a four-year-old girl. It wasn't like she was at all knowledgeable when it came to such a topic.

“So, what does that mean for us?” My mother asked.

“Well, at this point, we would give you money to pay for his funeral and also give you the insurance policy money that he made before signing with the business. So, you should be set to live off that. The only thing is that he wouldn't be coming back, and that's the money that you would get, unfortunately.” They said.

“Wait, what about liability?” I asked. “Isn't the company liable for the accident, like was it the company's fault or was it his fault?”

The CEO took off their glasses and sigh.

“The accident was unintentional, there was never meant to be an accident. I wasn't there, so I can't say for sure what had happened. I'm sorry.”

That answer wasn't good enough for me, let alone my mother. How were we supposed to take a bullshit response like that? It was an unintentional accident, like how does that make sense? Now, what were we going to do? How was my mom going to take care of us?

The CEO saw their way out and that was the last that we ever saw them.

The funeral went as any funeral would have gone. Completely boring and a waste of time. My stepfather's family came of course to see their loved be buried into a pile of fucking dirt. They

couldn't even find his body fast enough; it took them like two or three weeks to find it! But that was in the past, I couldn't do anything for the man anymore. I didn't even come with a name to call him. I always just walked up to him, or he would start the conversation. Did I regret that? Yes and no. Yes, because I felt like I could have done more and tried to build a somewhat shitty relationship with him. But no, because at the same time, I didn't even think that he liked me. I mean, I wasn't even the guy's biological child. He had Desi as his flesh and blood, and of course, he had Elise as one of his nieces. So, basically, I was alone in that shitty family with just my mother and even then, we both started to feel like we were outcasts in that family.

At the end of the funeral, Andrea happened to run into us, and she wasn't really too sad to hear about what happened.

"I hope you guys are doing alright." She said. "It must've been hard to hear the news about him. I know that Elise and I were pretty sad to hear about what happened."

Neither I nor my mother responded to her statement. We were too emotionally defeated to say anything.

"But hey, don't worry. You can move in with us. It will be like a whole new family. You'll have our love and support and don't need to worry about needing a place to live, because that money will run out eventually."

Wait, how did she know about that money? There was no way that she knew about that. But I couldn't say anything because it wasn't my place to say anything, even then, I didn't know much about it, to begin with.

"So, you want us to come live with you two?" My mother asked.

“Well, three of us actually. Elise and I and my new boyfriend.” She said. “Don’t worry, he won’t bite. He barely comes over anyway.”

“But you said three? So, what are you implying?” I asked. “Does he live there or no?”

“Well, we’ll just say... he sleeps over a lot.”

“Right.”

“Anyway, so what do you guys think? Sound like a good plan?”

My mother was full of depression and sadness, she knew that she didn’t have the capability to take of Desi and me. But I didn’t know what she was thinking about or what was going through her head.

“I mean, I don’t see why not.” She said. “I could use the support.”

“But wait, what about your appointments?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Andrea said. “We can have them switched around so that they’re closer to where I live.”

“Well, if you going to put it so gently. I don’t see why not.” My mother said.

Andrea’s face lit up with happiness.

“Great! I’ll be sure to pick you guys up within the next few hours.”

And just like that, she walked away, leaving my mother and me to look at each other in complete confusion. Like, what were we supposed to do in that situation?

“Well, at least they were willing to help us, right?” My mother asked.

“I mean, I guess,” I said. “I thought you would be strong enough to take care of both of us.”

“I am, but using an extra pair of hands wouldn’t so bad now, would they?”

I couldn’t necessarily argue with that logic.

After arriving back home, my mother started packing her clothes and her belongings into a bunch of suitcases. She even grabbed the picture of her, and my stepfather; I caught a glimpse of her crying to herself. I would have gone to go say something, but I knew that it would have been a bad idea. So, I went upstairs and pack my belongings up first, and then when I was done, I went to Desi’s room and helped her pack up her things as well.

We heard the doorbell ring. I went down to answer the door to see Andrea. I tried to mask my neutrality with a half-hearted smile.

“Hey Tyler, how’s it going? You guys ready to go?” She asked.

“Just about, my mother is just about done packing and I have basically packed up both Desi and me.”

“Great, well, I can help you start putting your things in my car.”

She let herself in and I just stepped out of the way. I closed the door and went upstairs to grab my belongings and started putting them in her car. After a while, all of our things were packed away in Andrea’s car. My mother said her last goodbyes to the house and then she and Desi got into Andrea’s car.

I was the last person to walk out of that now vacant house. Why were we leaving this house? Couldn't we just have stayed here? What will happen to this house? Clearly, mother couldn't keep up with the payments. But since, we were moving in with Andrea; she could potentially save her money. I didn't know what to think about the situation. All I knew was that something was bound to happen.

And I didn't know what was going to transpire next.

I closed the door and locked it and slowly backed away from what was my shelter for the longest time. Now I'm going to a new situation not knowing what to think and not knowing what was about to happen.

Surely, nothing was going to go bad, right?

At least, that was what Andrea told us on the way there.

Chapter 4 – Abduction

Tyler opened up his eyes for the first time in a while. He was still laid up on Kaiya's lap and she was still brushing his hair trying to relax him. He looked up at her and he couldn't help but feel a little bit of a weird feeling. He didn't know what that weird feeling was, but he couldn't deny it. He still felt a little iffy about her and was still questioning why she ended bothered to help him in his quest to find his sister. But now, that he remembered some more important details, he decided to change the objective goal of who he wanted to save from not just his sister, but to his mother as well. He had felt that by actually sitting back and trying to piece together what the events were that lead up to them having to live with their aunt, that he had actually changed history just a little bit. Hopefully, that wasn't just his imagination because he had a lot of regrets, but that something good actually happened in that flashback.

“So, you made some good headway Tyler,” Kaiya said smiling. “I'm proud of you. How do you feel?”

“I feel alright I guess, I still have a lot to talk about, but I feel like I got some of my thoughts together. Elise... something was very off about her. I just couldn't figure out what it was. And I still don't know why I can't.”

“Maybe, it could be because she was just an abnormal girl?”

“No, it couldn't be that simple. She was the one that wrote me that note that night, she was the one who came and talked to me that night. She literally infiltrated my thoughts without any

difficulty whatsoever. That was a big problem that stuck with me for the longest time; I could never figure out an answer as to why she was the way that she was.”

Kaiya pondered to herself what that Elise girl was like and why she was so mysterious to Tyler and his family. There was no reason in particular that she would have needed to act so out of character. What was the purpose of writing that letter to Tyler? She thought about that question long and hard as soon as Tyler mentioned that part in his backstory of his stepfather’s family. She had her suspicions of his family, but at the same time; she had just met Tyler a few days prior, so she didn’t know what to think of him. But she knew that she saw something in him that most people had refused to look at. He was innocent in her eyes, maybe it was potentially because she had some kind of feelings toward him, but that would have been hard to judge because of her lack of knowledge of Tyler. But she knew that she could trust him, she didn’t know why she could, but she knew that she could.

“What about Elise made you feel uncomfortable about her?” Kaiya asked.

There was a slight pause after that question was asked. Tyler had a multitude of answers, but he didn’t know how to comprise them into one full-fledged sentence without sounding like an idiot or paranoid. He felt that he was more leaning towards the latter rather than the former. But as Tyler thought about that question; Kaiya had some more questions about his initial story. Like for example, how did Andrea know about the money that Tyler’s mother was going to get? Unless there was something that his stepfather did prior to him passing away; there would have been no way that she could have known about that money. Secondly, what was Andrea’s goal with trying to get Tyler and his family to live with her? She was having a lot of trouble understanding the

purpose of them living with her. Yes, his stepfather died, and yes, his mother was very sick. But that didn't mean that she could not have taken care of both Tyler and his sister.

Both of those facts were very concerning to Kaiya, she couldn't answer those questions. She couldn't rack her mind around those facts.

Tyler had thought long and hard about Kaiya's question, but he just couldn't find an answer that could justify his paranoia.

"I don't know honestly." He said. "I couldn't, well, I still can't describe her at all. Especially when I was twelve, she was just very weird to me. As I said, I swore that she held that candle up to Desi, and I swear to God that she said something to Desi to make her cry. But I didn't have any proof according to anyone, including my parents. So, I had to let it go."

"So, do you think that she wanted to get revenge with potentially accusing her by trying to psychologically mess with you?"

"I don't think it was that, but I feel like once I go over the events when I was living with Andrea, then I should start to put some of the pieces together."

Tyler let out a deep sigh and sat up. He rubbed his eyes and look at Kaiya who was still in the same position, but now her arms were crossed against her chest.

"So, now what?" She asked.

"What do you mean?"

"How do you want to do it?"

"Do what exactly?"

“Try to relive the flashback? We already got one of them already done. We have time for one more.”

Tyler looked out of the window and stretched his arms.

“I would love to, but I fucking exhausted.” He said. “Talking about my shitty childhood made me even more tired than I already was.”

Kaiya tried to hold back her laughter. She knew that Tyler had literally slept for hours prior to screaming himself awake, but she knew that pressing him any further would cause him to potentially close up on her and that would have ruined any chances of finding out any more information about his family.

“What is the purpose of this?” Tyler asked. “Like what is me telling you about my shitty life going to do for us?”

Kaiya had a feeling that that question was going to surface again. She was never prepared for it because she knew that she didn’t have the right answer zero percent of the time, but she knew that she had to give him an answer to make him trust her.

“Well, as I said, I’m here to help you to the best of my ability.” She said. “I could write down what you said, but I don’t know if that would be a good idea because then it would be our word against your aunt’s and now potentially Elise as well.”

She started feeling a little down about the fact that she may have been wasting Tyler’s time. She was starting to feel that she couldn’t help him.

“What am I supposed to do?” She thought to herself. “I can’t help him, I can barely fucking help myself for Christ’s sake!”

She started tearing up and held her head in her hands. At that point, she felt useless and hopeless.

Tyler saw that she was crying and proceeded to sit close to her and began to comfort her. He didn't know what to do in that situation, he had yet to be put in a situation like this before. However, he felt like shit because he didn't have any experience in helping others because he could barely help his sister, let alone himself.

“Hey, it's alright.” He said. “Don't worry about not being able to come up with an answer to that question. You shouldn't feel bad. You actually wanted to talk the time out of your life to help me and you've never met me before. Most people would hear about this situation and immediately turn around and leave. So... thank you.”

Tyler's words hit Kaiya with passion. She didn't know what to make of what he just said, she had known him as a standoffish kind of person. But when she heard him say that she felt so happy inside.

She looked up at him and smiled.

He smiled back at her.

“W—well, thank you for reassuring me that I can at least help someone in need.” She said.

“Shit, at this point, you might want to reconsider your education and become a therapist or something.” Tyler laughed.

She laughed quietly to herself. And after a while, she felt a little better and stopped crying.

“Well, is it alright if I take a shower?” Tyler asked.

“Yeah, that’s fine. The bathroom is down the hall.”

Tyler let go of Kaiya and got up and walked over to his belongings and walked to the bathroom.

He turned on the water and stepped in and began to wash. As he was standing in the hot water, Tyler started to hear a voice.

He looked out of the shower to see Desi (now eight years old) sitting on the toilet looking at her phone.

“Desi? What are you doing here?” He said. “Wait... why are you here?”

Desi didn’t respond, it was like she was occupied by the phone in her hands.

Tyler didn’t think much of it because sometimes Desi would come into the bathroom while Tyler was taking a shower and just sat on the toilet and usually would just talk to him. But he didn’t hear the door open, however, the shower was pretty loud, and he wasn’t paying attention, so she could’ve just walked in, and he didn’t hear her.

But at the same time, he hadn’t seen his sister in a very long time, so her being here was an unexpected occurrence.

“Umm... Desi? Are you alright?” Tyler said.

Desi was still occupied by her phone and still didn’t respond to him.

He just stared at her for at least a minute or two and was completely confused as to why she wasn’t responding.

There was a knock on the door.

“Hey Tyler, are you alright in there?” Kaiya said. “Who are you talking to?”

Tyler didn't realize that he was talking so loudly, but he didn't expect her to walk up to the door and notice him speaking. It was almost like she was sitting by the door listening to his conversation.

“Oh, no one,” Tyler said. “Just having an out-loud thought. Sorry, I'll keep it down.”

“Oh, alright. I was just asking.” She said.

He waited for there to be a consistent sound of silence before he peeked his head out of the shower to see if Desi was still sitting there. However, she wasn't there. Where could she have gone to? She was just there a minute ago.

Tyler tried to not think about it too hard, he was already wasting so much hot water, to begin with. He eventually got out of the shower, and that's when he saw Desi again. But when he saw her again, she was sitting on the counter for the sink. She was just looking at Tyler and was smiling at him. That same innocent smile that she always gave him whenever he looked sad or was feeling depressed about something. He felt that he could always rely on the fact that Desi would always deliver a smile to brighten up his day or to take away any pain that he had.

“I can't help but ask you if you're okay or not.” He asked.

She again didn't respond. What was going on with her? Was she mute? Was she too scared to say something and was just putting on a happy face to hide her fears? What was it? Tyler did not have any ideas as to what to do or how to fix the situation.

As he looked at Desi, he couldn't help but start to tear up. Aside from the flashbacks and that dark visions of her, that was the first time that he actually saw her somewhat smiling at him. Most of the time, it was just a quick smile or something to try to reassure Tyler that she was alright. It was never once a legitimate smile, but Tyler never knew that because he never asked. He felt that he didn't need to, he thought he knew his sister like the back of his hand. But alas, he was starting to question if he even knew her to begin with.

"I know you must be scared or questioning how you got here, but it doesn't matter. I'm just glad to see that you're alright." He said tearfully.

He went up to hug her, but when he went to sneeze her; he went through her. Almost like she was a ghost or something. He was confused, he was for certain that she was real and looking at him at that moment. There was no way that she wasn't real. That was a harsh reality that Tyler just wasn't willing to accept, unfortunately.

