

Copyright Statement and Disclaimer

Copyright©2019 by C. Darnell

These stories are purely fiction. All the names, characters, incidents, and businesses are products of C. Darnell's imagination and used in a fictitious manner.

All rights are reserved. These stories are protected and may not be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the express and written permission of the writer and owner, C. Darnell.

Table of Contents

1. Simon Says Mukbang.....Page 3
2. Teach One, Save One.....Page 24
3. Rituals of the Wretched...Page 54
4. The U Scorpii.....Page 78
5. Numb and Void.....Page 149
6. Steps and Stones.....Page 181
7. The Jerikans.....Page 218

Season and Us: Simon Says Mukbang

“You never know what you’re going to get,” is a saying that seems to describe OH’s weather conditions on any particular day. But from a meteorologist’s point of view, October 24, 2025, was a phenomenon that they described as “one for the books”. Gabby gets out of the shower and listens to the morning news as she prepares for work. Gabby and her husband Carter live in a small OH town and have 2 boys: Jeremiah whose 6 and Marvin who is 3. Carter has already left for work so Gabby has the task of dropping Marvin off to daycare and driving Jeremiah to his second-grade class at school. She listens to the newscaster get animated as he sometimes does whether it’s for popularity or when he actually, has a favorable forecast to report. As she grabs different items that the kids need before heading to the car she hears the newscaster mention

clouds in an extremely animated manner. She runs back to grab an umbrella for what she thinks could be rain.

Gabby works at a local grocery store and is usually on time if the morning goes without incident. As she backs up into the street she immediately notices quite a few people out on their lawns recording and pointing up at the sky. She slows down and takes the time to look up at what had everyone so captivated. She immediately hit the brakes and got out of the car leaving...skid marks in the street. The clouds were black and gray...rolling like great waves of water over each other giving the appearance of what had only been described in the bible as the apocalypse. She could see the clouds form what looked like oddly shaped animals or distorted faces. The clouds brought forth fascination and fear but they were also hypnotic. Even though they were in the sky they seemed to come down and surround her...leaving her oblivious to whatever going on in real-time. These feelings seemed to dissipate as quickly

as the clouds did. In today's society, its instinct to grab your phone and start recording any image before it's forever gone, so Gabby captures the last moments of the phenomenon before the sky starts to change and the sun reemerges. As she drops the children off everyone is talking about the strange occurrence and sharing the information they had learned about it. Jeremiah's teacher shared that the strange formation of clouds was called Asperatus Clouds. She had seen it once before growing up in the fields of Iowa but never with the ferocity that these had...it was truly a frightening sight to behold.

Just like any other viral moment...after a few days, the phenomenon was all but forgotten and people were on to the next big story. That weekend, as Carter is watching a football game and Gabby is preparing lunch...Marvin comes into the kitchen crying. She lifts him into her arms and then sits him on the kitchen countertop, "What's wrong baby? Mommy's trying to make lunch." He tries to explain

in a way that any 3-year-old would, “Simon mommy...I don’t like Simon. Simon says die.” Gabby asks, “Who is Simon, sweetheart?” As she gets a napkin to wipe Marvin’s tears...then Carter answers her question from the living room recliner, “It’s some new weird kid video or show that Jeremiah wanted to watch.” Gabby reassures her son, “You must have misunderstood sweetheart...it’s just a kid show.” Carter turns his attention back to the football game for a moment but then back to Gabby, “It’s some guy in a costume like Barney or something that eats different meals and tells the kids stories. You know that Mukbang thing...but for kids, I guess.” Gabby thought that sounded simple enough and picks Marvin up to go see what had him so upset.

She walks into the room to find Jeremiah sitting on the floor in front of the TV watching this costumed figure eating food. The costume resembled something like Goofy with floppy ears and a hat but didn’t particularly look like

any character that she was familiar with. She sat down on the bed with Marvin on her lap. Marvin covered his face adamantly refusing to look at the video...leaving Gabby to assume that the character just wasn't his cup of tea. She watches the character for a moment as it speaks, "You guys are so smart...I bet you are the smartest ones in your class. We're going to have so much fun today...listening to nursery rhymes and eating your favorite foods." She watches as he smiles and laughs at the silly character eating breakfast cereal from a bowl. As she leaves the room with Marvin still adamantly clinging to her hip...Jeremiah asks, "Mom...can I have a bowl of cereal like Simon?" Gabby declines the request, "No...I have already made sandwiches for lunch." Jeremiah stands to his feet, clenches his fists, and lets out a scream from the pit of his belly. The screams are high-pitched and painful...causing her to cover her ear with her one free hand. Gabby is in total shock because her statement certainly, didn't warrant this type of reaction...by

any means. He was the most thoughtful and gentile child anyone could ever ask for. As she tries to reason with him Carter runs from the living room in fear that someone had been hurt, “What in the world is going on in here?” Gabby tries to explain through the relentless crying, “He wants cereal like Simon but I have already made sandwiches!” Carter offers a simple solution to end the noise and allow him to watch the game in peace, “Well, just let him have the damn cereal!” Gabby gives in even though she’s still floored by the reaction and Jeremiah returns to the room with a bowl of cereal in hand. Once seated the Simon character begins to speak as if it had paused for his return, “I bet you didn’t know how powerful you were. Only Simon understands what you need and can tell you how to get anything you want. Simon says we will always be best friends.” The cereal incident was just one of the strange occurrences that would soon begin to happen to this family.

On October 27th, the following Monday...Gabby's dropping the kids off, as usual. While walking Jeremiah into the building he asks, "Mommy...I don't like the breakfast here...can I have a breakfast burrito?" Gabby looks down and responds, "Honey...if you had told me that we could have stopped to get one but now it's too late. I have to get to work." He begins to whimper...which is once again, out of his character but Gabby is adamant this time. When she arrives at his class she finds the teacher in the hallway on her cellphone in distress and the classroom full of wailing and unruly children. As Jeremiah enters the room and joins the other distraught students Gabby asks the teacher, "What is going on?" The teacher responds, "They are refusing to eat breakfast and demanding breakfast burritos." Gabby shares her experience, "He asked me the same thing but I'm on my way to work. I simply can't be late for work." The teacher informs her that one of the other parents has agreed to go get some breakfast burritos for the

whole class, “I don’t know what else to do. Someone has taught them that there’s strength in numbers...that’s for sure. Hopefully, this will calm them down but if not, I’ll give you a call.” Gabby leaves for work a little puzzled and disturbed at the same time. She calls Carter and tells him about the incident who responds with minimal concern, “Well, good for them. I always hated school food anyway. The new generation is not putting up with it!” He makes a joke of it which seems to make Gabby feel as though she was overthinking it, as well.

That next Saturday on the 1st of November, Gabby is unexpectedly called into work. She liked her weekends off but is planning a birthday party for Jeremiah on the 14th and could use the extra money for food and decorations. Jeremiah had always been the type of child that appreciated any efforts that his mom and dad made for him...which made him a joy to do things for. Gabby returns home about 3:30 pm that Saturday afternoon and finds Carter napping

on the couch with the baby. She wakes him from a sound sleep and asks, “So, what did you and the boys do all day? I’m hoping this wasn’t it.” He quickly defends his lazy day at home with the boys, “Hey, I wanted to go out to the park but Jeremiah didn’t want to go. He just wanted to watch his favorite videos.” Gabby reprimands him, “But you are the adult. There’s no way he would have chosen to sit in the house watching videos all day...rather than going outside and play.” She calls to him, “Jeremiah...momma’s home.” Carter gets up to kiss Gabby on the cheek and go through the grocery bags she has brought inside.

Jeremiah then emerges from his bedroom and hugs Gabby around her waist, “Hey mommy.” She bends over and kisses him on the forehead, “Hey, big boy. I can’t believe you are turning 7-years old in 2 weeks.” Jeremiah asks, “Can I choose dinner tonight?” Gabby looks at the things she had purchased from the store to cook but replies, “Well, seeing as you had to stay in the house all day

because of your dad...yes, I will let you choose dinner.”

Jeremiah suddenly runs back to his room which leaves his parents puzzled and then returns with an answer, “I want Chinese food.” Gabby and Carter look at each other expecting him to ask for pizza or a happy meal per usual...which are his favorites. Carter interjects, “Hey Bud, we were thinking along the lines of pizza or some burgers.” Gabby agrees with Carter, “Yea, let’s just get pizza tonight and maybe Chinese next week.” He looks at both of his parents and says, “But you said it was my choice. People don’t lie to the people they love. You shall not bear false witness! You shall not bear false witness!” Carter reprimands Jeremiah, “Hey Bud, don’t speak to your mom like that. Go to your room and we’ll call you when the pizza gets here.” Gabby watches him walk away and then directs her attention to Carter, “He’s never been disrespectful like that.” Carter dismisses it as nothing more than growing pains, “He’s feeling himself...is all. He’s

turning 7 in a couple of weeks and probably feels a little bolder with his words. I'll talk to him. I'm going to take a shower before dinner." Gabby says, "Ok" but still feels troubled by the outburst and particular verbiage that Jeremiah used.

On Wednesday, Gabby decides to go to a party supply store to find decorations for Jeremiah's birthday party. As she walks in she notices a store associate in a heated argument with a disgruntled customer demanding items for a Simon themed birthday party. She has a hint of desperation in her voice when explaining that her daughter will accept nothing less. The associate is sympathetic but tries to explain that he's not familiar with this Simon character. After Gabby purchases her items and leaves she notices the same woman still sitting in the parking lot. She could hear her on the cellphone frantically trying to find some Simon themed party items. Gabby approaches and asks, "So, I heard your kid is a serious Simon fan too,

huh?” The woman replies after hanging up the cellphone, “You have no idea...and I can’t find any items anywhere.” Gabby offers some suggestions, “Maybe you can contact the person directly. I think he’s fairly new...but he should have an email address or something. A lot of these video people are independent.” The woman explains her frustration in detail, “You know it’s strange because...I can’t seem to find any information on this guy at all. My daughter’s obsessed and she is not going to be happy...that’s for sure.” Gabby concurs, “I totally, get it...my son watches the videos too. I guess it’s like we were with the Beanie Baby craze, right? They’ll move on to the next thing, soon.” The woman then said, “I hope so. You may think I’m silly but Simon speaks with such positivity but it’s in a way that only a child would understand. It’s strange but I started feeling like I didn’t belong or Simon didn’t want me there.” It was confusing as to why the woman was going against her own, concerns to satisfy the

demands of a child. Gabby tries to lighten the mood, “Well, there are lots of other themes in there that girls would love. I’m sure she’ll have a good time.” They end their conversation and with these concerns in the back of their minds but Gabby’s concerns were quickly coming to the forefront.