That fact caused him to cry even harder. He knew that he had once again failed to save his sister, at least that was what he believed in that very moment because he couldn't actually hold his sister in his arms like he wanted to. But she still stared at him with that smile on her face, but when he looked up, he noticed tears starting to fall from her eyes and that her eyes were turning red. He knew that he had to do something to fix it, but he didn't know what to do. That was the problem, he couldn't figure out how to fix any of the situations that he was presented with. And that fact completely enraged him internally. He felt his blood boiling, he felt surges of rage flow through his body. He needed to hit something, someone, hell, anything at that point. However, the problems were that he wasn't in his own home and secondly, he didn't want Kaiya and/or Desi to get scared

of his rage because he never actually learned to control it. It always spiraled out of control; it was to the point that he actually put Elise in the hospital because he—

That shouldn't be said. Apologies about that.

You didn't read that.

Sorry, got a little carried away. Apologies.

Tyler couldn't help himself though, he finally got to see Desi for the first time as an adult and that was the situation that he was put in. How was he supposed to react to that? Most people would have just lost their minds at that point. Imagine losing someone so close to you and then when you thought that you saw them again, they were like a ghost; you couldn't touch them or hold them.

And that was happening to Tyler at that current moment. He was beside himself though. He did start to tear up a little, however, at the same time, he couldn't let Kaiya see him like that. Actually, in his mind, he couldn't let anyone see him like that. Especially after what happened between him and his aunt and cousin after moving in with them. He felt the anger and rage that he felt at that time, not being able to do anything because he was so powerless. However, he couldn't blame himself though, he was way too young to do anything. He couldn't stand up to his aunt, and whenever he tried to deal with Elise; he would always get shut down by his aunt or by her herself. So, in short, he was literally on his own at the point. And feeling like the world was against you and there was nothing that you could do would cause anyone to grow up with some anger issues and some paranoia.

And that was the case with Tyler, but he didn't realize how much it was affecting him.

The effects of being psychologically drained and having people trying to psychologically break him caused him to have major trust issues. He couldn't find it in himself to open up to anyone. Even before he met Kaiya, he knew that he couldn't rely on anyone because of the fact that no one would believe him. Whatever Andrea and/or Elise did to Desi and their mother was so nonchalant that no one would have noticed anything wrong with them.

And Tyler knew that, but he never did have an answer.

He looked up and saw that Desi was now gone, she disappeared the same way that she entered: quiet and without warning.

That was completely fantastic, now what was he supposed to do? He couldn't believe that as soon as he saw her; she just left. Now he was crying a little more, but he still tried to keep his sobbing down so that Kaiya didn't hear him. But he had a feeling that she was listening in on whatever he was doing.

There was a little quiet knock on the door.

"Tyler, it's me," Kaiya said. "Are you alright? You've been in there for a while."

Tyler attempted to wipe his tears and quickly cleared his throat so that it didn't sound like he was crying.

"Uhh... yeah. I—I'm alright. Thanks for checking on me." He said.

"Yeah, any—anytime..."

Then there was silence. He didn't know if she was still standing on the other side of the door or not. But at the same time, he really didn't care. He was too distraught to think properly.

He finally pulled his self together and put on his clothes and stepped out of the bathroom and walked back into the living room area. And he saw Kaiya sitting on the couch watching a TV show wrapped up in a blanket.

“Are you feeling alright?” She asked.

“Yeah, I—I’m alright. Are you alright? You look like you’re freezing.”

“No, I’m alright. Just a little cold, I guess. Do you want to watch this show with me?”

Tyler walked over towards the couch and looked at what show was on the screen.

“What is it?” He asked.

“I don’t know. Some random kids show that I just happened to stumble across.”

“I mean, we can watch that or something.”

He sat down next to her, and they watched that TV show. He was a little uncomfortable about the situation because he had never sat next to a girl before like that. Usually, it was just to do menial things like homework or something, but it was different in that case. Kaiya sat back further into the couch was wrapping herself up further in the blanket to keep herself warm.

“Are you that cold?” Tyler laughed.

“Shut up! You gonna try to warm me up?”

“No, but I can try I guess.”

Tyler reached over and grabbed his favorite hoodie and gave it to her. She then looked at him and started to blush a little bit.

“What are you doing?” She asked.

“You said you were cold, so I’m letting you wear my hoodie. It’s my favorite, so don’t mess it up.”

She was really blushing at that point; it was really noticeable. However, she tried to play it off like she was phased by Tyler giving her his hoodie.

She put it on and then wrapped herself back up in the blanket. She was apparently still really cold.

“Are you still freezing?” Tyler asked.

Kaiya looked at him with a pouting face and lightly shoved in a playful manner.

“Oh, fuck off! Yes, I’m still fucking freezing.”

Tyler then picked up Kaiya and rested her on his lap to where her head was resting on his shoulder. All of a sudden, she was feeling a lot warmer and started to get a little tired.

“Do you feel warmer now?” He asked.

“Well, a little bit. I’m a little more comfortable.”

“How are you more comfortable when you’re sitting in a fetal position?”

“Because someone is holding me, that’s how?”

At that point, Tyler too was starting to blush. He had never heard a girl say that to him before, let alone “cuddled” with a girl as well. He didn’t know what to make of the situation. He was more confused than anything. He knew that he felt something toward her, but he didn’t know

whether to trust her or not. Which in his case at that very moment, he was conflicted. To be fair, he did just open up to her and gave her a glimpse into his childhood and how his life was prior to moving in with Andrea and Elise, however, there was still more that he wanted to talk about and didn't know how to tell her about those events. On top of that, he didn't know how to tell her about the hallucination that he had about Desi. That whole situation was very weird because Desi was around the age of eight years old. However, the last time he saw her, she was thirteen. So, that whole situation was very weird to Tyler, he couldn't explain the situation and why she was so young in that hallucination. At the same time, he didn't know that he was hallucinating; he actually thought that he was looking at Desi in the flesh as if she was actually there looking at him.

It was at that moment; he knew that he needed to do something to try to rectify the situation. However, he had more prominent matters on his hand at that current moment. He had a girl who he'd never met in his life resting on his lap. He was very nervous and tried not to get... aroused by that fact.

Although Tyler was wide awake, he noticed that Kaiya wasn't talking and that she was very still. But she was still breathing, so that indicated to Tyler that she was still alive. But he didn't know if she was just watching the TV show or if she had actually drifted off to sleep. Either way, he didn't want to bother her. He looked down to see that her eyes were indeed closed, and she was breathing very lightly and was sound asleep. He figured that all she wanted to do was warm up because she was cold, but he wasn't expecting to pick her up and lay her on his lap to try to warm her up. Even though she was in his hoodie, she was still wrapped up in the blanket.

“Wow, she looks so peaceful.” Tyler thought. “She's so beautiful when she sleeps, yet she's unaware of it.”

He started to brush her hair very softly, trying not to wake her up. However, she wasn't fazed by it. She was knocked out at that point. It could've been that she was exhausted from him waking her up out of her sleep and now that Tyler was calm, she could safely go back to sleep knowing that he was okay.

"Hmm... I guess she wouldn't mind if I changed the channel to something else." He thought.

He picked up the remote and flipped through the channels when he stumbled upon a news channel that was talking about child abduction and murder of that child. He considered turning up the volume on the TV, however, he didn't want to wake up Kaiya for her desired slumber. But he was very intrigued by what the news channel was broadcasting. So, on a whim, he turned up the TV to the point where he could hear it, but it wasn't loud enough to wake Kaiya up.

"We have further news on the abduction of a ten-year-old girl that was abducted just a few days ago. She was considered to have been abused and neglected in her residence, thus prompting her to allegedly run away from her home. But in the same breath, when police questioned the parents about her relationship at home, they stated that their relationship was fine and that there were no allegations of abuse or neglect in the household. However, police have their suspicions as to why the girl ran away. In other news, the missing child that had been abducted two weeks ago was found murdered in an abandoned shed on the outskirts of the city. It is unknown how that child ended up there and how they were murdered. People are skeptical saying that the child froze to death, others are saying that it was foul play. Police and investigators are now on the case and are searching for clues and answers to the case. If you have any information on either child, please call the police as soon as possible. Now back to the news back at the station..."

Tyler couldn't believe what he just heard.

“There was an abused child? And another child was murdered?” He thought. “One of those children could have been Desi. No, there's no way. Andrea is evil, but she wouldn't murder Desi, right?”

The fact that Andrea had the ability to commit murder started to get to Tyler. He started to get very anxious as to why someone would murder an innocent girl. What did Desi do that was so bad to Andrea and/or Elise? Was it the way she looked? Was it because of who her father was? Did they always not like Desi because of who she was? Did they feel that since Tyler's mother was too ill to do anything to stop them, they took advantage of that and proceeded to abuse Desi as revenge for Tyler telling his family about Elise? There were so many questions that he had, but he didn't have an answer for any of them. And that enraged Tyler. He had already felt that he had failed his family because he left them in the hands of his aunt and cousin, but also because he wasn't sure of whether these two children were Desi or not.

However, there was something that Tyler was thinking about. At that time that the news was broadcasting the children, Desi was thirteen years old. The child that was abducted was ten years old. So, that child couldn't be eliminated from the list. Therefore, that left the other child that was abducted and murdered. There was an uncertainty of who the child was. The news didn't give a name as to who the child was or how old they were. So, the child could have been anyone. That was the thing that was scaring Tyler, he didn't know whether to panic or be calm. Because that child could have been Desi, but Tyler had to keep reassuring himself that Andrea wouldn't have murdered Desi, but at the same time, he couldn't shake the feeling that all that was possible.

He noticed that Kaiya was moving around in his lap. So, he assumed that the volume was too loud on the TV. As a result, he quickly turned down the volume out of courtesy of Kaiya. But she was already moving around in his lap, but Tyler wasn't aware of that.

“Your heart rate was very high just now.” She said quietly. “Is something wrong?”

She lifted her head just enough to see Tyler's face, but she still rested her head on his shoulder. She was in such a comfortable position; she didn't want to move.

“No, not really,” Tyler said. “Just a thought rummaging through my head.”

That was both true and false. True because it was a rummaging thought in his head. But it was also false because he was lying saying that there was nothing wrong even though there was something obviously wrong. He just didn't want to tell Kaiya about it for some reason. Although, he had already begun to open up to her slowly but surely. There was still a sense of distrust lingering inside of him, yet he couldn't shake that feeling. For better or for worse, it didn't matter. He still felt like the world was against him and he had no one to turn to. But there was this person sitting there waiting to hear more about his story and was also waiting to provide any assistance that they could give. But in his mind, he was still very conflicted. He was angering himself trying to understand why he couldn't trust this person that had completely opened themselves up to him. The more that he pondered on why, the angrier he was becoming towards himself.

“I have a slight feeling that you're lying to me,” Kaiya said breaking his racing thoughts.

“How do you figure that?”

“Well, firstly, you were talking to someone in the bathroom even though there's no one here except for us and my dog. Secondly, I heard you softly crying to yourself when I walked by.

Thirdly, your heart rate was very fast just a few minutes ago and is starting to increase again. And lastly, I see that you changed the channel to the news, so there must have been something you saw to make you feel the way that you're feeling. Am I right?"

Tyler tried to hide the fact that he was caught up in the act and that he couldn't deny what Kaiya had just told him. He knew that she was right and had to accept that fact.

"Y—yeah, you're right," Tyler muttered.

"What was that? I couldn't hear you."

"Yes, you're right. There, are you happy now?"

Kaiya smiled and laughed softly to herself, "Couldn't be happier."

Tyler rolled his eyes in annoyance, yet he wasn't too upset at Kaiya however. She did say that she was studying psychiatry and mental health, so it really didn't surprise him to hear all these things that she was telling him. However, at the same time, he was kind of surprised that she could piece together such facts in such a small amount of time and with such little to go off of.

"So, what was on the news while I was sleep? Hopefully, something good I'm assuming?" Kaiya said.

"It's the news channel, usually it's some biased bullshit that they feel like spewing out their mouths to make a headline."

"Well, apparently what you saw really triggered you. Care to tell me what it was?"

Tyler looked down at Kaiya to see that she was also looking at him. He started blushing a little bit.

“W—w—well, i—i—it was nothing really. You wouldn’t have cared to hear about it.” He stuttered.

“Please, I have heard some really fucked up shit. Whatever you say probably not scare me.”

Tyler took a deep breath and cleared his throat.

“Well, if you insist.” He started. “I stumbled the newscaster talking about two children that were abducted. One was ten, and the other one... well... their age was unknown. The ten was just abducted recently, they claimed that she was a victim of child abuse and neglect from her family, however, when the police questioned her family; they said that there was no indication of abuse or neglect going on in the household.”

“I see...” Kaiya said. “So, she was only ten? Did they say who abducted her?”

“Nope, since she was abducted recently, the police are trying to figure out who abducted her and how she was abducted. Her location according to the police is still unknown.”

Kaiya felt a chill go down her spine.

“W—what about the other child?” She asked.

Tyler sighed and looked at her.

“Do you really want to know?” He asked.

She could see the seriousness in his eyes. Like he had just witnessed a murder, however, his face was fairly neutral. His eyes, however, were completely emotionless and ominous.

She didn't want to know what happened to the other child, but she was already way too invested in the story to turn back and say no.

"Alright, go ahead." She sighed. "What happened?"

Tyler cleared his throat and took another deep breath.

"Well, the other child was also abducted. However, they were murdered. The police found them dead in a shed. They didn't describe the condition of the child, they just said that they were dead. The theories were that the child either froze to death or was murdered in another location and then was brought back to that shed and the dead body was just left there. The child's gender was unknown, they're still trying to figure out who it was. They don't have a name for the child either. So, everything about that child is a mystery. And also, they don't have an age for the child either, so the child can be either a little child or a teenager. They're not sure yet, I'm sure that the police will give out more information in the coming days."

Kaiya felt tears running down her face, she couldn't believe what was hearing. How a child could be abducted was one thing. But to hear, that a child was abducted and then murdered on top of that was something that she couldn't handle. As a result, she started crying out of sympathy for both children.

Tyler didn't know what to do in that situation. Whether to blame Kaiya for asking him to tell her about the second child, or whether to comfort her because she was crying. He decided on the latter and wrapped his arms around her and comforted her while she wept to herself. That was the first time that Tyler had the opportunity to comfort someone that was not Desi in his life. He just did what his mother would do to him when he was sad. It seemed to work a little bit because Kaiya stopped crying after about fifteen minutes.

Once she composed herself, she looked up at Tyler and smiled. Her eyes were still bloodshot from crying, but she was glad that he was there to comfort her.

“W—was that the reason why you got so angry?” She asked. “Did that remind you of your sister?”