The 14th of November soon came around and it was time for Jeremiah’s birthday party. It was an unusually warm day for that time of year so they had the party in the back yard. Gabby had decided on the Spiderman themed decorations and all the kids seemed to be having a great time. She had forgotten ice and told Carter to watch the festivities while she ran up to a corner store. When she returned she noticed that none of the kids were in the backyard like they were when she left. She asked Carter, “Where are all the kids?” Carter looked around and said, “A couple of them wanted to wash their hands so I’m assuming they all just ran inside.” She responds, “I’ll go get

them while you put the ice in the cooler.” She walked in the house expecting a group of loud, rambunctious kids running around but instead, heard nothing. The house was eerily quiet with no kids in the kitchen or bathroom. She slowly opens Jeremiah’s bedroom door to find all the children on the floor solely focused on watching a “Simon Says Mukbang” video. She looked at the TV screen to see the camera unusually zoomed in on the character’s mouth... while he was talking and eating a large bowl of noodles. The size of the bowl was almost too large to imagine one person consuming. The kids seemed to be mesmerized by his words, voice, and actions. Gabby immediately turns it off and tells the children to go back outside and enjoy the party. The children seem to redirect their attention to Gabby when one child speaks, “He will feed the hungry.” She is confused but reiterates, “Come on guys...there’s plenty of cake and ice cream outside.” They slowly start to disperse and return to the party outside. At

this point, Gabby decided that the videos may not be as harmless as she thought...even though she couldn't exactly pinpoint why. Later that night, she expressed to Carter that she was blocking the videos and if need be...she would remove the television from his room. When Carter asked the reason why...she couldn't really, explain her uneasy feelings but wanted her wishes respected. He saw no need to press the issue and agreed.

To Gabby's surprise, she didn't get much resistance from Jeremiah...about her decision to block the videos. The next Tuesday on the 19th of November, she decides to pick Jeremiah up from school. She speaks with the teacher briefly about the day's activities, "How was everything today?" The teacher responds, "It was a good day. The last hour of the day has been the quietest...and that's been going on for the last couple of days." Gabby smiles and curiously asks, "Why are they so quiet. What's going on?" The teacher folds her arms and says, "They are all watching

these ‘Simon Says Mukbang’ videos. They love it and apparently, there’s some kind of finale happening on Friday.” Gabby’s expression quickly changes, “How are the kids able to access that?” The teacher confirms, “You signed a permission slip at the beginning of the school year that permits your child to use the internet. You shouldn’t worry though...the school has very strict guidelines and blocks to make sure everything is kid-friendly.” Gabby explains her position, “I have restricted him from watching the ‘Simon Says’ videos at home.” The teacher then becomes apologetic, “Oh...had I known...I wouldn’t have allowed it. Can I ask why you don’t like it? He seems to only talk about nursery rhymes and kids’ stories. We had Mr. Rodger’s when we were coming up but you rarely see a character that all the kids’ focus on like this anymore.” Gabby struggles to explain her feelings, “I’m just not comfortable with it...so I’d appreciate your help.” The

teacher acknowledges her request, “Yes, of course, and I’ll see you tomorrow Jeremiah.”

On Friday, the 21st of November, Gabby calls Carter and tells him that she has to work late...so he would need to pick up the kids from daycare and school. Gabby finally heads home from work around 6 pm and turns on the radio in her car. She listens to a breaking news alert about apparent mass suicide attempts amongst elementary school-aged kids, across the county. The idea sounded ludicrous so she turned up the volume to hear the horrific details. The newscaster described the children watching the finale of a “Simon Says Mukbang” video in which the character tells them that they are required to drink certain liquids to visit with him in real-life. There were several reports of the children giving the liquids to their younger siblings or adding the dangerous poisons to the household beverages. He was describing what the liquids could look like and where they would likely be found...such as the

bathroom, basement or under the kitchen sink. Apparently, the Simon Says character has been grooming the children for weeks in a series of videos and is now instructing them to consume cleaning agents or other dangerous liquids in the home. The newscaster then speaks with a sense of urgency, “Please check on your children and secure anything in the home that can be deemed dangerous to consume. If they are watching this guy...turn it off and turn it off now. Call your babysitters, daycares and other parents to warn them.” Gabby then desperately tries to contact Carter on his cellphone but gets no answer. She races home to find Carter under the kitchen sink trying to fix a clog. She hysterically yells, “Carter, where are the kids? Why aren’t you answering the phone?” Carter sits up from lying on his back under the sink and responds, “Marvin is sleeping and Jeremiah has my phone...he’s playing games or something.” Gabby starts to scream...knowing that he now has access to the videos with Carter’s phone. She runs

into Jeremiah's room with Carter close behind. She burst into the room to find Jeremiah sitting on the floor and Marvin on the bed. Jeremiah is sitting with Carter's cellphone in one hand and a bottle of Drano drain cleaner in the other. He was watching the "Simon Says Mukbang" finale on his father's phone. They immediately grab the kids and rush to the nearest emergency room to have them checked for poisoning. The horrific scene at the hospital was one never to be forgotten. It was flooded with parents and their small children seeking help. The look on their faces all suggested that they were clueless as to how this could have happened. Luckily, Jeremiah hadn't consumed any of the Drano as of yet and survived the plot but some of the children were not so lucky. There was plenty of blame to go around but ultimately there would be an intense investigation on Simon, the parents, and their practices.

Each parent was interviewed separately about the videos that they allowed the children to watch and the character. Astonishingly, a lot of parents had not watched the full content of the video to see what the character's message was and other parents hadn't watched any of it, at all. These parents had allowed a person dressed in a funny costume to infiltrate their homes and their impressionable children all because he sounded and appeared to be...kid-friendly. Some of the parents had noticed that there was no clear contact information on this person...yet still allowed their children to continue watching. What was even more disturbing than the police having no name or physical description of this person...was the fact that the videos were completely gone...and untraceable. Mysteriously, they had been deleted from the internet never to be seen again and no one could explain how the videos couldn't be tracked. The police officer saw such shame in the faces of these parents who would allow a monster to convince their

children to harm themselves right under their noses and all they had to do to prevent it was...turn it off. They were preoccupied with their own lives and some used the videos as a distraction...when in all honesty, they were the ones distracted. They had failed to protect their children or even discuss the videos to learn what they were taking from it. Shame...Shame.

On the drive home from the emergency room, they listen to the radio DJ talk about the Asperatus Clouds that had formed on the first day of Scorpio Season and how the mass suicide attempt ended on the last day. Gabby then pulls out her phone and reviews the footage that she had captured on that infamous day...the 24th of October. Everyone had assumed that the apocalyptic formation had never produced a storm but now she knew that it had. This storm was Simon and had lingered over their town long enough to cause unimaginable damage and then simply moved on. As she attends the funerals of the children that

did not make it...she wonders if anyone will learn from their grave mistakes or will it be forgotten as soon as the next big story happens. In her heart, she knows Simon didn't just disappear and he's watching. Simon is waiting for his next opportunity and only a click away.

The End

2. Scorpio Season and Us: Teach One, Save One

In 1910, 2200 Marquardt Place was a beautifully designed Victorian Styled apartment building...erected in the middle of a growing community and economy in Columbus, Oh. Today, the neighborhood is almost unrecognizable due to the drastic changes over the years and the economic decline of the inner city. The buildings in this particular neighborhood were desperately in need of renovation and restoration because the vicious cycle of

decay brought poverty, crime, and despair. But just like anything else...sometimes restoration needs to start from within. So in this case, where man has neglected to restore an intended place of peace and security, nature will step in and begin its own, cleansing process. The once beautiful building stands 5 stories high with 25 apartments inside...surrounded by other apartment buildings very similar in stature and similar in impoverished elements. 2200 Marquardt Place seems to stand out amongst the properties as a haven for people displaying toxic behavior and criminal activity.

People have come and gone but sadly some people became trapped. When people became permanent fixtures in this crime-riddled neighborhood it may be due to feeling trapped mentally, financially or emotionally...but freedom comes at a price. Through the years, 79-year-old Trudy Thompson has become one of those fixtures. She faithfully stands out on the sidewalk and preaches the word of God to

the people in her building and neighborhood. She warns of the day their worlds will be destroyed if they don't make the changes to live a productive life. She has done this for at least 15 years but in the last 2 years, she has had her grandson, Samael, sitting closely and watching her sermon. Sometimes she passes out spiritual pamphlets for small donations but most of the time he just sits until she is done. Even though she speaks directly to the needs of people and directly from the bible...her sidewalk sermons are ignored or dismissed as a crazy old woman panhandling for change. She shares the good word and if called upon, a hot meal or bath for someone that may be in need. Her dedication sometimes puts her in danger of being robbed or hurt but she is compelled to promote change.

She and her grandson head downstairs for her daily sermon on October 25, 2024. Unfortunately, they weren't surprised to find the elevator was out of order. They begin to make the journey downstairs from the 2nd floor by using

the stairway when they come across the janitor, Raymond. Raymond was sitting down finishing off a bottle of liquor and wreaking of alcohol...like it wasn't the first one of the morning. She calmly addresses him, "I hope you're on the way to fix the elevator. Even though, in your condition, you may do more harm than good." Raymond puts the liquor bottle in his inside coat pocket and drunkenly greets her, "Good morning, Sister Trudy. I'll get to it as soon as I can but right now, I'm on my way to the basement to get some insecticide for the building. Everyone is complaining about these bites or sores all over their bodies...it's probably another infestation of bedbugs...so that elevator will have to wait. I can do your apartment first...if you want to go back and put on a sexy nightgown for me." Trudy scoffs, "Don't talk like that. Have some respect for yourself and this child." He responds in an unbothered fashion, "Well, why isn't he in school anyway?" She explains Samael's presence, "This child is homeschooled and can teach you a

thing or two about manners. You should accept Jesus into your heart and your life.” Raymond sarcastically responds as he walks down the stairs, “I’ll put that on my list along with the other 100 things I have to do today.” She shakes her head as they watch him stagger off with his tools.

As she gets downstairs and begins her sermon in the book of revelations, her neighbor, Theresa comes out of the building with her two daughters. Theresa greets her and asks her, “Hey Sis Trudy...do you have a good word for us this morning?” It may have been asked in a jokingly way but Trudy is very serious when answering, “You must surrender yourselves to the word of God...before it’s too late.” Their conversation was interrupted by Theresa’s boyfriend running behind her, “Hey babe, I didn’t know you were taking the kids.” Theresa responds, “I was only going to get some milk...so they wanted to come with me.” Her boyfriend, goes in his pocket and pulls out a larger sum of money and says, “I thought you might want to go get

your nails done too or something...here take this extra money. I'll watch the girls...I don't mind." The girls cling to her but she had never had a boyfriend treat her so nice before...not even their dad. So she tells the girls to go back into the house with her boyfriend while she goes shopping. Before she leaves Trudy puts her hand on her shoulder and says, "The fruit from your womb is your reward. Don't be deceived. You must repent and accept salvation because the time is near." Theresa can't hear anything over her own, selfish thoughts of a new pair of heels and fancy outfits for the weekend, so she promptly leaves to go shopping.

Trudy continued to preach the Word of God late into the night...even later than usual and with more intensity. Samael touches her on the arm and says, "No one today...maybe tomorrow." So they pack their bibles and pamphlets to head inside. Once they are back inside the apartment, Trudy warms up dinner while Samael goes to the bathroom to wash his hands. All the bathroom windows

on that side of the building overlook the alley down below. There seems to be a ruckus going on down below that can be heard from several of the apartments from above. The disturbance involves 2 police officers struggling with a middle-aged man. The officers manage to get the man into handcuffs but then continue to beat on him until he collapses on the ground. The man was repeatedly kicked in the ribs until one of the officers looked up to see a very tall man standing in one of the windows. The officer makes eye contact with the man and then quickly alerts the other officer that they are being watched. Sure, the whole area was bad but there was no doubt that this was one of the worst buildings on the block...including the police officers that were paid to protect the tenants. The elevators reeked of urine and the hallways smelled of death. There was a clear presence of despair upon entering the building that was undeniable and hard to forget.

They uncuff the man and leave him lying in the alley. They were more concerned with making sure no one had recorded the beating or would dare report it. Based on the layout of the building they quickly make their best guess as to which apartment their voyeur was watching from and entered the building. Trudy is unaware of what the police officers could possibly, want and answers the knock at the door. The police officers barge past her and question her about who else is in the apartment. She questions their actions, “What’s this all about? There’s no one here except Samael and me.” The officers look at the young child and say, “Don’t play with us old lady, there was a very large man in your window moments ago.” She is adamant, “You have the wrong apartment. There is no one here but me and this child. You cannot come in here and harass me like this.” After a brief search of the apartment, they leave and talk with each other in the hallway. The first officer says, “Are you sure it was this

apartment?” The other officer responds, “I’m positive. She knows something or why else would she lie about the guy being in the apartment?” The first officer develops a plan...just in case, “Ok, let’s do some research and then return with a warning. If there was someone else in there...they’ll get the message.”

The next day, the 26th of October is a rainy day but that doesn’t deter Trudy from reaching out to passersby with a powerful message of redemption. She meets Raymond in the hallway as he has just finished repairing the elevator and he says, “Alright, Sister Trudy, I just finished the elevator so you don’t have to take those stairs today.” He rambles on as he picks up his tools and places them back in the toolbox, “Now, I have to head to Ms. Wagner’s apartment. That old hag is saying her sink is running red water like blood. She said all her fish and her cat are dead after drinking it. She has always been a little crazy but there’s never a dull moment in this building. ”

Trudy quietly comments before the elevator doors close completely, “Maybe, the building itself is crying out for change.”

Due to the heavy rain, passersby were few and far in between but soon, a resident named Cookie came prancing by in a very revealing dress and stilettos. Cookie was a prostitute that lived in one of the one-bedroom apartments on the 1st floor. Samael is sitting by the entrance out of the rain but still within earshot of the sermon. As she approaches, Trudy then directs her message toward her, “You can wash your sins away. Your body is a temple, holy and sacred...you must treat it as so.” Cookie feels as though Trudy needed more advice than her at that moment and responds, “Sister Trudy, get out of this rain and go home. You can save some souls tomorrow.” Trudy pleads with her, “Only if you come with me. We can all go up to my apartment and talk about you giving your life to Christ. You must listen to me.” Cookie decides to let her in on

some pertinent information, “Maybe you should worry about yourself. Two crooked cops have been asking questions about you. They seem to think you have some guy stashed in your apartment and they want to talk to him.” Samael taps Trudy on the arm and asks, “Do you have one?” Trudy tries to persuade Cookie again before packing up for the night, “I’m not worried about them. I’m worried about you...so won’t you even consider coming up and listening to the word...please.” Cookie gracefully declines the invitation and heads into the building. She knows Sister Trudy doesn’t mean any harm but she had other pressing issues upon her, “Maybe another time...we’ll sit and talk all about salvation.” Trudy looks over at Samael feeling defeated and says, “Maybe tomorrow.”

The next day, on the 27th, the sky was still cloudy but there was no rain. She starts her sermon earlier than usual like a race against time. Her faith is renewed and she

feels optimistic that someone will receive her message. Her voice echoed between the buildings...singing the praises of salvation and warning about the consequences of sin.

Raymond pulls up in front of the building in a maintenance truck with a co-worker. As they pass Trudy she listens to Raymond explain the plumbing issues, “It’s the damndest thing...it was only one apartment yesterday but today every apartment is backed up with this bloody looking water in the toilets and sinks. I posted notes on the doors that they need to go buy water until we can figure this out.” The gentlemen carry plumbing tools into the building when 16-year-old Garcia comes out with his 4 friends. Four 16-year-old boys hanging out should be the most harmless thing in the world unless they are known for carrying guns and robbing people like these were. They brandished bandanas and openly smoked weed but Trudy showed no fear...she spoke to Garcia, who she had known since he was 9-years-old, “Garcia, I was hoping I could talk to you. I know how

hard it must be coming up in today's world as a teenager but I want you to know the path to righteousness is not as hard as you might think." Garcia doesn't want to be rude but he's anxious to hang out with his friends, "That's cool Sister Trudy but I'm hanging out with my brothers right now." Trudy speaks again, "Brothers are born in love...not adversity or violence." One of Garcia's gang members becomes offended by her statement and snaps, "What did this bitch, just say?" Garcia calms him down. "Chill man...she's just a crazy old lady quoting scriptures but she's harmless. Leave her alone." They begin to leave as a group when Trudy makes one last attempt, "Garcia, please let me explain." Garcia then snaps, as well, "Listen, I don't want to disrespect you but save that shit!" Samael walks up to her and asks, "Aren't you tired?" Trudy looks on as the foursome walk away and says, "Never...it's not over."

On the 28th of October, Trudy awoke from her sleep feeling a bit under the weather...probably from her sermon

done in the rain. As she's gathering her items for her sermon, Samael covers her shoulders with a blanket and asks, "Are you sure you should go out today? You should rest." Trudy stood to her feet with the blanket around her shoulders and responds, "I cannot afford to rest because there's no rest for the wicked." The elevator had been fixed so they patiently wait until it reaches their floor. When the doors open, they see a man sitting on the elevator floor smoking a crack stem. Trudy is outraged. She puts one foot at the elevator door to prevent it from closing and her arm in front of Samael to prevent him from entering. The man on the elevator was Nate, a well-known crack and heroin user that lived on the same floor with his girlfriend Margie, who also struggled with drugs. She fans the smoke out the elevator and yells, "Get out...we don't want the smell of death in our clothes! Your path to recovery starts with trusting in a higher power and I don't know how to make you understand that this life will take you straight to hell!"

Nate is sweating profusely while struggling to his feet and then laughs, “Unfortunately, I’ve been in hell since the first time I slammed that needle into my arm. Now, it just helps me get through the day.” Trudy is compassionate and implores him to listen, “I usually tell people that it’s never too late to change but sadly, the end is near. You must accept Jesus into your life.” Trudy removes her coat as they both notice that it’s extremely hot in the building and it wasn’t just Nate’s drug issues that had him sweating. Nate scoffs, “That shows how much you know, Sister Trudy because Jesus is already in my life. I have two grandkids in Jersey right now and when I get clean my daughter is going to let me visit them. So you see I’m going to kick this thing someday but if you really, want to help me...you could lend me \$20.” At that moment, Raymond emerges from the stairwell door asking, “Whose holding up the elevator?” Trudy realizes that she has been holding the elevator door while conversing with Nate and may have people waiting

on it, “I’m sorry...we’re heading down now.” Raymond enlightens them on the current issues in the building and suggests, “I’m telling everyone to open their windows in their apartments and go outside for cool air. Something is going on with the heat but the furnace isn’t even on. The thermostats are through the roof already...so it’s going to get hot as hell in this building and I’m very serious.”

Although, it was miserably hot in the building...it brought people outside who wanted to escape the uncomfortable temperatures. This gave Trudy an unreceptive audience while Samael looked on. During, the course of the day, the thermostat reached unimaginable heights in the building before the heat started to decline and stabilized. Raymond was forced to call in an outside company to determine the defect but the reason for the dangerously high temperatures was never determined. Around 6 pm the tenants started to go back in the building to their own, apartments unsure of if the issue had been

resolved. Once again, no one had taken Trudy's words seriously. They conversed amongst each other and listened to music as she struggled to get their attention and describe the bowels of hell. Some were even slightly offended because her description of hell was scaring their children. As everyone slowly reenters the building, Samael asks her why she continues to try, "Why do you continue this...they don't want to be saved?" Trudy refuses to believe that the people were at a point of no return and she would carry on until the very end.

On the 29th of October, Trudy makes her way out to the front of the building...determined as ever that someone will see the error of their ways. Raymond happens to be sitting on the stoop with his liquor flask in his hand after taking a drink. Trudy is repulsed by the sight, sarcastically asking, "Don't you have some work to do?" Raymond looks around and responds, "I'm actually, surprised that I don't have any repairs because this building is clearly,

falling apart. This whole week has been a nightmare...do you have anything in that bible about that? He then laughs and as he takes another drink. In a matter of minutes, another tenant comes out of the door and informs Raymond that the electricity had now gone out in the building. Raymond tightens the top on the flask and shakes his head. As he enters the building with his toolbox in hand he looks back at Trudy and says, "You'd better start praying for this building or I'll be out of a job and you'll all be homeless." He leaves before listening to her response which was, "I pray for this building every day."

This time the tenants were loitering in front of the building because there was no electricity and there would be no relief tonight. Some tenants stocked up on candles before nightfall while others used flashlights to guide themselves through the pitch dark hallways. Trudy and Samael made their way up the stairs when the piercing sound of screams and gunshots rang out. Other tenants are

panicked and struggle to get up the stairs to their apartments in the dark. Through word-of-mouth, Trudy had found out that there was a shootout between Garcia's gang and a rival gang. Sadly, one of Garcia's friends had been shot in the melee. Gun violence had become the norm in this building and things quickly went back to normal when the electricity was restored around 7 am the next morning. Once again, Raymond could give no definitive reason for the strange power outage that only seemed to affect the residents of 2200 Marquardt Place.

The next morning, on the 30th of October, Trudy is visibly nervous. She takes her place on the sidewalk as she always does and Samael sits on the stoop, as he always does. Today there is desperation in her voice but her voice is not the only one. She suddenly hears Garcia call out her name as he walks toward the building, "Sister Trudy." She turns to him and asks, "Garcia, are you okay?" He shakes his head no and responds, "I have been at the hospital all

night with my friend...but he didn't make it." He begins to cry because of his friend's tragic death and says, "I don't want to die." Trudy finally sees a chance to persuade him, "You must lay your burdens down and walk in a path of righteousness. Please do it before it's too late. I'm sorry about your friend but you still have a chance to change your ways." He responds, "Yes ma'am...I believe you." Trudy asks, "Will you do it right now?" Garcia says, "Yes but just let me go tell my mother that I'm alright. I haven't been home... and I know she's worried." She can certainly understand the worry his mother must be going through and tells him to go speak to her. He promises that he will come back to confess his sins and recite the sinner's prayer, so she awaits his return.

Early afternoon, Theresa comes walking by with tears in her eyes. Trudy notices how upset she is and offers encouragement, "If you cry out to the Lord...there will be no more pain." Theresa is frustrated and lashes out, "I don't

need a lecture right now Sister Trudy, I need a friend. There's something wrong with my girls and I think my boyfriend has something to do with it. He's telling me I'm paranoid and treats me like a queen but why is there a pain in the pit of my stomach. I don't want to chase a good man away because of stupidity. ” Trudy tells Theresa what she thinks she already knows, “A liar's speech is charming. You must rid yourself of all malice and deceit...for the sake of your children. Confess your sins now, child and accept Christ.” Theresa wipes her tears and thanks, Trudy for listening, “You're right. I'm going to put him out of my house right now. Let me go get my daughters because I just need to know that they're safe.” Trudy thanks God that Theresa is doing the right thing and hopes she sees the light. She knows how important it is to get the girls to safety and awaits her return.