Tyler pondered on the question for a few moments even though he knew the answer to the question. He was just wondering if he was overreacting or if he was right in his reasoning for being so angry.

“Yes, that was the reason why I was starting to get angry.” He said. “That girl that was abducted was too young to be Desi, but the situation sounded similar to hers. However, that second child that was abducted and then murdered really rubbed me the wrong way because that child could’ve been anyone. And in my mind, I was scared to think that that child could have been her, but at the same time, I had to reassure myself that Andrea, albeit is a very evil woman, couldn’t find it in herself to murder anyone. Especially Desi or my mother. But I can’t shake the feeling that it could’ve been possible.”

Kaiya looked at the TV to see that the news was off and was showing some other show. She stretched her body and sat up and hopped off Tyler’s lap and walked into the kitchen. She was still shaken up from the story that Tyler had just told her. But she knew that in order to help Tyler, she needed to find the strength to push past her fears and concerns to help him.

Tyler noticed that she was taking quite some time in the kitchen. Maybe she was getting something to drink or something to eat. He wasn’t sure that she had eaten anything or had drunk anything when he was asleep. However, he was concerned for obvious reasons. He got up and

walked into the kitchen to see her drinking some alcohol in a small glass cup. She was grabbing her forehead insinuating that she had either a headache or a migraine.

“You alright?” Tyler asked.

“Yeah, I—I’m fine. Thanks for asking. Just a little stressed out for hearing those stories, you know?”

“Y—yeah, I understand what you mean.”

He leaned up against one of the counters and stood there just to make sure that Kaiya didn’t drink too much.

After a few minutes, Kaiya saw that Tyler was still leaning against the counter and then walked over toward him and laid her head on his chest once again. She had her drink in her hands, but she just needed someone to be there for her.

“Most people don’t actually tell me scary stories, or any stories at all for that matter.” She chuckled. “Hell, most people barely want to be my friend half the time because I’m allegedly so weird to some people. However, they are people like you that actually want to be there for people like me, especially in a time like this. Oh, would am I kidding? I’m a fucking wreck right now. You probably think that I’m useless or some shit. I can barely handle a story about two fucking children getting abducted! L—like, what the fuck, you know? I don’t get it! I—I—I don’t understand! I—I—”

Tyler wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly.

As a result, she started crying once again. She was sobbing even harder than before. She couldn’t wrap her head around someone actually being there for her. Especially, in a time like that.

She hated for people to see her drink, let alone have a mental breakdown in front of someone. She was supposed to be the one comforting Tyler in his situation, not the other way around. She felt so guilty about that. She felt as she said, useless. She was defeated.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” Tyler said reassuring her. “You have done nothing wrong. You wanted to know, so I told you. You weren’t expecting a story like that. It’s understandable for someone to be scared after hearing a story so dark and grimacing. Everyone deals with their fears differently, and that’s alright. But you shouldn’t feel guilty about feeling useless or some shit like that. I appreciate you being there to help me.”

Her tears slowly went away, and she stopped crying. She put her glass down on the counter and stood next to Tyler, trying to pull herself together.

“It’s late, you should try to get some sleep,” Kaiya said. “I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Y—yeah, I’m sure.”

She leaned and gave him a kiss on the cheek and smiled to reassure him that she would be fine.

Tyler looked at her and smiled.

He walked out of the kitchen into the living room where the couch was and took the medication that he was given at the hospital. Once those kicked in, he turned off the TV and closed his eyes.

Tyler looked around to see that he was all alone. Was he still dreaming or was awake? He wasn't sure.

He couldn't move his body, but he could move his eyes.

It was dark. The only thing that provided any light was the TV, but there was only static showing on the TV.

"Tyler, what's going through your head right now?" A voice said. "Looking back on those events have really screwed with your mental state, haven't they? I wouldn't be surprised if they did."

He then could see something moving in the corner of his eye, but he couldn't move his entirely to see who or what it was. All he could hear was a voice.

It sounded like her voice.

There was no way that she knew where he was, it was impossible.

He was able to recognize a figure slowly move into his vision. He thought it was Kaiya because it was her apartment. Well, that was what it was supposed to be.

"I honestly feel bad for you, seeing those children on that screen really messed with you, didn't it?" The voice said. "It would be quite interesting if that was your sister, hmm?"

The figure finally came into view, it looked like Andrea's figure. But he couldn't see a face on her, the darkness in the room and then the brightness from the TV made the figure have a silhouette-type appearance.

The figure moved closer and closer to Tyler's face until it was speaking in a whispering tone.

"It's only a matter of time, just try not to think about it too much. Worrying about such matters will only drive you mad."

He felt a finger run across his cheek.

"Have a goodnight, and... try to sleep well."

Chapter 5 – Abandonment

I

It was a cold night last night. Fuck, I knew that I should've worn a hoodie to sleep or asked for some extra blankets. I didn't know that Andrea was going to turn the fucking heat off in the middle of the night. What the fuck was her problem? Was she trying to kill us or something?

“Tyler! Get up, it's time for breakfast.” A voice said.

I woke up with a headache, I don't even remember much of what happened last night. All I remembered was that I opened up my eyes and I heard a voice, saw a figure, and I also couldn't move my body at all. The TV was on, but I saw that it was just static. Like something out of a horror movie, how could that be explained? What was that about? And who the fuck was that talking to me last night?

I heard someone walking up the stairs, but I was too tired to move. I couldn't sleep properly last night after whatever the fuck that was that snuck up on me and decided to talk to me.

Someone walked into my room and pushed the door open.

“My god Tyler, what are you doing?” They said. “I said breakfast was ready, now get up!”

I knew that voice all too well. It was Andrea, of course. She was always like that ever since we went to live with her and her daughter Elise five years ago. It had been a complete nightmare living with these two fuckers. I can't do anything at all without one of them all up in my business. I felt like I was being watched twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week around those two.

Couldn't do anything. It didn't help that Desi was getting older as well, she was around nine years old. Her birthday was a few months ago in December. We attempted to celebrate her birthday as just my mother and me, but she was too sick to join us, so Andrea took both of us out to eat. Somewhat nice for her to have done but doing shit like that was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. "I only do this on special occasions" she would always say. And that was actually true, she would only take us out for special occasions, never just to spend time with Desi and me.

"What's for breakfast, Andrea?" I shouted. "Some bullshit like last time?"

I couldn't stand Andrea; she was a manipulative bitch. She took advantage of every opportunity that was given to her. But I could never say anything about it to anyone outside of the house because no one would believe me when I said anything. Every time someone would ask Andrea about what was going on in her house, she would just say that it was a misunderstanding and that I was just having crazy thoughts about what was going on. Which was a total lie. That was not the case at all.

"I don't know, maybe if you got the fuck up, maybe you could see for yourself." She shouted back.

She stormed down the stairs and into the kitchen. I could hear her slamming the cabinets and slamming the dishes on the counters. She would always get upset whenever I was "disrespectful" toward her. I never saw anything wrong with it, she clearly deserved it. Prior to now, she was somewhat alright in terms of her behavior and how she was as a person. But over the years, she started to change, a lot. It was subtle, but it was a change, nonetheless. And it was for the worst.

Her entire behavior shifted from being a somewhat normal person to acting like a complete control freak and started to become abusive toward Desi and me. She also started to neglect my mother and stopped taking her to her appointments, saying that “she’s a grown woman, she can take herself.” Which was a lie because my mother was slowly growing too sick to drive. I would’ve volunteered to take her, but I didn’t have a license so that option was out of the window. But even then, she felt that she took care of her long enough, so in her defense; she felt that there was nothing more she could do for our mother. I found that reason to be absolutely ridiculous, my mother was doing perfectly fine when she was being taken to her appointments. However, my mother was also dependent on her medications as well. And since Andrea stopped taking her to her appointments, my mother couldn’t get her medication.

I was able to move my body finally, so I rolled over and sat up. I ended up on the floor somehow, I wasn’t sure how I got there. I’m assuming that I ended up there last night somehow. It didn’t matter, either someone moved me, or I fell onto the floor somehow.

I managed to make it out of my room when I turned and saw Desi in the bathroom doing her hair. I saw that her hair was a little messed up for what I last remembered, maybe she got a haircut or something? I don’t know. She didn’t really walk into my room as much as she used back in our old house prior to moving in with Andrea and Elise. It was weird to me, but I didn’t really think much of it. I was concerned and a little worried, but I didn’t want to force her to do something that she doesn’t want to do.

“Hey, Desi, you alright?” I asked.

No response.

I assumed that she didn't hear me or that she was too tired to respond to me. I mean, it was like seven in the morning on a fucking Saturday. I would have a not happy person too. But I still had my doubts and that she didn't hear me.

"Desi, are you alright?" I asked again.

No response.

I didn't like that. She usually responded to me whenever I approached her, that behavior was very suspicious.

I walked into the bathroom to check on Desi when she turned toward me and shoved me out of the bathroom with all of her force.

"NO!!!" She shouted. "GET AWAY FROM ME!!!"

She slammed the door with such force. I was still on the floor trying to process what had just happened. She never acted like that, ever. That wasn't like her at all.

"What was that?" I thought.

I pulled myself together and got up and knocked on the bathroom door.

"Desi, hey, what was that? What's going on?" I asked concerned.

"Get away from me... I don't want to talk to you." She said.

"What did I do that was so bad?"

No response.

I couldn't force myself to pry her for information, so I left it alone. Hopefully, she was able to find it in herself to tell me what was wrong and why was so hostile toward me.

I made it downstairs and walked into the kitchen to see both Andrea and Elise sitting at the table eating. It didn't appear to me that they were waiting for me to come down and join them. I walked to the table and sat down and just looked at the both of them eat like zombies. No emotion, just stuffing their faces with food. Absolutely pathetic, it almost disgusted me.

“So, where's my mother?” I asked breaking the silence.

Elise took her fork and pointed towards the ceiling. Making it blatantly obvious that my mother was upstairs.

“She's upstairs sleeping. If you actually went around and checked, you have noticed that.” She said.

“Sorry that I can't read your fucking mind.” I retaliated.

Elise squeezed her glass until it cracked, “WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?”

She stood up and glared at me with a grimacing stare. I wasn't really expecting for her to completely fly off the handle by me saying that I was just being sarcastic. But she, just Desi, exploded for no reason. I couldn't understand why there was so much hostility in that situation, but I didn't have any answers for it. As a matter of fact, I didn't have answers for a lot of the things that were happening. The reason that my stepfather died, why my mother was so sick, why we were living with Andrea, why Desi was acting the way that she was, and why Elise was so hostile this morning. I know that Elise was a growing girl and that she was a teenager. I believe she was

fifteen, I couldn't remember. I didn't care enough. But maybe she was going through some female hormonal things? I didn't know, I wasn't a woman, so I couldn't say for sure. What I did know was that Andrea just sat there and let Elise just let her aggressions out on me, and didn't say anything.

“So, we're not just going to talk about the fact that everyone is acting weird this morning?”

I asked.

“I don't see anything wrong with how anyone is acting. Maybe it's your imagination.”

Andrea said. “Elise had every right to talk to you the way she did because of your attitude in your response to her statement.”

“But she didn't have to come out and say that with such aggression and belligerence. It was uncalled for.”

That statement seemed to anger Elise, and as a result, she stood up so aggressively that her chair fell over and then stormed out of the kitchen. What a weird turn of events. The behavior that had transpired in the last ten minutes had been completely suspicious and unexpected. Andrea looked as though she herself didn't have an answer for anything that was going on. But in the same breath, I felt that she knew more than what she was giving off. I couldn't say anything because I didn't have any proof, but I was for certain that she was doing something to Desi to cause her to act the way that she was acting.

I finally picked up the fork and started eating the food on the plate. It was scrambled eggs with bacon and a piece of toast. It looked edible enough, although, I wasn't sure who made it or what that person's mental state was when they made the food. So, I proceeded to eat the food with caution.

“Just so you know, the food isn’t poisonous,” Andrea said. “We may not get along that well, but I wouldn’t intentionally try to kill you.”

I had an inkling suspicion that she was lying, but at that time, I went along with her statement and believed her. I mean, out of all the people that I spoke to that morning, she seemed the calmest and was thinking somewhat logically.

“So, can you explain why everyone is acting so weird this morning?” I asked.

“I’m not understanding your question. What do you mean ‘acting weird’?” She asked.

“I’m talking about the fact that everyone’s behavior’s off. Like... Desi never gets angry at me over something minute. All I did was just ask her how she was doing. It wasn’t a hard question; I wasn’t trying to bother her or anything like that. It just blew my mind how she just exploded so suddenly.”

Andrea looked at me with a look that showed that she was listening, but also looked like she really didn’t care to hear what I had to say. Which was pretty typical of her to do, she never listened to anything I said. Since I was just a “know-it-all teenager”, she disregarded whatever came out of my mouth. Which was bullshit because I knew a thing or two about what to do with my mother and her medical condition, but it was almost like my advice and knowledge meant nothing to her because she was the adult, and I was the child. I “didn’t know what I was talking about”, she would always say. I was sticking my nose in adult business; you were worried about things out of your control. Blah blah blah, what the fuck ever. What I was talking about was correct, I knew about my mother’s ailing condition. She was dying right in front of me, and all I could do was just sit and watch like a helpless 911 caller listening to the victim on the other side of the phone by attacked by their assailant. Completely useless. I couldn’t stand for that.

“Well, to be fair, maybe she just... I don’t know, had a bad day or something. You know how girls are.” She said. “Maybe she had a bad dream or something.”

I picked around at my eggs, hoping that they would eventually develop some kind of flavor to them.

“I guess, whatever you say,” I said defeated. “But it just doesn’t make sense.”

As soon as I said that she gave me a death stare as she was trying to drink her coffee as if I was annoying her with me constantly bringing up Desi’s erratic behavior.

“Look, Tyler. Your sister is fine, alright?” She said aggressively. “It happens to everyone, so just drop it, alright?”

After she said that she got up and put her plate in the sink and walked back upstairs to the upstairs living room. I could hear her sighing and muttering to herself under her breath, but I couldn’t make out what she was saying. Most likely, she was talking to herself about me, as she always did, not really a surprise. But it still didn’t make me feel any better knowing that at that point three people weren’t happy to see me or acknowledged my existence. I was hoping that my mother would at least see me as less than human.