Trudy was professing her love for Jesus so enthusiastically...she had to sit down and catch her breath.

As she sits and drinks water...she is immediately disturbed by the blaring sound of the rescue squad that pulls up in front of the building. The EMTs rushed upstairs with a gurney and soon returned with Nate's girlfriend, Margie, barely clinging to life. Nate walks closely behind them as they place her in the ambulance but he does not get in with her. As the ambulance drives off, Nate notices Trudy sitting and runs to her asking for prayer, "Sister Trudy, I know I've been a piece of shit but please pray for my friend. Somebody gave her a hot dose." She answers him, "Yes, I can pray for her but what about you?" He replies negatively, "God doesn't want to hear anything I have to say. Maybe, he'll listen to you." Trudy responds, "Nate, he hears everything you say and he knows what's in your heart. You must change your ways and you must do it now...the time is upon you. Fall to your knees and confess your sins...now. It's your only chance." It seems as though Nate is coming around when he notices one of his dealers

coming up the block toward the building. He takes a rag from his pocket and wipes his face. His attention is now on his dealer and says, “I just need one last fix and then I’ll get clean. I just need to clear my head before I go into rehab...I’m serious this time.” He then eases off from Trudy in the direction of the dealer...sending her into a rage. She turns to face the building and screams, “You all must fall to your knees. The last days are upon us! Confess your sins and accept Christ...if not, for yourselves...do it for your children! In the 2nd Book of Peter: Chapter 2, Verse 5 states...He did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people!”

Trudy’s sermon carried on well into nightfall until she sat exhausted in her chair. Samael finally beckons to her that it is time to go. He helps her stand to her feet as her knees are very weak and her feet have become swollen. She had relentlessly been out every day and all day begging the other co-habitants of this building to save their souls and

now her body is failing her. From the shadows in the night emerges Cookie...who takes Trudy by the other arm and helps her up to the apartment. Cookie even goes into the apartment to help Samael get her safely seated in a chair. Trudy thanks her, "I want to thank you for your help, so let me help you now. Lay your burdens down now, child." Cookie looks at Samael and asks, "Well, tomorrow is Halloween...do you have a costume?" Samael looks at her and then exits the room without responding. Reluctantly, Cookie takes her scarf off and reveals the marks around her neck. She shares some disturbing news, "Sister Trudy, I was almost killed tonight. I got into a car with the wrong trick and he tried to strangle me. I got away but now I'm just scared and tired." Trudy asked, "Did you go to the police?" She looks down and says, "They won't take me seriously...they know what I do. Everyone does." Trudy reassures her, "When you walk in the path of righteousness, there is no judgment, shame or fear. It's only 4 steps that

include...realizing that you're a sinner, repenting, confessing your sins, and reciting the sinner's prayer. You must do this now...time is of the essence." Cookie knows her life is in chaos but unfortunately, that's the only life she has ever known. She has now grown weary and wants to make a change, "Okay I'll do it. Just let me go to my apartment, take off these clothes and take a shower. I'm sure God doesn't want me in a tube top, mini skirt and pumps when I recite the prayer." Trudy makes a desperate plea, "He said to come as you are. He knows what's in your heart, child." Cookie stands up to leave, "It'll only take a moment and I'll be right back." Trudy sits in that chair and awaits her return. She waits all night, subsequently falling asleep in the chair...with her bible in hand.

The next day on Oct 31st, Trudy does not make her journey downstairs to take her usual place on the sidewalk. The voice that people had heard for years speaking the word of God was now silent. In addition to Trudy's health

failing...the weather had taken a very strange turn. The day started with the sound of a violent storm brewing overhead. This storm would be very different from any other...the patterns of rain would change to huge pellets of hail and gale-force winds that didn't seem to have a pattern at all. The winds seemed to howl as flying debris violently moved through the streets. Trudy prayed and waited for someone to come to her this time because she was just simply too weak to go out. She had hung a sign on the door addressing any trick-or-treaters in the building that might be looking for candy...that there was none. Around 6:50 pm there's a knock at the door. Trudy has been praying all day and now it appears that her prayers have been answered. Someone has decided to change their ways and truly believes in the gift of eternal life. As she becomes excited and prepares for the visitor...Samael answers the door to find two police officers standing there. It's the same two officers that had given the man in the alley a brutal beating and then

searched Trudy's apartment for that same man they believed to be a witness.

Once the door is opened they rudely barge in again...pushing Samael out of the way. The first officer addresses Trudy, "You should have known we'd be back." The other officer closes the door and directs Samael to sit down on the couch beside her. The first officer continues, "You see...we have been doing some research. We've found out that you don't have a grandson at all...you don't even have children. There's no record of this kid on your lease or registered at any school which means...you are in a lot of shit lady." The second officer adds, "We just want to know who the person was in the window that night...just for a conversation. It's as simple as that and we all go back to our normal lives." Trudy reiterates, "We are the only ones that live here...now please leave my home." The first officer takes this as a direct challenge and violently grabs Trudy by her arm, "You don't want to mess with us

Grandma...I'm warning you!" Trudy grabs her chest and slowly begins to fall to the floor. Samael runs to her side and looks up at the clock on the wall...it displayed the time 6:58 pm. The police officer begins to panic as she lays on the floor clinging to life and asks, "What's wrong with her...all I did was grab her arm?" As the police start to panic and call 911...Samael holds her hand and says, "You have done all you could do...your job is done." She looks over at him and faintly, asks, "Is it time?" Her eyes begin to roll back in her head as life leaves her body and the clock strikes 7:00 pm. The first police officer frantically asks, "Time for what...what is she talking about?" They are then confronted by a towering angel standing 12 ft high with a wingspan of 15 ft...spreading from one corner of the room to the other. They stood aghast as the angel of death, Samael, spoke to them, "Time to die!" As he did a single spin...the tips of his razor-sharp wings went across the throats of both police officers

simultaneously...decapitating them and leaving their bodies to drop to the floor. The cleansing process had now begun.

Suddenly, all the pipes in the basement and apartments of the building began to burst filling it with water. The sinks, tubs, and toilets all began to shatter and overflow simultaneously sending the tenants running into the hallways. All the doors and windows began to slam shut...trapping anyone and everyone in the building from escaping. The ambulance arrives to service Trudy but they cannot enter the building and watched in horror as the water continued to rise. The tenants cannot escape and are forced to run to higher floors as each is quickly becoming submerged. A panicked crowd begins to grow outside as people frantically try to shatter the windows or kick in the doors. They grow even more hysterical as they see none of the water is leaking from the building...it is completely contained inside and people begin to drown. The building is

flooding so fast there are only a few that make it up to the top floor trying to escape the water. The people scramble over each other and behold the sight of Samael, the Angel of Death, standing there watching them beg for their lives. They quiet down as he raises his hand and points his finger at the group. He said, “One. I gave her time to save just one of you...and all of you would have been spared but there were none!”

Cookie was one of the last people who had made it to the top floor trying to escape the rising water and now knew why Trudy was begging her to give her life to Christ...but it was too late. She had given sermons day after day with no regard for her own, safety...in hopes of her message being received. They clawed, screamed and stepped all over each other to survive but death was quick and imminent. When it was over the water began to recede...and the doors and windows mysteriously opened. Almost, every death was ruled by drowning except for

those who were decapitated or trampled in the melee. Sister Trudy...had died of natural causes and took her last breath trying to save at least one person...for the sake of all. No one had recognized the 7 biblical plagues in a modern-day fashion happening to the people in this building. In another strange occurrence, there was no record or documentation of a Samael ever living in the building and a body was never recovered.

The End

3. Scorpio Season and Us: Rituals of the Wretched

There's an endless list of health conditions that could make your heart race, palms sweat or feel a sense of nervousness. These could be the signs of some underlying health issues or something much more positive...such as

the sight of the person that you are deeply in love with. How intoxicating it must be to know that you are the object of someone's love so deep that it causes them to have such a reaction...not just emotionally but physically? In some cases, love can be compared to addiction and just like any other addiction... the less you have the more you want. So what's to become of the people in a one-sided love affair? How do you convince a person to walk away from the people that truly make them happy...no matter how toxic, dangerous and unwanted that love might be?

These are the questions that Diane Desoto wants to be answered through her research. Through court-ordered interviews...she hoped to develop a way to intervene and discourage the behaviors of potential stalkers and document it for her new book. As a newly employed forensic psychiatrist...she not only wants to protect the victims but understand what drives the offenders to the lengths they take...so they don't continue to victimize other people.

Her first three patients were Scott Waglin, Romello White and Nivea Farewell. Scott seemed to be a distinguished older gentleman in his mid-50's, who was balding but growing a goatee. He had become divorced from his wife of 20 years and found himself committing offenses that were unbecoming of a man his age. He was finding it hard to come to grips with the fact that the marriage was over and his ex-wife had moved on. He had voluntarily sought therapy with Diane to understand his behavior before it escalates to a dangerous level. Luckily, she had connected with him during the early stages of his obsessive behavior. Romello White was a bit younger at 25-years of age, with shoulder-length dreads and glasses. In this new age of technology combined with age-old obsessive behavior it wasn't long before he had been convicted of violating his restraining order and internet stalking of a female co-worker. His therapy was court-ordered and a mandatory requirement of probation. Lastly,

Nivea Farewell was a stunning brunette in her 30's weighing around 120 pounds and standing at 5'3 in height. There was a lot of personality in her little frame but the unfavorable behavior had earned her two different restraining orders from past relationships and a simple assault charge. The differences in ages, financial statuses, and races certainly went to show that there is no specific age, gender or demographic to determine who is more prone to behave this way.

On Monday morning, Diane chose to ease into the therapy sessions with simple background questions in an attempt to build trust between the patient and doctor. She knows trust is imperative for the offender to open up about what they're feeling during these acts of stalking and harassment. Her first meeting began with Scott explaining his difficulty adjusting to a single life...that he never initiated or wanted. He felt as though his ex-wife was just going through a mid-life crisis so he allowed the separation

but never expected her to go through with a divorce. He feels as though she is punishing him for the lack of attention during the marriage and wants to prove to her that he has changed. Diane presents him with the reality of the situation, “To my understanding, your ex-wife is in another healthy relationship and if you persist with the harassment...you may end up in jail or worse. Have you ever considered moving on to date someone else?” Scott responds, “I wanted to let her know that I’m still waiting for her and if I start dating...it would make me feel like it’s really, over. I don’t know if I’m ready for that.” Diane suggests a different way of thinking, “I think a lot of people associate the end of a marriage with the end of your life but what if it actually, means the beginning of something new and beautiful? Another long-lasting healthy relationship could be in your future...if you allow it. There are lots of available women out there your age...trust me I know because I’m one of them. You have to believe that you can

be happy with someone else.” She doesn’t want to press the issue but wants him to go home and just think about the possibilities. She schedules him for his next appointment in 2 weeks.