I finished my plate and put my plate and cup in the sink and walked back upstairs to go and see my mother. I got to the top of the stairs and looked to my right to see Andrea sitting on the couch wrapped up in a blanket watching some random ass TV show in silence. I walked past her and walked past Elise’s room to see her door was cracked, and when I caught a glimpse of her, she was sitting in the corner of her room facing the wall. I thought it was strange that she was just sitting there not moving. But as I quietly listened, I heard her muttering to herself very quietly.

“I—I—It’s alright, Elise. T—t—they can’t hurt... T—they can’t find...”

It was hard to make out all of what she was saying, but I was already this far in her internal conversation. I had to continue listening to see what was going on with her. I knew that I didn’t like her personality, but to see that she was not feeling all that great and then exploded at me earlier, and now to see her literally in pain made me feel... conflicted and confused.

I must’ve been in my own head for too long because I had happened to lean on the door a little too much causing it to creak. That creak caused her to snap her neck around toward the door and she saw that I was peeking in on her. She immediately snapped up and ran toward the door, slamming it in the process almost taking my eye out from the sudden force, I literally had seconds to pull my head back for getting my eyes slammed on. I wasn’t sure of what to make of what had just happened, however, I tried to not harp on it for too long either.

Andrea came from the living room and walked around the corner to see me standing in front of Elise’s door. The look on her face signified that I had done something that I wasn’t supposed to.

“So, what did you see?” She asked nonchalantly.

“W—what are you talking about?” I asked.

“You saw something, what was it? And don’t try to act like you didn’t see shit because I know you did.”

Andrea was walking up to me with a frustrated look on her face, like she wanted to say more to me, but didn’t have the words to say. She stopped right in front of me to where we were literally inches apart from each other. Her demeanor and the looks that she gave me made me feel

like she was judging me or looking down at me for whatever reason. I couldn't shake the feeling that was something she wanted to say to me, but she couldn't either find the words to say or was just not really up for saying anything because of whatever reason. Maybe she didn't want to disturb her daughter, but why would she feel like that? She must've heard what just happened with Elise. Clearly, that must mean that she was aware that there was a problem, and that could mean that either she was completely oblivious to the situation, or that she knew about the situation, but refused to do anything about it.

“Hello? I'm waiting for an answer.” She said snapping me back into reality.

“I'm sorry, what did you say?”

“I said, you saw something, what was it?”

“Oh, i—it was nothing too major, really,” I said. “I was just walking to talk to my mother when I noticed that her door was open and that she was just sitting in the corner of the room facing the wall and she was just muttering to herself about how they can't find or something like that. It didn't make sense to me. And I must've gone into my own thoughts because I accidentally leaned in too much on the door and it creaked, and that must've scared her. And as a result, she came storming up to the door and literally almost blinded me slamming it.”

“Interesting... was that it?”

“What do you mean, ‘was that it’? Your daughter was doing something very suspicious in the corner of her room, does that not concern you at all?”

Andrea rolled her eyes and proceeded to knock on Elise's door.

“Elise, open the door. I need to talk to you for a second.” She said.

Elise was hesitant to open the door, she had apparently locked it after she slammed it, but I didn't hear her do that.

"It's unlocked." She said quietly.

Andrea opened the door and then she motioned me to step into the room as well. Elise was lying on her bed just staring up at the ceiling. There was nothing on, no TV, no laptop. She wasn't on her phone, listening to music. Just allegedly sulking in whatever emotions that she was in. I couldn't read her mind, so I couldn't say for sure what was going through it. But I couldn't only assume it was something malicious. I've always felt uneasy being around Elise, there was just something about her that was just... off. I could never put my finger on what was going on with her, she always gave off this... demented aura. Like something had to be done, or she was always planning something behind your back. Over the years that I had spent living with her, she seemed to slowly fall into a depression. Maybe it was because she was getting older and finally hitting her teen years, who knew? The only two people who had any inkling of what was going on with her were her and Andrea. But even then, Andrea seemed just as confused as I was when we walked in to see her just lying there like that.

"So, what's going on with you?" Andrea asked. "Are you alright?"

"I'm alright, I guess. I was just feeling weird, maybe it was the cramps again." She said.

I had no idea what cramps she was talking about; it was probably safe to assume that she meant period cramps; which seemed like the safest option at that moment.

"So, why were you sitting in the corner?" Andrea asked.

As soon as she asked that question, Elise quickly snapped her head toward me with a malicious glare in her eyes. I wasn't aware why she was looking at me like that, I didn't really do anything to make her feel like she was being called out or something like that. But I also wasn't expecting Andrea to be so blunt with asking Elise why she was doing what she was doing. I was expecting a more methodical approach or some shit. But that expectation flew right out the window at that point.

“W—wh—wha? I—I wasn't sitting in the corner. W—what made you think that?” Elise stuttered nervously.

She was clearly sweating; it was clear that she was caught in her actions but was trying to throw any blame or dirt on her to the side as much as possible. But Andrea hadn't told her way she had asked her that question.

“Tyler mentioned it to me, and I was just concerned about you,” Andrea said.

Witch...

I was taken aback by what she just did, however, at the same time, I couldn't say that was all too surprised. It was still bullshit that basically threw me under the bus just then, it was completely uncalled for. Unfortunately, she didn't see her sitting in the corner of the room when I mentioned it, so I guess it wasn't a lie that I told her. But I had a feeling that telling her that would probably fuck me over sometime in the future.

“I—I don't know what you're talking about,” Elise said. “I'm perfectly fine, mother. I don't know what Tyler here told you, but whatever he said was wrong and foul.”

“I didn’t say anything wrong or foul about you, Elise,” I responded in defense. “I just told her what I saw, I wasn’t planning on looking in on you anyway; I just happened to see that your door was opened and that you were sitting there. That’s really it.”

“LIES!!!” She screamed.

She sprung out of her bed and proceeded to tackle him with all of her force and started attacking me relentlessly. I

“Elise...! Get off of me!” I yelled.

“LIES! LIES! LIAR! YOU’RE A FUCKING LIAR!!!”

Her screams on top of her attacks were completely out of the ordinary. She never behaved like that at all, it was almost like she was being controlled by someone or something. Whatever it was, she was letting take over and was lashing out at everyone that she came across.

I got a peek at Andrea, and she was just standing there aimlessly as if she wasn’t expecting her own daughter to completely snap and started attacking me. I was half expecting her to step in and do something, anything. But she just stood there like a helpless victim that just witnessed a robbery.

I managed to throw Elise off of me, however, she flew back and hit her head on the corner of her dresser and was went unconscious.

“What did you do!?” Andrea yelled. “Why did you do that!?”

“What are you talking about!?” I exclaimed. “YOUR daughter just fucking attacked me for no reason. And you just stood there and did nothing! What did you think I was going to do? I’m going to defend myself!”

I sat up and caught my breath and looked at Elise who was still lying on the floor unconscious. Whatever that was, I didn’t want it to happen again. She exploded for no reason; she exploded this morning for no reason. She was sitting in the corner for no reason. It was all just a game or just a façade or something. There was no reason at all for anyone’s erratic behavior. Andrea is not telling me shit about anything. I was starting to get anxious about the whole situation. I felt as though I was on my own in that house, no one was on my side. Desi, I felt, was slowly drifting away from me. I had no relationship with Elise, I didn’t like Andrea, and my mother is slowly dying in front of my face. So, all in all, there was no one that I could go to for help.

I was all alone. In my own thoughts, with my own fears, my own demons. Myself.

Just alone...

II

I woke up on the floor again in my room. I didn’t go and see my mother that day, I must’ve passed out after what had happened. Wait a minute? What actually did happen? It was all so blurry to me. All I remembered was being attacked by Elise and getting yelled at by Andrea, but after that, it was all blank. I didn’t know how Desi was doing or what was going on with my mother, I knew I had to check on both of them.

I got up and walked out of the room when I saw out the corner of my eye a letter sitting near the spot where I had woken up from.

I picked it up and started to read it.

“Tyler, why are you like this? I... I... don’t really have an explanation for your behavior. You are an epiphany to me, really you are. I can’t find it in myself to figure you out. I assume that you don’t remember anything at all yesterday, which is fine, I didn’t expect you to. A lot happened in such a short amount of time. You accuse me of slitting my wrists and talking to myself. Saying that I was having an anxiety attack, etc., etc. Who do you think you are to say such lies about a person? Well, it doesn’t matter anymore, the past is in the past. I forgive you though, however, I would go and check on your family if I were you when you see this note. Just a thought. ~Elise”

I remembered seeing another one of those notes from her when I was younger, there was never an explanation for why that was written, but that wasn’t important. She was saying that I needed to go and check on Desi and my mother for whatever reason. I had a feeling that she did something to them, and I was anticipating the worst.

I walked out of the room and down the hall into Desi’s room to see that she wasn’t there.

“Huh, that’s weird.” I thought. “Usually, she’s asleep around this time.”

It was pretty early in the morning, so it was surprising to see that she wasn’t in her room sleeping.

I walked out of her room and walked further down the hall into my mother’s room. She too was gone, now I was starting to get a little concerned. Where could my mother have gone? She didn’t have the energy nor strength to move around that much let alone drag Desi along with her. I walked out of her room and walked out into the upstairs living room to see that neither Andrea

nor Elise was there either. Everyone was gone. Where could they have gone between now and yesterday? They couldn't have gone far, and surely, they would eventually come back, right?

Right?

Three days later...

I was staring up at the ceiling in my room waiting to hear back from anyone. They really couldn't have gone that far away. Where were they? What was the reason for them abruptly leaving? What happened four days ago to cause such a rash decision to be made? I didn't have any of the answers, but I had nothing but questions for Andrea when she came back. If she came back.

I got up and walked downstairs to the kitchen and decided to call the police about filing a missing person's report. I wasn't wanting to do that, but I was starting to get incredibly anxious about the whereabouts of Desi and my mother. Anything could have happened to them.

I told the police about the situation, and they asked me very basic questions about who my sister and mother were, who Andrea and Elise were, and what I was doing before they left. I informed them about what Elise did to me that day before they up and disappeared. And when I told the operator about her behavior, she asked me if she always acted like that. That actually threw me off because that those thoughts were at the forefront of my mind. I wasn't paying attention to Elise enough to notice a change in her behavior and personality. However, when I did notice a change was that morning, other than that; nothing.

The operator told me that they'll put an APB out for Andrea's car, and they told me that they'll send a police car to talk to me further about the whole situation. Which was a conversation that I wasn't prepared to have. Not because I was nervous, but because I didn't know what to say about their behaviors.

There was a knock on the door, I opened it to find two police officers standing on the other side.

"Good evening, sir. We're with the police and we would like to speak to you about the whereabouts of your family."

"Oh, sure, that's fine," I said.

I let them into the house and one of them took a seat on the couch and the other one stood towards the door.

"I'm assuming you know why we're here, right?" The officer asked.

"To talk about my sister and mother's whereabouts?" I asked.

"Yes, do you know anything about that and where they could've gone?"

"No, I don't. I have no idea. They literally just up and left without saying anything, the only thing that was left was a note from my cousin a few days ago the day they allegedly left."

The officers looked at each other with suspicious faces.

They turned back to look at me.

“Do you have access to that note or know what the note was talking about?” The officer asked.

“Well, the note basically talked about how I lied about my cousin’s erratic behavior, saying that they didn’t slit their wrists or hear any voices in their head. Which to me was off because I didn’t remember seeing a knife in her possession when we walked into her room, nor did I see any cuts on her wrists when she attacked me.”

“Well, if it’s alright with you, we would like to take you down to the station to see if there’s anyone who can come out and take of you until your family is found.”

“That’s fine, I guess. I don’t understand why you would need to do that.”

“There are some things that we would need to look into and maybe you could help us. But don’t worry, we’ll keep a patrol car around the area in case they come back, and we also have patrol cars scouting out the city looking for them. So, it’s very likely that they’ll turn up here pretty soon.”

The officer’s optimism was at least somewhat reassuring, at least they could help me find Desi and my mother. But in the same breath, why did they want to take me to the police station? What did they want from me? No one was there in town to take care of me, hell, I had no family to take care of that wasn’t my mother. So, I guess it made sense to go with them.

“I guess that’s alright,” I said finally.

“Alright, we’ll be waiting here for you. Grab some clothes and some of your personal belongings. And if you can, bring that note from your cousin with you as well if you can find it.”

“Alright, I will.”

I went upstairs and grabbed some of my clothes to take with me to the police station, I still wasn't understanding why I needed to go with them. Although, I didn't have a license nor did I have any money, so going with them was probably the best option. I had to continuously psyche myself out, telling myself that I could trust the police; that they were here to help me, that they would actually listen to my story about Andrea and how I didn't trust her as a person. Hopefully, that was the opportunity that I needed to finally tell someone about those two people.

I finished packing up my clothes and I grabbed the note that Elise left on the floor and walked back downstairs where the police officers were still waiting for me.

"I have everything that I need, and I have the note for you," I said.

"Alright, come with us." The officer said.

I followed them out of the house and got into the back of the police car and they took me to the police station.

We arrived at the police station, and I was escorted into a room. I didn't know what the room was, I didn't know why I was put in that room. But it had to mean something. There was no explanation as to why I was put in there, all they said was "have a seat in there, someone will talk to you shortly." So, assuming that would be another police officer or something like that.

After about twenty minutes of waiting in silence, someone walked into the room saying that they had a location on where Andrea was. That was great news to hear, they had finally found my sister, but the question still remained if she was alright or not, and also why did they up and leave without telling me?

Chapter 6 - Confusion

Seconds turned into minutes; minutes turned into hours. And every hour that passed made me more and more nervous about what could have happened to Desi and mother. Whatever kind of plan Andrea was scheming, and whatever mental state that Elise was in had me sick to my stomach. It was to the point where I couldn't even think properly, my mind was so crowded with negative thoughts and was filled with anxiety because there was nothing that I could've done to change the situation. I felt useless and powerless.

There was a knock on the door.

"Hello, may I come in?" Someone said.

"Yes, you can. It's open." I said.

The door opened and it was a woman with a clipboard in her hand. I didn't know what she was doing or why she was coming into the room to speak to me, but I guess since I had been sitting in my anxiety-filled thoughts for what seemed like an eternity; it felt good to actually see a face that wasn't Andrea's or Elise's. But it wasn't Desi or my mother, so the outcome was bittersweet.

"Hello, my name is Natalie Akane. I'm a social worker for the city and I was coming to speak to you today about the situation with your family. I had heard that you had recently dealt with some rare behavioral differences with both your sister and your cousin, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Great, I'm glad to be speaking with you."

“This opportunity means a lot to me, thank you.”

“Of course, now can you tell me a little bit about your family and your situation and why you’re here right now?”

I gathered my thoughts together as Mrs. Akane sat down and pulled out a pen to begin writing whatever I had to say. Hopefully, this person can give me some answers as to what to do about my family.

“Well, to start, I have always had a bad feeling about my step-aunt, Andrea Wilson. That’s her name by the way.” I said. “Ever since I met her when I was twelve, her demeanor and persona was just off-putting to me; I could never explain why I felt that way about her, you know?”

“I see.” Mrs. Akane said. “What kind of feelings did you feel towards her?”

“Mainly suspicion, manipulation, and deception. Nothing really good towards her. Maybe this is pretty small and minute, but she decided to take my sister out of her bed when she was a little kid and decided to play with her even though she was clearly sleeping.”

“Why did that bother you so much?”

“Because usually how my sister and I operated was that I would wake up before her and walk to her room and just watch her sleep, you know, just to make sure that she was okay. Then I would usually walk into her room and sit on the floor or lay on the floor next to her bed until she woke up and then we would start the day together. Or if I didn’t wake up before her, she would come into my room and wake me up or hop in the bed with me and go back to sleep.”

“Well, that seems like a nice little routine that you two had going for you.”

“It was. And for the most part, if I wasn’t there in my room or if I wasn’t there waiting for her to wake up, she would go and sit on my bed and waited until I came back to my room.”

Mrs. Akane was writing down what I was telling her, I didn’t know if any of what I was saying meant anything to her or not. But it must’ve meant something to her.

“So, you’re saying that Andrea, your step-aunt, right?” She started saying.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Okay, your aunt, had gone and woke up your sister and was playing with her. And that bothered you because that wasn’t what your routine involved. You already had a set routine and schedule and then she allegedly came and ruin that entire thing. Actually, how long did she ruin this routine, or how many times do you recall her doing that?”

“I would say that was the only time that she really messed up our routine, when I first met her, she didn’t stay with us that long. That was until my stepfather had passed away, then Andrea became an entirely different person.”

“What do you mean by she became a different person?”

“She became insistent on having us live with her for some reason. She had happened to know about my stepfather’s money and what was going to happen with it when he died and asked my mother what she was going to do with that money.”

Mrs. Akane sat back in her chair and looked like she was processing what I was telling her, however, I couldn’t read her mind, so it was unclear to me what she was thinking about. Maybe she believed me, maybe she didn’t. I wasn’t sure.

“So, she told your mother that you all should live with her because your stepfather passed away? Why would she do that? Couldn’t your mother take care of you and your sister? There had to be some reason why your aunt insisted on that sudden action.”

“Well, my mother is very sick. And after my stepfather died, it was almost like she lost all will to live basically. I asked her why she decided on living with Andrea, but she said that she could use the extra help or that it would be better for us if we did that. I was skeptical about that, but I couldn’t really say anything at the time because I was so young. But if I was the age that I am now, I would have told her that we didn’t need Andrea’s help and that there was something off about her.”

“Alright. So, let’s skip forward a bit. You go to live with Andrea and her daughter. What happened during your that time up till their disappearance a few days ago?”

I sat back myself and pondered on her question. All of those years were literally just a blur, nothing really happened. I just sat there and did practically nothing, went to a different school, basically did the same thing that I did before leaving our home.

“Nothing really... happened during the five-year block while living with them. I basically lived my life the way that I did before I lived with them. I went to a different school, had a hard time making new friends though. Looking after my mother and sister, doing menial stuff around the house. Things like that. I mean, I pretty much did all the work while everyone else did nothing, it was really weird.”

“Did anything feel off to you about Andrea or Elise at any point?”

“No, but there was one time prior to us living with them that Elise allegedly did something to my sister.”

Mrs. Akane perked up and eagerly grabbed her pen.

“Really? What did she do?” She asked intrigued.

“She was, I guess playing with my sister and then I saw her hold a lighter towards her and then looked like she whispered something to her. All of a sudden, my sister started crying. When my parents came upstairs, I told them that Elise had held a lighter near Desi and whispered something to her that made her cry. However, when they questioned her, she said that she didn’t do anything like that and that I was lying.”

“Did they believe you?”

“No, they didn’t, they took Elise’s word over mine for some reason. I was adamant that she did those things to my sister, but no one believed me. Since I allegedly couldn’t prove that she did it, or that no one saw her do it. They didn’t believe me.”

“That wouldn’t make sense. Did they ask your sister if any of those things were true?”

I never actually thought about that. It never crossed my mind to have my mother ask Desi if Elise did those things to her.

“No, they didn’t. I wasn’t thinking about that at the time. However, I feel that even if they asked her about what had happened; she wouldn’t have said anything because of whatever Elise did or said to her.” I said.

“So, did anything else happen after that event?”

“Yes, I went to my room, and I guess I dozed off. But then I was woken up to a voice talking to me.”

“A voice?”

“Yeah, I thought it was in my head. But then it started asking me about what had happened earlier with Elise and my sister. I thought it was my sister talking to me, but the voice was too deep to be my sister. However, I couldn’t see the person because it was so dark. But I knew that there was someone standing there.”

“Then what happened?”

“Then the voice asked me if I liked my stepfather’s family, then I said that I didn’t like them at all. Then they said alright and that was it. I didn’t hear anything else after that. And then it went all black.”

The room was starting to get hot, maybe because I was sweating about telling Mrs. Akane about what was going on with my family. However, I was starting to have second thoughts about Andrea and Elise. The way it sounds, it felt like what they were doing was a coincidence or was just in my head. I couldn’t wrap my head around it. All those events were so weird, the voice talking to me. Elise’s letters, Andrea knowing about my mother’s appointments. All of it must’ve been a coincidence, there was no way that they were doing this intentionally.

Maybe I was just making up things. I didn’t know anymore, I felt like I was just talking out my ass at that point. Making a situation out of nothing, potentially lying about the events that happened.

Was I seeking attention? Was I just crazy?

I was starting to feel an overwhelming sense of anxiety rush over me, I couldn't control it. I was grabbing my head and I started hyperventilating. I slowly fell into a downward spiral.

"Tyler, are you alright?" Mrs. Akane asked rubbing my back. "Try to breathe."

"I—I—It was all a lie. None of that stuff happened. I—I—It was all in my head. The letters, Elise holding that lighter to Desi's face. The voices. It was all a lie. I can't believe it, what have I done?" I said with tears running down my face.

"I'm going to call someone in here to take you to the hospital, okay?"

Mrs. Akane quickly got up and ran out of the room to go and get someone.

"Wait! Don't! Please! I can't... I don't know what's happening anymore..." I barely managed to say.

Everything was going black, I laid in a fetal position with my hands around my head trying to block out the sound of everything around me. I felt that I was having a mental breakdown or an anxiety attack at that point. Everything was literally crashing down on me.

Was everything that happened a lie? Was I lying to myself? My parents? Desi? Everyone?

I had no one to turn to, the police couldn't help me. I couldn't help Desi; I couldn't help my mother. I had failed everyone.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something, I was too distraught to look over at what it was. But then it started moving toward me. I looked to see a person, or at least that was what I thought it was.

“I knew you couldn’t save me, Tyler.” The person said. “I tried to tell you that a long time ago.”

The voice sounded very familiar. It sounded like Desi’s voice, but when I looked up to see if it was her, there wasn’t anyone there. That caused me to play into a deep depression and made me lose my mind even more. Desi wasn’t around, it was uncertain where she was. She could have been anywhere. Andrea took them somewhere; I just didn’t know where they took them.

The door opened and a pair of paramedics came in and asked me if I was alright. I couldn’t respond, I was too far gone to say anything to them. Everything was slowly starting to go black, and it was then that I knew that I had failed them.

I had failed my mother; I had failed Desi.

I had failed myself...

Chapter 7 – Reminiscence

Tyler had woken up in fright. He sat up and looked around to see that he was on the floor in a pool of sweat. He couldn't believe what he had just seen.

“What was that?” He thought to himself. “What was that dream? If that was a dream...”

He was hyperventilating and was sat there in complete confusion trying to figure what was going on. He knew that the dream he had or whatever it was that he saw wasn't real, that wasn't what happened when he was seventeen; it was supposed to have been a different outcome of events. Maybe something happened in his mind that caused him to think like that or maybe he was having another mental breakdown? He wasn't sure as to what was going on.

Kaiya walked out of her room and was stretching, signifying that she had just woken up. Tyler looked around after seeing her realize that he was in her apartment and that was in fact dreaming. That was a relief to him because he felt that nothing had happened and that everything was supposed to be alright.

“Good morning,” Kaiya said happily. “How'd you sleep?”

Tyler finally composed himself and got his thoughts together.

“I didn't get that much sleep; I had a rough night I guess.” He said.

“Oh, didn't something happen in your dreams?”

“Yeah, two things happened actually. I think I had an episode of sleep paralysis and then I had this crazy nightmare on top of that. I couldn’t explain it, but it had something to do with Desi, Andrea, and Elise.”

“What do you mean? Did the dream mean anything?”

“Yeah, it skipped ahead to when I was seventeen. And I had the same case of sleep paralysis when I had woken up. I was on the floor again like in the first flashback, but Desi didn’t come into my room and wake me up this time.”

“Oh, how was she? Was she any older?”

“Yeah, she was around eight or nine. And we were at Andrea’s house. But when I got up to check on Desi, she acted very weird and was very hostile towards me. The only thing she said was ‘get away from me’ and then pushed me out of the bathroom and slammed the door. When I went to ask her what was wrong, all she said was get away from me. Even before that altercation, she was in the bathroom doing her hair, and even then, her hair looked very different; like someone had gone and did a really shitty good cutting her hair. And when I called her name, she ignored me. I went to call her name again; she ignored me. That’s when I went up to her and that’s when she exploded. It was really weird.”

Kaiya sat down on the couch. However, she was very confused about the situation at hand.

“What was that dream supposed to signify? Why was that? What caused him to have that dream? Surely, it had to have been from watching the news report about those two children.” She thought.

“So, what do you think that means?” She asked.

“I don’t know actually; I can’t wrap my head around it. I’m just glad that it’s over.” Tyler said.

“You mentioned sleep paralysis, what was that about?”

“That, I don’t know where or why that happened. All I remember was that I opened my eyes and heard a voice, but I couldn’t move my body. Only my eyes, then I looked to the right to see that the only light was the TV, but it was just static. Then the voice came into my vision and there was a body; it looked like Andrea’s body, however, there was no face. Maybe it was hard to see because of the static, but I couldn’t tell. Then it went it black, and I woke up on the floor in Andrea’s house.”

“That sounds like a hyper-realistic dream. I’m surprised that you had those two things back-to-back. Do you think that they’re connected to each other?”

“They can’t be, it just doesn’t make sense as to how they would.”

Tyler got up and sat on the couch next to Kaiya. His face was riddled with confusion, the whole situation was just flat-out confusion.

But there was one thing that wasn’t explained or that made any sense.

“Apparently, in the dream, I had talked to a woman named Natalie Akane. Now that might not mean anything, but I just thought that I’d share that. She probably doesn’t even exist, to be honest. But whatever. Towards the end of the dream, I started to second guess myself and started to have a mental breakdown or an anxiety attack, one of the two. And I started saying that everything that I saw was a lie, that nothing was true, and that Desi wasn’t hurt. Elise didn’t hold the lighter to her face and didn’t say anything to her, Andrea wasn’t after us and trying to hurt us.

It was all so weird and didn't make any sense whatsoever. And also, I thought I saw Desi in the room that I was in, she said that she knew that I couldn't save her and that she knew she was going to die or something like that. It was hard to believe, but when I looked up to see if she was there, she had disappeared. And that's when I blacked out and woke up here."

Why was Tyler hallucinating in a dream? And why did he fall apart before he blacked out? That was one question that didn't make sense to Kaiya at all. Most of the time, people don't hallucinate in dreams, they wake up paranoid or thinking that someone is watching them. But in her experience, she hadn't heard of anyone hallucinating in their dreams. Maybe it was because she didn't have that much experience in that field, however, she was for certain that she possessed so kind of knowledge about the subject.

"So, do you think that all of what you saw was a lie?" She asked.

She knew that she had to be cautious with her words, she didn't want Tyler to potentially have a mental breakdown in reality like he did in his dream. But she felt that he wouldn't do that, however, she did remember reading about him having a mental breakdown at the child protective services building and also overhearing the police officers and social workers saying the same thing. So, at that point, she was very conflicted about what to do.

"Surely, it couldn't have been. I know what I saw." He said. "Desi is with Andrea, surely she has to be."

Tyler started to think about the news report that he saw the day before and was thinking about if that child that was murdered really could have been Desi. But he had to keep reminding himself that that wasn't the case and that she was perfectly fine, or at least still alive and that Andrea, although an evil person in his eyes, wouldn't kill her. What reason would Andrea have to

kill Desi? There would have been nothing to gain from killing her. It didn't make sense to Tyler. The other main concern was his mother and her physical well-being. She was still very sick and was being neglected by Andrea because of the appointments that she had to go to, and Andrea also saying that his mother was a grown woman and that she didn't need to go to those appointments.

“Do you think that Elise was as bad as you thought she was?” Kaiya asked.

“What makes you say that?”

“The only things that she did were allegedly talk to you, and then wrote you a letter about the night before. I mean, maybe I'm just mistaken, but that's not grounds to accuse someone of being a psychopath.”

“I'm not saying that she's a psychopath, not really. But what I'm saying is that her behavior was very suspicious to me. Why would she go through all of that trouble to mess with me psychologically? There was no reason for her to do that. If she wasn't guilty of messing with Desi, then she wouldn't have done those things to me.”

Kaiya knew that she needed to get further information about that dream that Tyler had, although it may not have meant much. Maybe it could lead to a change in memories.

“Would you like some tea or something?” She said trying to assess the situation.

“Yeah, that's fine,” Tyler said.

She got up and went into the kitchen and put some water in a pot on the stove.

“Surely, something happened in that dream to make him feel that way.” She thought. “Could it have had something to do with the sleep paralysis? Surely not, that would have absolutely ridiculous. But it’s not out of the question.”