On Wednesday... the day of Romello’s scheduled appointment...she walks into the waiting room to find him focused solely on pictures on his cellphone. Because of his conviction of internet stalking, she offers a suggestion, “I’m going to ask you to leave your cellphone with the receptionist...just so I can have your complete attention.” Romello doesn’t see any legitimate reason for that request and declines, “I’d rather keep my phone with me.” Diane then offers an ultimatum, “Well, we can do this my way or I can just let the judge know that you weren’t cooperative with therapy.” When presented that way...there really, wasn’t any choice to make so he gives the receptionist his phone. According to the court documents, Romello’s love addiction was directed toward a 45-year-old female co-

worker, who did not share the attraction. Romello described how he struggled when he was first hired and the co-worker took him under her wing. She was kind when helping him, giving advice and even brought him home-made meals to work. He began his one-sided love affair from afar...but all the while working beside her every day. He began to profess his love to her online through relentless anonymous messages and fake profiles. He sent gifts without return addresses and flowers without cards. Finally, the surveillance footage at work captured the image of Romello stealing trinkets and personal information from her purse. Further investigation revealed that he had been secretly taking pictures of her and stealing trinkets from her purse to use in perverted rituals of self-pleasuring. He lost his job, charges were pressed, and a restraining order was granted.

After an in-depth discussion with Romello...his past includes living in the foster care system most of his life and a lack of communication with his family. Diane

asks, “Do you think the motherly care that she gave you was misconstrued as a romantic gesture?” Romello dismisses the notion, “She was doing things for me that a woman would do for a man...not a son. She wanted to take care of me like a man.” Diane responds, “There is quite an age difference. I think you, yourself, must have thought that a woman that age was intimidating and that’s why you kept your feelings anonymous.” He thinks about it for a moment and replied, “I suppose. I mean...I could have taken care of her.” Diane elaborates, “Well, think about it. Any man would want his flowers and gifts to be appreciated by the one he loved. Don’t get me wrong...I definitely, believe in May-December romances but the fact that you allowed her to walk around without knowledge of who was sending her the gifts sends a message that you weren’t confident in this arrangement.” His expression hints that she might be getting through to him and follows up, “Don’t respond just

yet. I want you to go home and think about what I said and we'll meet again in 2 weeks."

Diane's session with Nivea was on Friday but due to traffic, she is running about 10 minutes behind schedule. She apologizes to her for the wait and invites her into the office. However, Nivea is not so forgiving, "I think it's just rude to have me waiting around." Diane continues to be apologetic, "I understand but sometimes things are out of our control and we have to adjust." Nivea is sarcastic, "That's rich. I may need you to explain that to my next flight of passengers that complain about everything." Diane looks over her notes, "That's right...you're a flight attendant." Nivea is annoyed and uninterested in the small talk, "Can we just get to it?" Diane obliges her, "Nivea, you seem very angry. Are you like this in your relationships too?" Nivea finally decides to open up, "No. I was quite the opposite. I overcompensated and sacrificed but what did it get me? Both of those bastards cheated on me and thought

they were going to get away with it. But I showed them.”

Diane continues her line of questioning, “You mentioned that you sacrificed. What did you sacrifice?” Nivea looks at her hands and then back at Diane, “My own, happiness. I know my parents would never accept me dating a woman. They want me married, with kids and a picket fence so I tried to give them that.” Diane responds, “So in a way, you were cheating too. You were cheating them out of your complete honesty and heart. And in the end, you gave yourself grief with men that weren’t good for you and left you angry. You can’t go into a healthy relationship expecting someone to be honest...when you’re not being honest with yourself. I can identify because my parents are the same way...so we have that in common. We can give our parents all of those things but it doesn’t have to necessarily, be with a man and it doesn’t have to make you miserable.” Nivea rebuts, “Okay maybe I held back on some information in my relationships but they physically

cheated on me and I didn't...so they deserve what they got.”

Diane makes a closing statement, “Had you been living your truth...maybe they never would have been in your life to start with. If you start living your truth now...whatever relationship comes your way...you'll have the tools to let go and move on.” Once again, she tells Nivea to just think about things from her point-of-view over the next two weeks and schedule an appointment on the way out.

Over the next couple of weeks...Diane has been working later hours. Some of those hours were a distraction from her, own, complicated relationship. She had recently ended an illicit affair with a married colleague, by the name of Alfred Mason, working for the same Behavioral Health Institute. She knew the affair would be frowned upon for the obvious reasons: lack of morality and professionalism so she tried to end it. As she pulls up in her driveway...she notices that her neighbor has been pulling her trash can back to the house for her...so she places a “Thank You”

card on the windshield of his car. She checks her emails and surprisingly finds out that she has accumulated some bonus air miles in her account and she has an unsolicited, romantic email from Fred inviting her on a secret weekend get-a-way. She had tried to break it off with him but the new emails from him indicate that he finds it just as hard to let go...as she does. She was planning a vacation anyway...after her upcoming appointments and cousin's wedding...so she's looking forward to the time off. She spends so much time evaluating other peoples' relationships...she hated to admit that her own social life was in disarray. After she receives several more of his erotic messages... his invitation was accepted. She calls her sister and asks her to join her for a day of relaxation and shopping. They both need dresses for the upcoming wedding and some other sexy items for her trip.

The day of shopping proves to be productive and fun. Diane and her sister always seem to have a great time

together...whenever they can both manage a getaway. They try on some dresses and discuss their upcoming dates. In addition to Diane going away with her romantic suitor...her sister has met someone special, as well. Diane is feeling as though all the stars are lining up for her sister after the sudden passing of her sister's husband, so this was good news. Her patients are responding to the sessions, she has a cousin that will be happily married soon and if things work out maybe she'll convince Alfred to make their relationship public and official. She highly anticipates the upcoming week to be busy but very fulfilling.

On Monday, she meets with Scott as scheduled. He expresses how he thinks he's ready to leave his ex-wife alone but nervous about dating at his age. Diane offers encouragement, "Come over here with me." She stands behind him in front of the mirror with a supportive hand on his shoulder and says, "Any woman would be happy to have you and who knows...she could be right under your

nose. You are handsome, smart and most of all...you are worthy of being loved. We all are.” They return to their seats...feeling optimistic about moving forward. Diane wasn’t naïve enough to think the changes would come overnight but at least she had him admitting that changes had to be made for his future. She documents the success of the session in her journal.

On Wednesday, Diane meets with Romello who still seems to be a little hesitant about moving forward without this woman in his life. He protests, “I still think she was afraid of what people would say about our ages.” Diane plays devil’s advocate, “Okay...let’s just say she was willing to date someone 20 years younger than her. I certainly, don’t see anything wrong with that. Ask yourself, what else would you have to offer her...you’re not even working right now? Do you even know if she likes your hobbies...like NASCAR, fishing and video games? I’m a NASCAR fan myself...by the way.” He asks, “How’d you

know that about me?” Diane responds, “Well, I took the time to learn about you or else...how could we relate?” There seems to be a break-thru with Romello, “I think I understand. No matter our ages...I should have given her the opportunity, to get to know me or want...to get to know me.” Diane finally feels like he understands, “These are tools you can use going forward. Be open and honest about your feelings and allow the other person to do the same. Most importantly respect a person’s space.” The session started on shaky ground but ended on a much more positive note. This is documented in her journal for her book.

On Friday, Nivea enters her session in much better spirits. By far this was the best session of the week. Nivea detailed the conversation that she had with her parents and gotten so much off of her chest. She says, “I took your advice and I think everything is going to work out well. For all of us.” Diane responds, “I think so too but because of the anger issues I do suggest meditation. I don’t want to

have any regrets moving forward.” Nivea agrees, “Oh no...I don’t have any regrets and I promise you...you don’t have to worry about me ever being violent again. I don’t even regret those old mistakes because I never would have met you...and changed my life.” Diane adds encouragement, “We are going to work closely and I’m going to make sure you’re never alone in this. I’m here for you... more than you know.” The session ends and Diane makes her last entry into her journal for the day...finally looking forward to a wonderful weekend.

Saturday is the day of the wedding and night of her flight out of town with Alfred. He has sent a message that they would meet up at the office building and leave for the airport from there. Diane looks divine in her gown and waves to the neighbor as she leaves for the wedding. She asks, “Did you get my Thank You card?” The male neighbor replied, “Why, don’t you look lovely? Yes, I got your card but I don’t know why you were thanking me.”

Diane explains, “For moving my trashcan back and forth from the street for the last several weeks.” The neighbor says, “Well, you know I don’t have a problem doing that for you but it wasn’t me, darling” Diane is extremely puzzled but also running late...so she gets in the car to leave.

She arrives at the wedding and immediately looks for her sister while greeting people along the way. She spots her sister in the dress that they had purchased...on the arm of a well-dressed man. She calls out to her as the couple turns around to face her. She then feels as though she had been hit in the face with a brick. Her sister was on the arm of Scott Waglin, her patient. This was the man her sister had been so excited to introduce her to. She has lost her breath but does her best to compose herself as she’s being introduced by her sister. The sister says, “Scott this is my sister...Diane.” Scott extends his hand as if he had never met Diane before and greets her. Diane tells her sister

that she suddenly feels faint and asks, “Would you please go get me some punch?” Her sister is concerned and excuses herself without hesitation to retrieve the punch. She immediately asks Scott, “What the hell are you doing here with my sister?” Scott responds, “Diane, don’t be jealous. I know you love me and I love you, too. I’m only here with your sister so I can be close to you. I know you could lose your job if people knew we were in love.” Diane is floored, “Are you crazy? We are not in love...I’m your therapist! I have to tell my sister as soon as she gets back!” Scott discourages her decision to expose him, “Well, there’s a thing called patient/doctor confidentiality so you can’t do that...besides, you’re the one that came on to me. You told me you’d be lucky to have me and put you hands all over me...don't you remember? I believe we can be happy...so relax.” Her sister returns with the punch but Diane is literary sick to her stomach and leaves the wedding. She returns home to figure out what to do but

doesn't have a clue. She is still scheduled for the trip with Alfred and heads to the office building. She hopes Alfred will know what to do because she is in hysterics.

She arrives at the office building and greets the security officer. She lets him know that she's going up to her office and wait for Alfred, who's meeting her there shortly. Before heading to the elevator she asks the security officer if she could grab a soda from the concession machines. He says, "Sure. I know the new cleaning guy is around there so you should be fine." As she's putting in the change for her beverage someone walks up behind her and says, "Hey baby." She naturally thinks it's Alfred romantically touching her waist but she immediately turns around to find Romello standing behind her. He grabs her and kisses her deeply. She's in shock and yells, "What...what are you doing here!?" Romello responds, "I got a job here as a cleaning guy. I wanted you to see that I can bring something to the table. If we're going to be

together I want to pull my weight.” Diane is hyperventilating at this point, “Romello...why in the world would you think we would be together? I’m your doctor for god’s sake.” Romello responds, “You shared how much you knew about me and believed in our May-December love for one another. That meant a lot to me. I’ve even been helping you around the house...taking your trash to the street and back...just to show you how serious I am. You are the woman that I’ve always dreamed of.” Diane backs up against the wall and starts to scream for the security guard. The security officer responds and asks what’s going on. Diane does her best to explain but begs the security officer to remove him from the building until she had left. Romello had not broken any laws so this was the best the security officer could do under the circumstances.

Diane runs to the elevators and up to her office to wait for Alfred. She was devastated as to how all of this was happening. What did she do wrong? What did she

miss? She sits down and puts her head on her desk...in tears. She then hears the bell of the elevator doors. She runs out of her office to greet Alfred when Nivea gets off the elevator. In light of the other things that had happened that day...she stands frozen and asks, "What the hell are you doing here...Nivea?" Nivea seems surprised at the question, "I came to pick you up for our trip. Are you ready?" Diane is mentally exhausted, "This cannot be happening. Nivea I am going on a trip with Alfred a friend of mine...not you. I don't know what the hell is going on but you are confused." Nivea looked at her and said, "No. I think you are confused. We have been messaging each other for days about this trip. I even gave you some bonus air miles." Diane answers with frustration, "No...No...No. I have been messaging Alfred." Nivea responds, "I'm Fred...my middle name is Fredrica." Diane is completely distraught and crying, "No...this can't be happening." Nivea tries to calm her, "You don't have to worry. No one

knows about us and we can live our truth together.

Remember what you told me about wanting that picket fence and children...I am willing to do that with you. I love you and I want to be with you. I never would have been brave enough to come out without you.” Diane makes her position clear, “I am not in love with you and will never be. This is all in your mind. I am not your girlfriend...I am your doctor. Would you please leave?” Nivea then becomes very angry, “So you lead me on. I came out to my parents for you and you said I would never be alone. You’re no better than those bastards that cheated on me before. You pull me in and tell me to live my truth and then you reject me!” Diane watches in horror as Nivea pulls a knife from her purse and lunges toward her. Diane runs back toward her office and tries to lock the door but the impact from Nivea bum-rushing it sends her falling backward unto the floor. Nivea enters the room ranting, “I’m so tired of being used. You people don’t deserve love and I’m going to keep

you from hurting anyone else.” She dives on top of Diane as they begin to tussle for the knife. When the violent confrontation was over...they both struggle to stand to their feet. Both of them exhausted from the fight and bloody. They look at each other and Nivea says, “I just wanted to be loved.” She then collapses to the floor from a stab wound to her abdomen.

In the following moments...the building is flooded with police cars and ambulances. Nivea would eventually recover from her wound but Diane would be left with the task of explaining how all of this happened. She gladly breached her patient/doctor confidentiality clause to inform and protect her sister from Scott. She explained the circumstances of Romello’s employment at her place of business. Finally, she had to divulge the affair she had participated in with a colleague at the same office building, Alfred Mason. This was the only way to explain the romantic messages she had sent to Nivea Fredrica

Farewell...assuming she was him. She had underestimated the power of love and these particular individual's perception of it. Her career is now ruined, her privacy has been invaded and her personal life had been exposed. Through the years, she received unmarked postcards, flowers with no cards, phone calls with no voices, and letters with no return addresses. She was left in a paranoid state of wondering if it was one of her relentless suitors...or all three. She had now become the pursued, the intimidated and the loved.

The End

4. Scorpio Season and Us: The U Scorpii

Autumn is often described as a time that life lies dormant and regeneration is taking place under the surface. This is the time when daylight begins to fade and sometimes a feared but necessary darkness lies ahead...because this is the natural order of things. It's August of 1999 and another school year has started at Hillshire Elementary School in Chicago IL. Max Bowie is a new 3rd-grade teacher who had traded the subtropical climate of Southern N. Carolina for the wicked arctic chills of the mid-west for his career...and love of his life, Alice. He welcomes his 15 new students...including one bright young student by the name of Bella Walton. Young Bella is a charming and smart little curly red-haired girl who is sometimes quiet but always pleasant. The first 2 months of the new school year have passed quickly and went very

well with a minimal amount of issues or complaints. Max is definitely, looking forward to an exciting and productive school year.

Right away...Bella shows initiative and seems to take on a leadership role in class but there were three students in particular that Bella seemed to gravitate to...more than the others. Their names were Annie, Jason, and Violet. All four students varied in enthusiasm but all were extremely intelligent and displayed assertion...much like Bella. One particular day, during a lesson of capital and lower case letters...Bella got up to check on her friends and their progress in the lesson. Max thanked Bella for her assistance but ushered her back to her seat and explained that it would be more appropriate if he helps the other students...should they need it. She became visibly annoyed when she was redirected back to her seat and gave Max a cold hard stare. Of course, Max knew he would have to deal with the occasional tantrum of the average 3rd grader

but dismissed it as nothing major. While writing some lesson reminders on the blackboard he oddly felt the strange sudden urge to turn around. He looks around to eerily find Bella's eyes still fixated on him in that same dark cold stare, so much so, that the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up. With nervousness in his voice...he asks the class to get out their math books to start a new lesson. The request breaks the continuation of Bella's angry stare but not before her eyes seem to gloss over like ice. It was only for a split second but then quickly back to normal. The incident left Max a bit uneasy but he quickly convinced himself that his imagination was working overtime and resumed the lesson activities.

Days later Max's lesson plan included studying the spelling and identification of the different days of the week and months. Surprisingly...Bella who always seemed to excel in every lesson struggled with the spelling of the word...Wednesday. During the quiz, Max walked around

the classroom and noticed that Bella had spelled out each day correctly...except for Wednesday. He walked back up to his desk confident that she would eventually figure it out but soon noticed that Bella was one of the last students still struggling to finish the quiz. Max eventually collects the tests but as he turns to walk away he is immediately disturbed by the piercing sound of what sounded like sharp nails scratching against the desktop surface...along with the sudden flickering of the ceiling lights. He looks back to identify the sound and finds the sight was even more disturbing than he could imagine. Bella was panting in short breaths visibly angry and her eyes were bloodshot red. He suggested that she calm down by taking long deep breaths and go to the water fountain...but she sat frozen in anger and did not move. Almost by instinct the other 3 children: Jason, Ann, and Violet got up and rallied around Bella in an attempt to calm her down. Max thought it was a kind effort on behalf of these 3 children because in all

honesty...he was at a loss of what to do to diffuse the tantrum. Bella soon seemed to calm down and regain her composure...with the support of her other 3 classmates. However, Max was a little surprised that such a young child could display that level of anger and decided it was time to speak with Bella's parents.

Max promptly schedules a meeting with Bella's parents and is intrigued to hear their thoughts on their daughter's behavioral patterns. He asks..."Ms. Walton, are we waiting for your husband or is it just you that I'm meeting with today?" Mrs. Walton responds, "My husband is still at work...so it will be just us. I'm hoping this won't take long anyway. Now, Mr. Bowie what's on your mind?" Max opts to start on a positive note, "Well...let me start by saying that Bella is hands down one of my brightest students and I'm sure you and your husband are very proud." Mrs. Walton smiles with confidence, "Yes we are very proud but I'm sure you didn't call me down here just

to say that. Are you having issues?" At this time he gets right to the point, "I would like to know if there's anything I should be made aware of regarding Bella's temper or behavior. I have noticed a temperament that I rarely see in children her age and I just don't want it to become a distraction." Surprisingly, Mrs. Walton laughs and says, "It sounds like Bella has given you a little dose of her medicine." Max admittedly smiles, "Yes, ma'am...she has but the fact that you are laughing kind of lets me know that maybe it's not as serious as I had thought." Mrs. Walton replies, "Oh, it can be serious at times... but I know her and she's not an outright disrespectful child. Now I can't tell you how to run your classroom but if you want to avoid those conflicts with Bella I would suggest one-on-one redirection. She can take being reprimanded very personally...especially if you do it in front of the class. She is an old soul and can be very stubborn but that'll change once she begins to trust you. She's not easily impressed

like other children and that can be a challenge...but I'm sure you're up to it.”

Max is fascinated by such an in-depth description of Bella's personality, “I totally, agree with you. She is an old soul, indeed. She is also very protective of Jason, Ann, and Violet and they seem to feel the same way about her. Are your families related...or friends in some way?” Mrs. Walton shakes her head, “No...I don't know any of the children you are talking about.” Max seems very surprised, “Oh I’m sorry. I just assumed that your families were in some way connected because the children are so extremely close. They act as though they have known each other forever.” Mrs. Walton ends the conversation by getting up from her seat and saying, "Well...school tends to bring kids together. I have to get home now and get dinner started but don’t hesitate to call again if you should need me. Just consider my advice and just maybe we’ll make it through this school year in one piece.” She laughs. Max thanks Mrs.

Walton for her time and leaves for home feeling a little more optimistic about dealing with any future issues. He didn't want Bella's issues to be a reflection of his teaching skills or conflict resolution. Of course, a new teacher wants to look good in the eyes of the school administration but in this case...he felt comfortable with the decision he had made to ask the parent to intervene.

It is now October 30th and a punch of the weather's melancholy...hints that winter season is quickly approaching. The teachers give the students lots of outside playtimes when the weather allows and watch over their, individual, classes on the playground. They also often use this time to gossip and catch up on the days' school events. Max decides to join the other teachers who are engaged in a friendly conversation and overseeing the kids as they play. While they are talking he notices that a small group of children has moved to a corner of the playground from their own, individual classes. He notices that 4 of those children

are from his class. Those children were Bella, Ann, Jason, and Violet. He watched as they just seemed to converse in a very organized manner. Not like, little children their age...at all.

Max knew November was coming in and a lot of the outside activities would be limited due to cold weather conditions so the strange bond would soon be irrelevant but no less of a mystery. He liked to acknowledge the kids' birthdays at the beginning of each month. So...when the month of November came in he asked the November birthday students to stand up and receive their acknowledgment. Once again...oddly enough it was Bella, Violet, and Ann. Max assumed it was a simple mistake that when he asked them to stand...the 4th of their tight-knit group, Jason, stood up as well. He figured Jason was confused and reminded him that his birthday was in late October and had passed already. Bella quickly turned and corrected Max... "Mr. Bowie...Jason is one of us." The

other students who didn't care one way or the other began to clap for the children with upcoming birthdays as Max stood there looking confused. He could only assume the "one of us" statement that Bella had just made was about their friendship. Although, he felt a friendship of that magnitude from children so young was extremely unusual. He now is sure that there is some kind of undeniable bond happening between the four students but can't seem to figure out the connection.

In Mid-November anytime that the children were allowed on the playground it was definitely for shorter intervals of time. Max joins the other teachers for light conversation as they usually do during outside activities. Out of the blue...Bella approaches the group of teachers with a small baby bird in her hands followed by the other children in this small interested group. The teachers assume the baby bird has fallen out of the nest so Max offers to take the bird inside and attempt to feed it. Just as Bella is

handing the bird to Max...another little boy, runs by and knocks it out of her hand. Max quickly picks it up and takes it inside. In unison, the group's attention is slowly and intensely directed toward the clumsy little boy, who has taken his mistake as a joke. The insensitive act against the bird and the group was clearly, an accident but still will have consequences. The disdain from the small group was so pronounced that the little boy quickly sensed that he had done something extremely, offensive...and something even worse was about to happen.