After about ten minutes, the tea was ready. She put the water in two cups and put tea bags and sugar into the cups and brought them out for Tyler and herself. She sat back down on the couch next to Tyler and took a sip of her tea.

“So, what about Elise in the dream?” She started. “What was so different about her? We can start with her first.”

Tyler took a sip of his tea and started pondering on what her question was. What her aim was, what she was trying to achieve with finding out about that dream.

“Well, Elise in the dream was pretty much the same person that she was in the first flashback that I told you about. Very shady and suspicious. However, in this flashback or dream, she was very hostile. Just like how Desi was. All I remembered was that I asked Andrea about how my mother was doing and then Elise said that I should have gone to see her prior to coming downstairs. So, I responded by saying that she didn’t need to say that or something along those lines. And then she stood up and slammed her hands on the table and said, ‘who the fuck do you think you are?’ and stormed out of the kitchen.”

Kaiya was not expecting to hear such details about Elise, let alone some much detail about the dream since there were a lot of things that allegedly happened in it.

“So, she just exploded on you because you retaliated to her initial comment?” She asked confused.

“That’s correct, it didn’t make much sense to me either.”

“Did anything else happen with her?”

“Yeah, so after she stormed out the kitchen; I asked Andrea what the hell that was about and she too got upset with me as well for hounding her on why everyone was acting weird. So, I got up and went upstairs to go and talk to my mother and that was when I happened to see Elise just sitting in the corner of her room with her back to the door. Her door was slightly cracked, so I peeked in on what she was doing. I wasn’t planning on standing there to watch her, but she just looked so suspicious. What I saw was that she was just sitting there like I said, however, I could barely make out her muttering to herself things like “they can’t find you” and “they can’t hear you”. Anything else was hard to hear if she even said anything else.”

“Well, that was weird. Did you have any ideas as to why she was acting so weird?”

“Nope, I couldn’t figure it out. All I remembered is that I just happened to get lost in thought and accidentally leaned in on her door and it creaked. And then she snapped around and saw me standing there, and then all I saw was her just sprinting to the door and literally slamming it.”

“She just stood up and ran to the door and slammed it? She didn’t say anything?”

“Nope, she may have said something, but I was too concerned with trying to figure out what had just happened as opposed to what she had said.”

They both sat there in confusion as to what those events were supposed to mean. It just seemed like a random freak accident or a typical reaction, but it was still a dream in Tyler’s eyes. So, it didn’t mean that much to him. But in the back of his mind, he was still superstitious.

“Were you able to talk to your mother or Desi at all in the dream?” Kaiya asked.

“No, I wasn’t. After that event, Andrea came to see what had happened and then asked me what was going on. I told her that Elise had been sitting in the corner and that Andrea should have done something about it.”

“Was she going to?”

“I had no idea. All she did was knock on Elise’s door and asked to speak to her. She unlocked the door and we walked in to find her lying on her bed and just staring up and the ceiling doing nothing. Her TV was off, she wasn’t on her phone, nothing. Just lying there in total silence.”

“Then what happened?”

“Andrea sat on her bed and asked Elise about what she was doing in the corner, to which Elise said that she wasn’t doing anything. That’s when Andrea told her that I had said that she was standing in the corner of the room and that she should’ve done something about it. Then suddenly, screamed that I was lying and then proceeded to attack me. She was screaming that I was lying, and I didn’t understand why she was attacking me. I happened to catch a glimpse of Andrea just standing there not doing anything, I was expecting her to step in and maybe do something about her daughter, but she didn’t.”

“Did you fight back?”

“No, I just tried to restrain her from hitting me. That was when I threw her off of me and then she hit her head on the corner of her dresser and it knocked her unconscious.”

Kaiya was not expecting such a rash confrontation. In her eyes, there was no reason to attack Tyler when he was just looking out for her and was concerned about her well-being.

“Did Andrea say anything about what had happened?” Kaiya asked.

“She did.” He said. “She yelled at me saying what was my problem and why did I do what I did.”

“And what did you say?”

“I told her that her daughter had literally just attacked me and that I had to defend myself from her since she didn’t do anything to stop Elise from attacking me. Then after that, I walked out of her room, and then it went all black and that was all I remembered for that day.”

“That day? What do you mean that day?”

“I had apparently blacked out after that whole encounter and woke up the next day.”

“Oh, was there anything out of the ordinary or something?”

“No, not in that moment. I got up like I normally did and started to walk out of the door, then out of the corner of my eye I saw a note on the floor next to where I had woken up at.”

“Wait, you were on the floor again? How’d you end up there?”

“I had no idea, after I left Elise’s room; it went all black for me.”

Kaiya had a hard time believing that Tyler had just blacked out after dealing with Elise and what she had done. In her mind, something happened to Tyler prior to him blacking out. But that could have just been a stipulation on her part. But it wasn’t a thought that couldn’t have been ignored either.

“Do you think that something happened to cause you blackout for the rest of that day?”

She asked curiously.

Tyler took another long sip of his tea and thought about the question and internally asked himself the same thing. Since it was a dream, it was hard to go back and remember what had exactly happened. Because at that point, he would have been making up scenarios and events in his head.

Which sounded like what he had been doing the entire time.

Just a thought.

“I don’t think anything, or anyone could have caused me to blackout that day. It just went blank after that, that’s all I can say on that.”

Kaiya knew that she had to accept that fact and didn’t want to push the issue further.

She took another sip of her tea and started to think of more questions to ask Tyler about the dream. Like what happened next, what about his sister? What about Elise...

Wait, what about that note that he was talking about?

“What about the note?” She said raising her finger as if she just had an idea. “Did it say anything suspicious or anything?”

Tyler looked at Kaiya with a great deal of confusion. He wasn’t really thinking about the note, he had a feeling that he would have been asked about it, but he wasn’t expecting such a big reaction about it either.

“Well, the note was from Elise again and it said that she was just disappointed that I had told her mother about what I saw and that I was a liar and that she wasn’t slitting her wrists or talking to herself. Which made no sense to me because I didn’t mention her slitting her wrists nor talking to herself. But in the last bit of the note, she said that I should go and check on my family for some reason.” Tyler said.

“Did you do that?”

“I did, I put the note down and went to Desi’s room. But when I walked into her room, she wasn’t there. Which was odd, so I checked the bathroom, and she wasn’t there either. I went to check on my mother in the hopes that she was in there with my mother, however, my mother wasn’t in her room either.

That detail scared Kaiya. Tyler had told her that she was very fragile and couldn’t really defend herself, so the fact that she was gone, and Desi wasn’t there either was a very big concern to her.

“Did they leave a note saying that there were going anywhere?” She asked.

“No, they didn’t.”

“What about Andrea and Elise, where were they?”

“Once I saw that my mother and Desi weren’t in their rooms or in the bathrooms; I walked into the upstairs living room to see if anyone was in there. And to my surprise, no one was there. I checked all over the house, and no one was there. It was like they just up and left.”

Kaiya remembered the note and tried to find any hidden messages in the words.

“The note did mention that you should’ve checked on your family, do you think that Andrea and Elise had something to do with that?” She asked.

Tyler at that moment had an inkling suspicion that what Kaiya said made a lot of sense. The note did say that he should’ve gone to check on his family, however, by the time that he had woken up, they were already gone.

So, the question remained; where did they go and what happened to Desi and his mother?

Chapter 7.5 – Intrusions

Both Tyler and Kaiya pondered on what possibilities could have developed from those flashbacks and dreams that Tyler had. But at every turn that they took, they usually would hit a dead end.

Kaiya was sat at the table in her dining room when she had a thought about something she saw at the hospital when she met Tyler.

“I was just thinking about something,” She said. “They said that you came in for suicidal thoughts and anxiety. But they also said that prior to that, you were pacing back and forth in the main waiting area, and you had also had an episode of some kind. Do you remember what it was?”

Tyler looked up at her and tracked back to when he was at the child protective services office.

“Well, from what I remember, I was talking about Andrea and Elise and then I suddenly had a really dark thought and vision about them being murdered, mutilated, and beaten ferociously. And that was weird, but the thing was that I have had those visions before. Those intrusive thoughts as I have read. They are very dangerous, yet they are so quick that was almost like I thought of something violent like that, then a few seconds later; it would quickly go away.”

“So, could you call a hallucination?”

“I don’t think so, I have hallucinated before. But that in my opinion wasn’t a hallucination.”

Kaiya didn't know what to think of what Tyler said. However, it was starting to make sense about why he ended up in the hospital and why he was admitted for suicidal thoughts. Because of those "intrusive thoughts" as Tyler called them, he apparently saw himself doing violent acts of murder. Or that was what was perceived by her.

"Did you at any point feel like those thoughts could become a reality?" She asked cautiously.

She was afraid of what answer Tyler was going to give her. Having a person who has homicidal thoughts in the same room as you were not a good situation to be in.

"I couldn't see myself acting upon them unless it was necessary." He said. "I don't have a reason to kill anyone. I wouldn't kill Andrea nor Elise for no reason. In fact, I wouldn't kill anyone for no reason. The only way that I would kill someone is if they were messing with the people that I cared about, which in this case is my sister and mother."

With that being said, Kaiya took a sigh of relief for the time being. She was still a little on the fence about Tyler's mental state because it hadn't been long since he was released from the hospital, yet she still let him into her apartment, so she had to trust him somewhat.

"Are there any intrusive thoughts that you've had that have made you really scared? Like were they realistically possible for you to commit and would you go through with them if you had the chance?" She asked.

Tyler thought long and hard about that question. The thing was that Tyler had only had a handful of those thoughts about certain people. Like people in his school, or someone who made him angry, or anyone who he thought was messing with his sister. However, he also had made up

a bunch of scenarios in his head that also caused him to have unexpected intrusive thoughts as well. So, to him, narrowing down just one intrusive thought would have been hard to do because some, if not most of them were either made up or very minute.

“Most of the intrusive thoughts that I have had were very situational.” He said truthfully. “It really depended on the situation. If I felt that someone was messing with me, I would have thoughts on beating them up or killing them, but that was a little too far even for me.”

That was the honest truth for him, he wasn't an evil person nor was he an approachable guy either. He was very standoffish because of his childhood, but at that point, it was looking like it was all a total lie.

Chapter 8 – Romance and Recollection

Present day...

Six months had passed since Tyler had last seen Desi, his mother, Elise, or Andrea. He had been with Kaiya the entire time trying to build a case and had been trying to develop a strategy in the hopes of finding his family. There were some instances where they tried running through Tyler's memories to see if he could remember anything else, but there was no new information. The only hints that they had to go on were the two flashbacks that he told Kaiya. Albeit they weren't much at the time, but they were still helpful.

They tried reaching out to child protective services and the police to see if they had any information on Andrea and where she was, however, they weren't able to find anything. Just like how they weren't able to find anything in Tyler's dream. The only difference was that he wasn't alone when he couldn't find his family. At least he had someone to attempt to confide in when dealing with the situation.

“Did you have any luck finding any more information on them?” Tyler asked.

“No, I got nothing so far,” Kaiya said. “There was nothing to go on since I don't have access to any of the police reports because I'm not a police officer nor a doctor.”

“Why a doctor?”

“Because whenever the police bring someone to the hospital, they need to tell the doctors about the patient, so they know who they're dealing with. That was what the case was for you,

they brought it up in and they took the doctors about you. But since you passed out, they put you in the psychiatric unit because of the suicidal thoughts as they were afraid that you were a threat to yourself and to others around you.”

“Well, that’s nice to hear. All I did was panic due to all the built-up stress, but I couldn’t remember anything after that. Just like with the dreams and flashbacks, I have blanks in my memory; I remember more things than others. And I hate that I can’t remember everything.”

Kaiya walked over to Tyler and rubbed his head and smiled.

“You shouldn’t beat yourself up over small things like that, you’re dealing with a lot of stress. Anyone would be acting the same that you’re acting, I know I would be losing my mind as well.”

Kaiya’s kind words were very well received by Tyler, it was the first time that someone actually cared about him outside of his sister and his mother. He slowly started to accept the fact that Kaiya was actually there to try to help him as opposed to working against him and lying to him.

“I know, I’ve said this before, but I want to thank you for your help,” Tyler said. “I really do appreciate your help. Most people wouldn’t have bothered to help me in this situation. But apparently, you saw something in me or saw something in my situation that compelled you to help me, and for that I am grateful.”

Kaiya smiled and blushed a little bit. She wasn’t expecting Tyler to completely trust him, even though he was still partly skeptical. But that was just his personality.

Tyler got up from the table and went and sat on the couch. Kaiya then joined him by sitting next to him. They started to develop a good friendship over the few months that they spent together. They talked about everything since they were technically living together.

Kaiya rested her head on Tyler's shoulder and wrapped her arm around his.

"There is one question that I have been wondering for a while now but didn't know how to ask it," Kaiya asked cautiously.

"Oh, alright, what's the question?" Tyler responded.

"Where did you live prior to meeting me? Surely, you had your own place, right?"

"I have my own place. However, I haven't been there for a while because I've been here with you. I actually got a job after leaving Andrea's house and graduating high school, I'm also in college, however, that kind of went out of the window after I went to the hospital. Just like you, I couldn't handle the stress because of school and also because of what was happening with Andrea and Desi."

"I see, so you're actually a college student just like me."

Kaiya herself started to realize that she and Tyler were more alike than she originally thought. She always knew that she could help him, but she didn't realize that she was closer to him than she first thought. She tried to mask her feelings toward him because she was afraid that he would shut her out because of how standoffish he was. But ever since they met each other, they slowly started to open up to each other more and more. They started to develop a sense of trust between themselves and also started to develop somewhat of romantic interest in each other as

well. But both of them were afraid to say anything because they didn't know what the other person was thinking nor what their mental state was when they first met.

There was a bit of silence between the both of them, none of them said anything they just sat there and watched TV and enjoyed each other's company for the time being. They both wanted to take their mind out of all the hard work that they put in trying to find Tyler's family. But there was still more than Kaiya wanted to know about Tyler's final moments before he lost contact with Desi and his mother. However, she didn't know what to ask or how to approach the situation because that situation was still fresh in his mind and didn't want to cause a trigger in his head that would cause him to have another mental breakdown that would send him back to the hospital, thus erasing all of the progress that they made.