The skies changed so quickly that no-one had noticed or had time to prepare. Suddenly, a single lightning bolt came down striking a nearby tree and splitting it in half. It then begins to rain and violently pour buckets of water. The students were immediately gathered and rushed back into the building for safety concerns. During the melee...not all students had promptly returned inside as instructed by the teachers left on the playground. Max

notices the absence of his missing students and returned outside to find them in the pouring rain. He also found the little boy surrounded by Bella and her 3 other classmates, in a state of panic. Max quickly dispersed the group but was deeply troubled by the frightening look of terror in this child's eyes. It wasn't just the fear of the storm that Max saw, it was the fear of being literally...torn apart.

Thankfully...none of the children were hurt during the storm. He wanted to address the incident with the school principal but found it difficult to explain his concerns because no one was actually, hurt. But Max is convinced that the strange mannerisms of Bella and her group were very becoming more disturbing by the day and had the potential to become dangerous.

Later that evening, as Max helps his wife prepare dinner at home...he discusses the incidents and the strange alliance that the four children share. He asks his wife, Alice, her opinion on what she thinks the correlation could

be. Alice has been gainfully employed as a modification counselor for autistic children for 11 years. Max feels with her experience...she might be able to offer some insight and advice. Alice listens to his detailed recollections of the incidents and begins to ask questions.

After, several simple questions she asks him, "You told me that the 3 girls were born in November but when did you say Jason's birthday was?" Max answers, "I'm not sure what that has to do with it but his birthday was October 28th." Alice becomes very focused, "Now I need you to have an open mind....and hear me out before you totally, dismiss it. A lot of the children that I begin to work with are misdiagnosed with autism. Sometimes they are what some people call...Indigo children. They find it hard to focus because they are so easily bored with simple things or in such deep thought...all the time. Of course...for liability reasons we don't tell the parents that their children may be spiritually hypersensitive...but we do offer other

ways to promote focus with the children after the misdiagnosis is discovered.”

Max is stumped as to why they are discussing the misdiagnosis of other children, "I still don't understand what all of this has to do with these students...Alice." Alice responds with a simple explanation, "Honey...they are all Scorpios. For some reason...the people of that particular zodiac sign are more connected than any other sign in the constellation. They are highly clairvoyant at a very young age and just naturally drawn to each other. The sensitivity may be heightened whenever the U Scorpii is expected to burst, so we really, don't know how this astrophysical phenomenon affects them." Max is becoming overwhelmed with information and struggling to see the connection, "What in the world is the U Scorpii? I have never heard of it and how do you know so much about it anyway? Aren't you a Virgo?" Alice elaborates on how she formed her opinion, "I did a term paper on astrology when I was in

college...I was going to focus on all the zodiac signs but the more I researched the Scorpio sign...the more fascinated I became. Let me explain the U Scorpii first...ok? In short...it's the fastest moving nova in the galaxy and it bursts about every 10 years. I want you to keep in mind that...there was a time when doctors studied the moon and stars to make a physical and mental diagnosis. I don't think it's a stretch to say that the activity of the U Scorpii could hugely dictate the mood and mental state of a Scorpio. Your experience could be good or honey, it can be really bad.”

Max Bowie responds, “This is silly. Doctors did a lot of things back then that doesn't make sense to us now. These kids don't know anything about astrology or zodiac signs. Adults barely understand that stuff outside of their birthdays and using it in a lame pick-up line.” Alice begs to differ, "Everything you described to me points to it... Max. Not just the birthdates but the unusual bond at that age.

They grow up to show us how strong their characteristics...really are. Hillary Clinton's loyalty to her husband Bill during that scandal was stronger than most women because...had it been me...you would have been out on your ass! Look at Bill Gates or Sean Combs...a music mogul and innovative genius because there's no in-between for these people...it's all or nothing for them. But there's also an extremely dark place that their minds can take them and it shouldn't be ignored. The art of premeditation...the desire for vengeance and the demand for loyalty has also manifested itself in people like Charles Manson or Katherine Knight, who made a stew out of her husband. You may not believe any of this but I'm just saying to keep an open mind." Max Bowie responds, "You know I don't believe in that stuff. It's ridiculous to think there's a connection between kids and their zodiac signs. Thank you for the history lesson but there has to be a more believable and reasonable explanation." Alice gives up and says,

"Ok...but just pay close attention. Make some observations of your own and tell me if there's some hint of truth in what I'm saying."

That night Max and Alice are sleeping soundly in bed...until he feels the draft of the cold night air on his bare feet. He sits up to reach for the blanket when he is confronted by 4 small shadowy figures standing at the foot of the bed. In sheer terror, he struggles to turn on the lamp on the nightstand only to find nothing there. Max's sudden movements in bed awaken Alice for a split-second but she quickly rolls over and falls back to sleep. He dismisses the vision as Alice's stories causing his imagination to work overtime. But for reasons that he would probably never admit, he decides to leave the night light on for the rest of the night and attempts to get back to sleep.

The next day...Max arrives at school early to find Bella, Jason, Ann and Violet sitting in the classroom...instead of the lunchroom as most kids do

during breakfast. He knows this is not another coincidence...especially with these particular children and begins to put away his supplies. He greets them, "Good morning...guys." Bella responds with an inquiry, "Good morning... Mr. Bowie. How did you sleep last night?" He hesitates for a moment but ignores the question. He offers a solution for what he sees as a potential problem..."Look, I understand that you guys have grown pretty close really, quickly...but don't miss out on all the opportunities to make new friends. That's what having fun is all about. Wouldn't you all like that?" Max Bowie assumes the question is rhetorical and turns away from the children...but then surprisingly he hears an answer to his question. Bella responds..."No...we wouldn't."

Max turns around to find the four children standing there together side-by-side...instead of in their seats as they were a split-second before. He is startled by the children standing so close in proximity and asks, "Bella, what do

you mean...no?" The classroom lights begin to darken and flicker. Bella begins to walk even closer to Max's desk. She begins to speak in a very deep and unfamiliar tone of voice, "We trust each other and we don't need any other friends. Mr. Bowie, we know you're going to try and separate us...if you do it won't end well for you or anyone else..."

Bella's threat is interrupted by the bell for class and the other students rushing into the room from breakfast. Max didn't need to hear the end of the statement to know he had just been threatened by a group of 3rd graders. His first reaction was shock and then disbelief because he barely could believe it his self. The rest of the school day Max tried to stay focused on the lesson plans but miserably failed to do so. He now believed there could be some validity to what Alice was saying and knew that he was dealing with something that was out of his understanding and out of his control. Max didn't have a plan on moving forward...nor did he know if he even needed one if he just

took the advice of his wife, Bella's mother...and Bella herself. Needless to say...he handled different situations with kid gloves (no pun intended) but it got him through the school year and everyone was safe. He often wondered what would happen if there should be a time when he would have to oppose the group of children and what they were realistically capable of...but why risk it. He saw good and bad characteristics in the children and felt he could have possibly connected with each of them individually but he was powerless against the group. He witnessed this bond and appreciated the artistic talents but feared any retaliation. That year...he taught his class to the best of his ability staying mindful of his extraordinary challenge.

Over the years...Max continued to teach school but thankfully never had any indication that this situation was presenting itself again. But he always kept the experience in the back of his mind and periodically...checked the

birthdates of his students...more closely.

11 years later in Raleigh, North Carolina...Max's nephew is having a bachelor's party before his upcoming marriage ceremony. Omar is the only son of Max's older brother Liam and will be marrying his girlfriend, Vanessa. They had both graduated from East Carolina University and looked forward to starting a new life and business together. Max speaks to his older brother, Liam, and accepts the invitation. Among other things that they talk about, he asks Liam his opinion on Omar's fairly new engagement following the long-term relationship with a former girlfriend, Zoe. Liam responds, "I think she's a good fit for Omar...especially after Zoe tragically disappeared two years ago. He was completely heartbroken...and sadly they never found out what happened to her." Max is sympathetic, "Yes, I just can't imagine what her parents are going through." Liam states, "After Zoe's disappearance

Omar had become deeply depressed...I mean who could blame him. But she stayed by his side and encouraged him to get back to normal. Vanessa seems to be a bit more intense when it comes to getting things done and I like that about her." Max says, "Well...I'm glad he decided to move on with his life and start a family." Liam says, "Hey...you and me too. She's kind of hard to read sometimes but you'll have your chance to meet her when you get here. Be sure to schedule Oct 31 for the bachelor's party and November 3rd for the wedding. I can't wait to see you guys, little bro...its been way too long. Liam responds, "I can't wait to see you too big bro...we'll be there."

Time quickly flew by and before they knew it, it was time to travel to North Carolina for the wedding. Omar and Vanessa gladly offer to pick up Max and his wife from the airport because they wanted to express their appreciation personally. Omar was especially happy to see his favorite uncle again after so much time. Once the men

saw each other they hugged for a heartfelt moment while the women stood back and swooned. Omar had grown to be a man since the last time his uncle had seen him...he couldn't believe how much time had gone by. Omar then hugged his Aunt Alice, who he hadn't seen in a very long time as well. Vanessa patiently waited with a smile on her face for her introduction to her soon-to-be in-laws. Omar quickly gets focused and introduces his bride-to-be and love of his life. Vanessa was petite and had shoulder-length dark hair, olive skin, and beautifully almond-shaped eyes. Omar proudly introduces his bride-to-be, "Uncle Max, this is my lovely, Vanessa." Max opens his arms to receive a hug from Vanessa but she respectfully declines and gives a pleasant handshake. She smiles and then says, "I am so happy to finally meet Omar's favorite auntie and uncle." Max is a bit surprised but accepts her handshake request, "Well, I'm his only uncle...so I'd better be his favorite" and then laughs.

Omar states, “We’d better get you both to the hotel and settled in. You know my dad is anxious to see his baby brother and you too... Auntie Alice. I’m so glad you could make it.” Vanessa feels a bit left out and repeats Omar’s sentiment, “Yes, WE... are so happy you both could make it. So, let me help you with the bags.” When Omar starts the car a popular song automatically begins to play on the car’s audio music list. The bass thumped and soon the lyrics followed, “My punnany and my crack.” Vanessa quickly turns the music down and asks for forgiveness from the couple. Vanessa quickly apologized, “I’m so sorry. We forgot we had the music playing before we picked you up. It’s a little risqué.” Max didn’t hear the lyrics clearly and said, “Oh we don’t mind a little music. Please don’t turn it off because of us.” The giddy young couple look at each other and begin to laugh at the suggestion.

Max reacts to the laughing and says, “Hey, I may not know about the newest music out but I’m not ancient.”

Alice tries to explain the laughter, "They're not laughing at you...honey. The song has some strong sexual lyrics and they don't want to embarrass us." Vanessa turns around to Alice in amazement and asks, "You know about the artist Brianna...Miss Alice?" Alice responds, "Oh I was a big fan of the song. Not so much about the dirty lyrics but more because I thought she was talking about women's empowerment. It's sad to say but sometimes you have to use strong lyrics to spark a reaction from people and get the message out about self-worth. Is she still making music?" Vanessa replies, "I'm not sure but I hope so. I heard she has a tongue like a viper and that can be intimidating to a lot of people. You know we women aren't allowed to be too outspoken in a male-dominated industry." They continue a pleasant conversation about different music and current events as they drive in the direction of the hotel.