Although, to Tyler, the feeling was mutual. He felt the same way about Kaiya that she felt about him. Ever since he laid eyes on her when she offered him a ride to get something to eat and he stared at her hair and wanted to stare into his eyes; he knew that he had felt something toward her. But he just didn't know what he was feeling at that time. Was it apathy? Was it rage? Was it even love? Did he just feel that way toward her because it was a nice face actually showing him so compassion? He didn't know at the time; he still didn't know what to feel or think. However, he was sure that he felt something; he just didn't know how to express how he felt. Because every time that he would go to express some kind of feeling toward something, it would always go up in flames because the people in his life he felt were more important than those in the outside world.

They both wanted to say something, anything to break the silence that was happening. But neither of them knew how to do that. They were still in their infancy when it came to starting conversations, especially when it came to starting a conversation in a romantic situation. Both of

them had their own set of problems and issues that they were dealing with, however, they knew that they weren't too far off from each other. It was just trying to find the words to say to one another that was the biggest problem for the both of them.

They knew the situation that they were dealing with. Tyler's mental health, his family's disappearance. Trying to find answers as to where Andrea could have taken them; why she took them from where they were. What the final words were that Andrea said to Tyler before they disappeared. They also needed to figure out if those dreams that Tyler had six months ago still actually met something or if they were just a farce. They still didn't have an answer for that. He hadn't had any more dreams like that, it was sometimes an occasional nightmare or two once a week. However, they weren't as bad as that one. But they still happened, nonetheless. He could never explain the backstory for his nightmares and why they happened, just like how he couldn't explain the intrusive thoughts he had about those that he didn't like either. None of it made sense to Tyler at all. The fact that the police and the social worker at the child protective services office made him look like a psychologically deranged person made Tyler feel like there was no one out there outside of Kaiya that was willing to listen to what he had to say.

Kaiya was trying to find the words to say about the situation herself. She would think about a conversation starter, but then would retreat back into her thoughts she felt like it was a stupid way to open up a conversation. She wasn't confident in her ability to hold herself together, let alone try to motivate someone else to keep trying to find the answers to their own problems.

Kaiya cleared her throat and that caused Tyler to turn and look at her with an intrigued face. But he just assumed that she was just clearing her throat and thought nothing else of it and continued to watch TV.

“Well, there goes that plan.” Kaiya thought. “I thought that would entice him to ask me what was wrong or something. But it just looked like there was something in my fucking throat.”

She squeezed Tyler’s arm into frustration and started to turn red. He noticed that she was progressively squeezing his arm tighter and tighter. He started to wonder if there was a problem or if she was just cold or something like that.

“Hey, are you alright?” Tyler said trying not to sound concerned. “You’re squeezing my arm pretty tight, are you cold?”

Kaiya realized what she was doing and quickly released the pressure off of Tyler’s arms. She released herself from Tyler’s arm and sat up and started blushing uncontrollably. She knew that she had messed up whatever conversation started that she wanted to have.

“Umm... yeah, I’m alright...” She muttered quietly trying to hide her embarrassment. “Just was thinking about some things, you know?”

Now that she got that out of the way and finally said what she wanted to say, Tyler could confirm in his head she was indeed wanting to say something. But just like Kaiya, he didn’t want to engage in a conversation if there wasn’t one, to begin with. He felt that if he had asked her if she was alright when she cleared her throat and that she said that she was doing just that, he would have felt a level of embarrassment. But at the same time, he had never been in a situation like that before, so no one could really blame him for asking the question. Because of his mind, he saw someone clearing their throat for two reasons. Firstly, that person had something in their throat. Or secondly, that they wanted to say something, however, they didn’t know how to start the conversation. So, they would clear their throat to try to engage the person that they wanted to talk to and have that person initiate the conversation.

However, it could also be the fact that both Tyler and Kaiya had major anxiety when talking to people and were socially awkward. Kaiya actually was diagnosed with a social anxiety disorder at one point in her life, so it wasn't too big of a surprise that she had difficulty starting a conversation. Tyler, on the other hand, wasn't diagnosed with having any mental disorders, however, he wasn't tested for them either. So, he didn't know if he had anything truly wrong with him or not.

"I see, what were you thinking about?" He said.

Kaiya fiddled with her hands. She was nervous about what Tyler's reaction would be to the question that she wanted to ask him. However, she was also worried about the potential outcome of whatever he was going to say. Whether that would be positive or negative, she wasn't ready to hear what he was going to say. But she knew that she needed to hear the answer. Maybe if he could recall what Andrea told him prior to him leaving then maybe she could figure out something.

"W—well, I was thinking about what your last conversation was like with Andrea before you left." She stuttered. "Maybe we can go off of that and maybe get somewhere."

Tyler wasn't all too concerned about that question. In fact, he had been anticipating that question for the longest time at that point.

"Well, to make a long story short; I went to her house and told her that I was back to talk Desi with me. However, she told me that wasn't going to give her to me. I asked her why, and she said that I wasn't a legal guardian or qualified to take care of her. Then I saw that Desi was standing in the doorway behind Andrea and that's when I said that I would go to the police about her and that I knew that she had been abusing Desi. She asked me how, and I said that she kept me away

from her for the longest time. Then the last thing she said was that if I left and went to the police that I would never see Desi ever again.” He said.

“So, you had a feeling that Andrea was abusing your sister?”

“Yes, I did. I just couldn’t prove it. But I had a great feeling about it. Because think about it, she literally left for years and didn’t tell anyone. And then I happened to find her years later, and that’s what she tells me? God knows what she did to Desi.”

“Wait a minute. Did you say that she left without saying anything?”

“Yeah, why?”

Kaiya started to piece the puzzles together. It was starting to make sense. The dreams and flashbacks that Tyler had weren’t a farce, they were actually true. There was no way that she could’ve just up and disappeared without a trace and—

“Wait, where was the last place you said she was when you spoke to her?” She asked.

“She was at her house...”

Tyler was very confused about what Kaiya was trying to get at.

“Why does that matter?” Tyler thought. “What is she supposed to do with that information?”

Kaiya prepared to ask herself a very important question because she knew that it would solve the situation. At least, that was what she hoped would happen.

“S—so, you found her at her house, right?” She asked.

“Yes.”

“In the dream, you said that when you woke up that no one was there, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Do you think that the dream is connected to what happened when you last visited and confronted Andrea?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Even Kaiya was starting to second guess herself, what she was saying wasn’t really making much sense. How could the dream and flashbacks coincide with reality? That was until it hit Kaiya.

“Do you think it was possible that Andrea could’ve gone back to her house at any point after you were taken away by the police?” She asked.

“It could be possible, yes.”

“Better yet, did she say that she was dating anyone or living with anyone else?”

Tyler started to remember Andrea mentioning a boyfriend that she had.

“Yeah, she said that she had a boyfriend that would occasionally visit or stay at her house, but she never gave us a name for him or where he lived.” He said.

It could’ve been possible that Andrea could have moved to where the boyfriend lived for the time being while Tyler was away and then when Tyler was gone, she went back to her house.

“We need to find out who her boyfriend is and where he lives.” She said with a determined expression on her face.

“There’s just one problem though,” Tyler said. “I don’t know his name, she never mentioned him at all.”

“Did he ever come over to see her at any point?”

“Maybe like once or twice, but I never really paid attention.”

That was when it dawned on Tyler.

“Wait, I did remember seeing him and actually meeting him one time because Andrea was so happy that he came to see her.” He said.

“Do you remember his name? Or what he looked like?”

“Uhh... J—Jake? J—Jackson? J—Josh, maybe? I can’t remember.”

Tyler closed his eyes and tried to backtrack to when he met Andrea’s boyfriend. He remembered that he was sixteen and that her boyfriend had come over.

Tyler remembered sitting down on the couch when Andrea walked upstairs with some random guy. He remembered being excited to see whoever she was with.

“She said, ‘Tyler, this is my boyfriend [blank]. [blank], this is Tyler.’” He recalled. “Oh, what the fuck was his name? I think it was... Joseph. Yeah, it was Joseph.”

He looked at Kaiya and was for certain that Joseph was Andrea’s boyfriend that he remembered meeting the only thing was that he needed to find him and then at that point, he would find Andrea.

Chapter 9 – Knowledgeable

It was only a matter of time for them to find Joseph because both Tyler and Kaiya knew that finding him was their only chance to finding Desi. They tried to get as much information on Andrea as possible, but there wasn't anything about her that signified anything important. Actually, there was nothing on the internet about Andrea at all. It was like she was a complete mystery.

“We have to go to the police about this,” Kaiya said. “Maybe they'll know something about this Joseph guy.”

“Yeah, you're right,” Tyler said. “I'm just concerned that they'll get to him before we do.”

“But there is one thing we could do.”

“What is that?”

“We can try social media and try to see if she is on there. It's a longshot, but it's a possibility.”

“Can't hurt to look, but I'm not sure that we'll find anything on her.”

Kaiya pulled her laptop and scowled the internet to see if she could find anything on Andrea and maybe find out something about her boyfriend. She eventually stumbled upon what looked to be an old social media account that Andrea had a long time ago, and it showed that she had posted a picture of her and some random guy. The caption read, “Having a great time with a special guy!”.

Surely, that had to mean something. The only thing was that it didn't say what the guy's name was, but the picture did show what the guy looked like.

“Does that look familiar to you at all?” Kaiya asked pointing at the guy in the picture.

Tyler examined the picture thoroughly to see if the guy in the picture looked like Joseph. He again backtracked through his memories of what little he remembered on Joseph and remembered catching a good glimpse of him.

“That's not him, that's someone else,” Tyler said disappointedly. “Based on her personality, it looked like she ran through boyfriends left and right.”

“Well, that is on lead gone up in flames. Now, what the fuck do we do?” Kaiya said frustratedly.

“We might have to go to the police. Maybe they'll know something.”

They both grabbed what they had on Andrea and went to the police in the hopes that something good could come out of the situation. As they were driving, Tyler couldn't help but remember that time that he was driving with Andrea and that they got into an accident. He remembered what happened, but also had some memory loss because he hit his head pretty hard in the accident. There wasn't any specific reason why he was remembering the accident until he remembered seeing someone coming to help them after the accident. He recalled it to be Joseph, and it was safe to assume according to Tyler that they were in fact heading to Joseph's house that night because Andrea wanted to show Tyler something, but he couldn't remember what it was or why she wanted to personally take him out of everyone else.

After the accident was safe to assume that she called Joseph to pick them up, however, the ambulance had already been called and that they were on their way to get them. The ambulance rescued them from the accident and took them to the hospital and they were taken care of. After they spent some time in the hospital recovering from the accident, Joseph came and picked them up because Andrea's car had been totaled from the accident. Tyler vaguely remembered the route or directions that they took to get to Joseph's house because he was still partly shaken up for the accident, his head wasn't entirely cleared from it. However, when he got there, he remembered seeing Desi, his mother, and Elise in the house. So, he assumed that they were picked up by Joseph and were taken to his house while Andrea and Tyler were in the hospital for those few days. Tyler couldn't really remember what the house looked like because it was all a big blur and also, he wasn't too concerned about what the house looked like because all he wanted to do was sleep off his pain.

Eventually, he got to look at Joseph while he was in his house for that time being. Since he had nothing to do besides heal from the injuries and go to school, he had plenty of time to gloss over what Joseph looked like. So, at that point it wasn't starting to come back to Tyler, he had remembered what Joseph looked like, and he vaguely remembered what his house looked like. But that was it, that was all that he could remember.

Kaiya and Tyler arrived at the police station and went up to the front desk to speak to one of the officers. They said that they had important information about an abused child and that they needed the police and the child protective services' help. At first, the officer was a little hesitant because he thought about why two young adults were coming into the precinct talking about an abused child out of nowhere since no one actually called the station to report one. But after a while, he relented and was escorted into one of the waiting areas and got on the phone to child protective

services. However, Tyler was insistent on finding out who Joseph's real identity was and where they could find him.

He walked up to the officer's desk and knocked on the window to get his attention.

"Can I help you?" The officer asked

"Yes, hello. My name is Tyler Wilson, I was one of the people that mentioned to you about the abused child."

"Yes, how can I help you?"

"I was wanting to know if you could help me identify a man who I think may be involved in the situation."

"And who might this man be if I may ask?"

"Well, I don't have a full name, but I do have a first name if that will help or mean something."

"It won't be much because I don't have the last name, but I can read off the list of last names if that will help you."

"That could work, however, as I said, I don't know or remember his last name. But I do know what he looks like."

The officer swung his chair around to face Tyler.

"You know what he looks like?" The officer asked.

"Yes, I do."

“Well, give me a first name and a description of what he looks like, and I’ll pull a list of people that fit that description and I’ll show them to you, and you tell me if you that person, will that work with you?”

“Yes, that will work perfectly. Thank you.”

Tyler gave the officer Joseph’s first name and a brief description of what Joseph looked like. The officer wrote down the information that Tyler gave, then he thanked him and swung his chair back to his computer to search for Joseph.

Tyler was somewhat relieved that the officer was so willing to help him, however, the distrust of the police still sat in the back of Tyler’s mind. He was still partly hesitant to trust the police, especially after what happened at the child protective services’ building just a few days prior. He was concerned that that same situation was going to happen again and that all the effort and work that he and Kaiya put into finding Andrea and Desi would have been for nothing if Tyler couldn’t get the help that he needed from the police.

Tyler went back to Kaiya was and sat down next to her.

“You alright?” She said rubbing his shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m alright I guess.” He said. “I’m just a little stressed out.”

“About what?”

“About the fact that I just gave the police officer and brief description of Joseph and that he said that he’ll look into it and give me a picture of multiple people that have the name Joseph and that fit the description that I gave him.”

“Okay, so what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know if the officer just thinks I’m talking out of my ass and just wasting his time, or if he is going to through with what he says and will look up Joseph’s name and description.”

“I’m sure that he’ll do it. I don’t why he wouldn’t.”

She reached over and proceeded to kiss him on the cheek. Something that she wanted to do for a while, but she just didn’t have the confidence to do so. She wasn’t even sure why she did what she did; especially in a public setting like the police station, but she felt like it was necessary and that maybe it would sort of relax Tyler or ease his stress.

“Why did you do that?” Tyler said blushing.

“Umm... I don’t know, it was an urge, I guess. I’ve been meaning to do it for a while now, but I just didn’t have the confidence to do so until now. Probably because I was scared that you would find me weird or something or proceed to judge me harshly because of something as extreme and intimate as that.” She said laughing nervously.

She too was also starting to blush very much, also like a bright red. But she was just as nervous as Tyler, but she knew that she couldn’t show because it was time for her to be strong for him and herself.

Tyler noticed that she was blushing and was slowly starting to tear a little. He moved her hair from the side of her face and tilted her head so that she was looking at him. He could see that her eyes were slowly turning red because she was starting to cry. But he couldn’t hear her because she was slowly weeping to herself.

“Why are you crying?” He said concerned.

“Because you’re probably judging me right now.” She said with her voice breaking. “Imagine it, a girl kissing a guy on the cheek, and she is the one that ends up crying. Can you believe that? I’m sorry that you have to see me like this, I’m usually better in situations that aren’t this. Do you think that I’m wei—”

Tyler interrupted her with a kiss on the lips, he knew that he needed to comfort her, and he felt that that was the way to do that. He just like her was afraid to make the first move because of the potential judgment and sheer embarrassment if the opposite party pulled away if the first move was made. And Tyler knew that, but he still tried it anyway and hoped for the best. And to his surprise, she was very receptive to the kiss. She caressed the side of his face with a soft touch, something that she had been waiting to do for the longest time with someone that she cared about. And she felt that she somewhat cared about the person kissing her at that moment.

Tyler pulled away and looked into Kaiya’s eyes to see that she was still crying softly, but she was smiling after the fact.

“In case you’re wondering, no, I don’t think you’re weird.” He said brushing her hair.

She smiled and started to feel better about herself.

“What compelled you to do that?” She said.

“Well, you said that it felt like the necessary thing to do. And well, I felt that what I did was the necessary thing to do, so I went for it and got something in return.”

At that moment, there was some kind of happiness. However, there was still an important matter at hand. Desi was still missing, and Andrea still had her, and she was missing as well.

The officer came out to where Tyler and Kaiya were and asked them to come with him.

They followed him into a room where he sat them down and discussed with them what he found.

“So, I did some searching and I found a few people that represent Joseph based on the description you gave me.” He said. “What I have here are a few pictures of Josephs fitting the description. What I need for you to do is to look at them and then identify the one that you remembered from your memories.”

“Alright, I can do that,” Tyler said nervously.

“Alright, here we go. Take your time looking at these.”

The officer laid out five pictures of Josephs that fitted the description that Tyler gave him. Each of them resembling different small features about themselves.

Tyler looked long and hard at the pictures. Examining each one very carefully as well as trying to backtrack to see if the description that he gave the officer was the correct one.

After about five minutes of recollection and looking at the pictures, Tyler put his finger on the one that he thought was Andrea’s boyfriend.

“Is this the guy?” The officer asked.

“Yes, that’s him.” He said.

“Alright, give me a moment to let the other officers know.”

“Do you think you can do one thing for us if you don’t mind?”

“What’s that?”

“Do you think you could give us the location of that Joseph if that’s possible?”

“Why do you need his location?”

“I was concerned that my sister was there, and we wanted to see if she was there, my mother also.”

“If I find the address, I’ll give it to you.”

“Alright, thank you so much,”

The officer walked out of the room and went to go back to his computer to put the information about Joseph into the database and to alert the other officers about him and the situation.

“Do you think that he’ll actually give us the address?” Kaiya asked concerned.

“I hope so,” Tyler said. “We’re already so close, so he might as well.”

A few minutes passed and the officer walked back into the room that Tyler and Kaiya were sitting in.

“Alright, I got the address for Joseph.” He said handing them a piece of paper with an address on it.

“Great! Thank you!” Tyler said.

“I also called a few officers to head to that location to speak to Joseph and whoever is at the location. If you do happen to go there for any reason, proceed with caution, and if you see anything or get there before the police do; you wait for them to show up.”

“Alright, we can do that.”

“Alright, you’re free to go.”

The officer opened the door and walked them out into the common area.

“Well, we need to hurry. Hopefully, we can get there before the police can.”

“Right.”

Chapter 10 – Retribution

Tyler and Kaiya made their way to Joseph's house hoping to find Desi and Andrea there. Since the journey was across the city in a remote place pretty far away from civilization, they were concerned that no one could find Joseph's house if something were to happen to Desi. The car ride to his house was a quiet one, there was so much anxiety and fear that was running through both Tyler and Kaiya's heads. However, Kaiya was mostly concerned about Tyler because she wasn't sure of what he would do if he found Andrea at Joseph's house. Would he kill her? Would he talk to her? Would he demand answers as to why she left without saying anything? There were so many things and scenarios running throughout her mind and it was starting to eat away at her. She couldn't understand why she was feeling like that. But she knew that she had to remain calm because if she were to panic or act out of character then that would cause Tyler to worry about her, and that was something that she didn't want him to worry about.

Tyler noticed the look of concern on Kaiya's face. In her mind, she didn't want him to worry about her. However, in his mind, he was worried about both her and his sister. It was unknown why he suddenly cared for Kaiya, maybe it was because they shared a kiss. Or maybe it was because they literally shared a living space with each other for the last six months. All of those factors played into Tyler's concern for her. But at the same time, he couldn't help but feel something toward her as well.

"Just so you know, I don't know what is going to happen when we get there, but I just thought I'd say thank you for your help and that if anything helps to me, just know that I really liked you," Tyler said out of nowhere.

What Tyler just said really shocked Kaiya, she wasn't him to say something so out of the ordinary. What was the reason for him saying that? Did he think that he was going to die? Did he think he was going to get arrested after the fact? She was so perplexed by his statement. But she couldn't deny the feelings that she had towards him either.

"What compelled you to say that?" She asked confused.

"I just felt like saying it." He said. "As I said, I don't know what's going to happen when we get there. So, I thought I would express my feelings and gratitude."

"Wow, well, thank you. Don't mention it, I enjoyed helping you. And the feeling's mutual."

"Oh, you have feelings as well?"

"Yeah, kind of. Even though we've only known it for a while, I still feel like we could be something more."

"Like a relationship, something more?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Both of them were blushing, they both had a feeling that the topic of a relationship would come up eventually. But since that they were some distance away from Joseph's house, they had something to talk about and discuss on the way. The thought of having a relationship and being about to save his sister and mother really excited Tyler. He never would've expected to get that far in life. But he still had one problem left to face, his sister wasn't with him nor was his mother, so he still had something to worry about it.

“What do we do if they’re not there?” Kaiya asked. “Do we wait for the police and explain the situation to them?”

“Well, that’s an option. If they’re not there, then we talk to them about finding Andrea and going from there. Because she would obviously have to know something about what’s going on and why she did what she did.”

“Should we have mentioned Andrea to the police as well?”

“I didn’t think to do that when I originally spoke to the officer at the station. I was more concerned about finding Joseph than anything else, to be honest.”

“Well, that’s fair, I guess. At least we’ve exhausted this lead and then can go further and try to find Andrea herself.”

“Yep, sounds good to me.”

The thought of Andrea not being at Joseph’s house was a prominent possibility. But it was the only lead that they had, and they needed to see for themselves.

The closer that they got to Joseph’s house, the more Tyler started to get anxious about what could happen. What if they weren’t there? Where could they have gone if they weren’t there? Tyler felt himself starting to have a mental breakdown because of all the worry and stress, but he tried to compose himself and not show that he was nervous and about to lose his mind.

There was one thing that Tyler wanted to ask Kaiya before they got to Joseph’s house. And it was a question that was fresh on both of their minds.

“So, since we both have feelings for each other? Would you like to make it official?” He asked nervously.

Kaiya smiled softly and started to blush a little bit.

“Yes, that would be nice.” She said.

So, that was one hurdle that was completed. The last thing was Desi and Andrea.

Twenty minutes had passed, and Tyler and Kaiya arrived at the location given by the police officer. They drove up to the house and saw that there were no police officers present, which was a little alarming to the both of them because they expected the police to be there before they got there.

They got out of the car and slowly walked up towards the house. The house looked as if it had been ransacked by someone or a group of people. The windows were broken, there were vines growing on the sides of the house. There was a little shed off to the left behind the house.

“Do you think anyone is here?” Kaiya said quietly.

“I don’t know, hopefully, Andrea is here.”

They walked to the front door and knocked on it.

There was no response.

“Huh, that’s weird. Surely, someone’s here because there’s a car outside.” Tyler said.

He knocked on the door again.

There was no response.

“Okay, what’s going on?” He said.

He grabbed the doorknob to try to open the door and saw that the door was unlocked.

“What the--?” He managed to say.

He pushed the door back to see something that he had never seen before in his life.

The walls were covered in blood, the windows were completely shattered. Glass was everywhere, it looked like a total nightmare crime scene in that house.

Tyler started to have those intrusive thoughts as he noticed the bloodied scene. He started to see the bodies of Andrea and Elise face down in a pool of blood.

“Oh my God...” Tyler said grabbing his head. “I—I... what the fuck is this?”

“Are you alright?” Kaiya asked. “You’re grabbing your head.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just had a very bad thought again.”

“What was it about?”

“It basically depicted this entire scenario, but there are no bodies that we can see so far.”

They stepped further into the house and looked around to see that there was writing on the walls.

“You did this to me! I can’t live like this... I hate you.”

That writing was covered in blood, but the question was whose blood was it?

They continue into the hallways where they saw more writing on the walls covered in blood. Then Tyler stepped on something hard.

“What the--?” He said.

He kneels to see that he had stepped on a body that was covered in blood. Upon further examination, he saw that it was Elise’s dead body.

“Holy shit!” Tyler said jumping back in terror. “What the fuck??”

“What?? What?? What’s wrong??” Kaiya exclaimed.

“That’s Elise’s body. She’s dead.”

“Wait, what? That’s her? How did she--?”

Kaiya looked up to see another body laid dormant in the hallway.

“Who’s that?” She asked pointing at the body.

“Who? Where?”

‘Right there at the end of the hall.’

Tyler got up and walked over to the body and saw that it was Joseph’s dead body, he had stab wounds all over his body and his eyes had been ripped out.

“This absolutely disgusting...” Tyler said covering his nose. “Who could’ve done this?”

He went back to Elise’s body to examine it and found that she too had stab wounds all over her body. However, the difference between her body and Joseph’s body was that she had a sharp rod that was impaled through her skull.

“Whoever did this, is a sick individual,” Kaiya said. “Or has something wrong with them.”

“You’re telling me.”

They continued into the house and stumbled upon a closed door. They weren’t sure of what to do about it. Whether they should leave it closed or investigate it. However, they already saw two dead bodies, so they took that they might as well open the door to see what was on the other side of it.

They braced themselves and opened the door, but no matter how much they braced themselves, they couldn’t prepare themselves for what they saw.

“Oh, my God...” Kaiya said in total shock.

They saw Andrea’s body lying face down in the middle of the room. When they flipped her body over, they saw that her eyes were ripped out of their sockets, her body had stab wounds all over it and her face had been mutilated like someone bashed her face in with a solid object. And just like Elise, there was a solid sharp rod that was impaled into her skull, except that rod was where her right eye should’ve been. Her clothes were torn off and she looked like she had been laid dormant for days. Her body was starting to decompose.

“What happened here?” Tyler asked quietly. “Who could’ve done this?”

The person that he wanted to ask about what she did and why she did what she did was dead. So, he actually could never get an answer as to why she did what she did. That upset Tyler because the question remained of where Desi was and where was his mother.

“S—surely, t—they have to be here,” Tyler said.

“T—that could be true, but where could they be?” Kaiya asked nervously.

Tyler stood up and walked to the other bedroom in the house and open the door to see that his mother was lying in the bed.

“Mom!” He said running over to her. “Are you alright??”

He listened for a heartbeat, but he couldn’t make one out.

“You’re not dead, right? You can’t be dead...” He said tearing up. “Please, don’t be...”

He was now starting to cry, he just realized that after looking for his mother for six months, that she was dead. And there was nothing that he could’ve done to prevent it.

“Where is Desi?” He said. “I have to find her.”

He rushed out of the house and fell to the ground and vomited. He couldn’t believe what he had just seen. Who could’ve done something so vile and horrific? The final question remained of where was Desi and if she was safe?

Tyler stood up and walked around the house looking for her.

“Desi! Desi!” He called out. “Where are you?? It’s me, Tyler! Please if you can hear, say something!”

He couldn’t find her anywhere. Then he saw that he didn’t check the shed that was behind the house, and he had to brace himself for whatever he was going to see.

He walked over to the shed and took one deep breath and knocked on the door.

“Desi? Are you in there?” He said quietly. “It’s okay. I’m here now, you’re safe.”

No response.

“Alright, I’m opening the door.”

He slowly opened the door.

“Desi—”

His body went completely numb.

“Oh, no. No. No. NO!!!” He screamed.

He saw Desi’s body swinging from a noose attached to the ceiling of the shed. Her hands were covered in blood and her hair had been cut and ripped as she had been in a fight.

“Desi!” He called to her.

She was barely breathing, and she slowly looked up at Tyler.

Tyler now in tears rushed into the shed and tried to pull her down from the noose, but the noose’s knot was too tight. And to add to that, Desi’s arms and wrists were cut as if she intentionally cut herself in case the noose didn’t kill her.

“Hold on! I’m going to get you down from there!” He said trying to find something to cut her down with.

He eventually found a knife and quickly started cutting at the rope, but the knife was too dull for him to cut it at a fast enough rate. He was cutting the rope as fast as he could, but as he was doing so, Desi was slowly asphyxiating from how tight the noose was. Eventually, he was

able to cut through the rope and both Desi and Tyler fell onto the floor of the shed. Both of them lying in a pool of Desi's blood. Tyler couldn't believe what he had just seen.

"Desi, d—d—did you...?" He tried to say.

Desi barely managed to nod her head as she laid on her brother's chest slowly dying.

"I...I...I—I'm sor...ry..." She managed to say as her eyes were filling up with tears.

"It's okay, Desi..." He said trying to hold back tears. "You're safe now. I got you."

He rubbed her hair out of her face and rested her head on his shoulder and held her.

"I...I...I lo...ve... you... Ty—Tyler." She said quietly.

"I—I—I love you too, Desi." He managed to say behind a face full of tears.

He kissed her on the forehead and held her tightly in his arms until her final breath.

"I love you... Desi. And... I'm so sorry..."