The flight to North Carolina was smooth...the traffic was great and the weather was beautiful. If the recent

events of the day were any indication of what the upcoming days would be like...there was no question it was going to be wonderful. As they are driving toward the motel they stop at a traffic light where Vanessa notices a Tarot Card reading business on the corner. She becomes intrigued and giddy while asking Omar to pull over to get their futures read by the man pictured on the store window. Even though, Max and his wife are a bit tired from the flight...they are game to stop for just a moment and adhere to Vanessa's curiosity.

The card reader's name is Alec Matwau and he looked to be around 70 years of age, a bald head and an energetic attitude toward his new customers. He greets the two couples and asks, "Who is having a seat at the table first?" Both Max and his wife decline a reading but Vanessa tells Omar to go first. The store pleasantly offers more than tarot card readings to Alice's surprise. There are quite a few books and interesting trinkets to choose from.

Omar doesn't believe in readings but plays along to make his bride-to-be happy. The tarot card reader slowly settles down in a chair across from Omar and begins to speak. The gentleman senses Omar's hesitation and says, "No need to be hesitant. You are going to deal yourself three cards from this Tribal Taro Card deck and then I'll just explain the meanings. I'm sure there can only be positive energy for such a beautiful couple like you. Now go on, son...and choose your cards." Omar smiles and rubs the sweat off his hands onto his jeans. He then separates the deck into two. He then combines the two sections back into one before placing his three cards on the table. The three cards revealed were the Hangman Card, the Lover's Card and the Wheel of Fortune Card.

The gentleman studies the cards for a moment and then starts to explain the meanings, "Well...the cards are definitely trying to tell you something and this is very interesting, indeed." Omar asks the gentleman,

“Interesting? What are the cards trying to tell me?” The psychic continues and says, "Firstly you chose the Lover's Card and that's no big surprise. I can feel the love between you two just sitting here...we didn't even need a card for that.” They all smile and Vanessa leans over to kiss Omar on the cheek. The reader then says, “Secondly you have drawn the Wheel of Fortune Card. Now please understand that the cards can be applied to many different aspects of your life, so it's not for me to say exactly what it's referring to. The Wheel of Fortune Card represents a cycle of dramatic changes. Lastly and most interestingly...your third card is the Hangman Card. It's a warning of consequences...should you resist these changes. You are not in control. Again...I reiterate that these signs do not pinpoint anything specific. The information is used to help you navigate through life.” Vanessa is anxiously waiting for her turn, “Okay now do me! I pretty much know my future is going to be great...but it doesn't hurt to hear it.”

She and Omar then switch places at the table. The gentleman instructs her to cut the cards just as Omar had done previously and studies them for a moment...looking more perplexed than before. The gentleman says "I must say...I haven't had readings such perplexing as yours, in quite a while. Pretty lady...your cards start with the Justice Card. This card shows how deeply you observe, listen and contemplate before making decisions...I would say that's a good thing. Following closely behind is the Devil Card...a subconscious wildness that can never be tamed or controlled. And lastly...you drew the Resurrection Card which refers to a rebirth or reunion of souls that harvest...like the Phoenix. These souls join each other and repeat the process over and over again."

After the reading...Max finally interrupts and says, "This is all very entertaining but guys we are sort of tired." Omar pays the psychic for his services and they begin to leave the store. When they get to the car...Alice decides to

run back and buy a book on homeopathic remedies she had noticed in the store...to read during the flight home. As she grabs the book and finishes the transaction the psychic reassures her, "You will definitely...enjoy this book." Alice responds, "I hope I enjoy it...more than you enjoyed that reading. Your facial expressions told more of a story than you did." The psychic smiled and replies, "That's why I quit playing poker...my face would tell it all. I don't like to go in too deep with readings but, simply put...the young man is playing with fire. Remember that, fire can be a gift and a curse. It can protect and shield you but if underestimated...it can easily destroy everything in its path. A smoldering fire can lay low underneath the surface and by the time you know it's there...it is far too late. The cards try to inform us of the energy that we have and the energy around us. Let's just say I hope he knows what he's signing up for...and you as well."

Alice leaves the store a bit confused but would never relay any information that sounded disparaging so she kept the additional conversation to herself. Her focus was on getting to the hotel and having a hot shower. Later on that evening, Max and Alice have been well-rested before getting up and dressed for dinner at Liam's home. While pulling her hair into a ponytail...Alice curiously asks Max, "So, what did you think about Vanessa?" Max responds, "She seems very polite. Did you see how she extended her hand when I tried to hug her?" Alice replies, "She probably just needs time to get to know you. I didn't know what to make of you either...when I first met you." She says jokingly. Max confidently, grinds his hips in a circular motion, "Who are you kidding...you still can't keep your hands off of me!" They both laugh while leaving the hotel room to hail a cab to Liam's home for dinner. Most of the family is already at Liam's house and anxiously waiting to see Max...after so many years.

Liam is the first one out the door to greet his little brother and sister-in-law. The touching moment brought tears to the eyes of onlookers that watched the brothers reconnect. The family had a great dinner and after the event turned into drunken karaoke...the brothers steal a moment to themselves. They head to the patio in the back yard to smoke a joint...something that Max hadn't done since college but Liam does like clockwork. They both grab a beer and get comfortable on the reclining patio chairs. Max wants more details about the bachelor party that Liam has single-handily planned. Max asks, "So what big surprise do you have for the stag party...because I am positive...you have something up your sleeve?" Liam laughs while coughing out the smoke from the joint, "You know me all too well little bro. The biggest surprise is the location...I changed it." He asks, "I thought it was at the VIP Lounge downtown...so where are you having it now?"

Liam passes the joint to his brother and says, "Well...Vanessa was dead set against having any stag party at all. I had to agree to her conditions before she would even allow it. The No.1 rule was...no strippers...can you believe that?!" Max admits to understanding Vanessa's discouragement, "Well, typically I know women don't like those types of things but rules seem a bit controlling. Is she that insecure?" Liam takes a swig of beer and replies, "No she's not insecure at all but possessive is more like it. I mean...can you blame her? Omar is in his prime and he's a hell of a catch. She's putting off starting her own business in Charlotte until Omar's dentist office is off the ground...so I guess you can say she is invested in this relationship. But he's my son and he deserves a great bachelor's party. He knows nothing about it so she can't blame him and it's all good." Max passes the joint back, "Yeah, it's all good until she shows up and finds nobody there." Liam responds, "I'm not worried...she is getting

together with her sorority sisters tomorrow night...so we're home free. For all we know, they'll probably have some male strippers of their own.” They begin to laugh when unexpectedly Vanessa gracefully approaches the patio in the company of three other young attractive women.

Vanessa says, "Girls...I would like to introduce you to the Bowie Brothers, my soon to be father-in-law Liam and uncle-in-law Max.” Both Bowie brothers seem to speak in unison, “Hello, ladies...it’s very nice to meet you and how is everyone doing tonight? Vanessa’s friend Maya responds, “We’re good...thanks for asking and might I add, you are the two most handsome men at this shindig.” Liam is visibly flattered and responds, "Yes...that is very true but thank you for saying it...young lady" and then laughs.

Vanessa discourages the flirtacious behavior, “Put your claws back in girls, both of these fine men are off-limits. There are plenty of other available men at the party.” Max fans the smoke away seemingly embarrassed by the

activity, “So what sorority do you ladies belong to?” Maya responds, “We’re not really, a sorority...but we are just like sisters. We connected in our freshman year of college and have been inseparable...since then.” Vanessa says, “I have a lot more introductions to make so you guys stay out trouble okay? I’ll check on you later.” Vanessa leans over and kisses Liam on the forehead in a daughterly way and walks away.

As the ladies walk away...Maya looks back and winks at Max...in a very subtle but flirtatious manner. She gives him an innocent smile that boosts his ego but then disappears into the house with the other women. All 4 of the women were of different ethnicities and cultures but beautiful in their own, rights. Maya and Nell were tall and statuesque and the other 2 women: Vanessa and Christine were petite and vivacious. Maya had piercing dark eyes and coal-black hair that swayed across the top of her buttocks as she walked. The diverse set of friends had everyone’s

attention during the party and now Maya had seductively caught Max's eye too. Of course, Max had no intention of acting on any harmless flirtation. He was a happily married man and intended on staying that way. Max quickly, turns his attention back to Liam and resumes his conversation about the secret bachelor party.

Liam asks, "Hey, I could use another beer...are you ready for another?" Max could use another and says, "Yeah, that's cool. I could probably drink one more." As Liam leaves to get the beers...Maya unexpectedly shows back up on the patio and sits down beside Max. He becomes visibly nervous...knowing that this could be the time that innocent flirtation...can go awry. Having the attention of such a young and sultry woman whose body seemed to exude sexual energy is every man's fantasy but can quickly become a nightmare. Maya inquires, "Why are you sitting out here alone?" Max responds, "My brother went in to get us some beers." Maya leans in and

seductively asks, "That doesn't give us very much time...now does it?" Max plays coy, "Time for what?" Maya answers in a low sultry voice, "To speak...privately. I wasn't sure what I was feeling before when we spoke but I'm absolutely, sure now that your body needs me." Max is surprised by the young woman's coquetry and even more surprised that it was being directed toward him. He responds, "I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean."

Maya is happy to elaborate, "I'm sitting beside you and can feel the energy and nature rising in you...as we speak. I'm not one for small talk and I hope you don't mind me being direct but no one will ever make you feel the way that I can. It's the experience of a lifetime." Max becomes extremely aroused and visibly uncomfortable. His body is responding to her words...but betraying his morals. He's completely caught off guard by the indecent proposal and she knows it. Max stutters and forces the words out by saying, "You are simply gorgeous and you wouldn't

believe how flattered I am right now but my wife is right in the house. Even if I wanted to...it just simply wouldn't be possible. I'm thanking my lucky stars because had she not been...I may have thought about you taking you up on that... experience of a lifetime.” Maya nods her head respectfully accepting his declination and excuses herself, “Well, I should get back to my friends and I hope you enjoy the rest of the night.”

Liam returns with the two beers apologizing for taking so long but creating the perfect exit for Maya, as well. As she leaves the patio...she and Max exchange one last glance...but this time was different. As she turns her head, Maya's eyes appeared to gloss over like black ice...but only for a split second. It happened so quickly...Max was sure that the weed and beer had him seeing strange things. It seemed strange yet familiar, in some way. Unaware of Maya's proposition...Liam jumps right back into the previous conversation about the party.

Liam says, "Ok...she's gone so listen to this. I have rented a yacht on the pier and ordered some sexy strippers for my son's send-off!" Max responds, "Liam he's getting married not going off to boot camp and I'm for the party but for the record...I'm telling my wife about the strippers. You're not going to have me in divorce court because of your bright ideas!" They both began to laugh uncontrollably, with beers in hand and another joint in Liam's mouth. Liam references the popular Las Vegas quote and replies, "Don't worry Lil Bro. What happens on the yacht...stays on the yacht."

Alice finally walks out to the patio...to check on Max. She had done her best rendition of "I Will Survive," on the karaoke machine and was ready to call it a night. She also informs him that she has been invited to hang out with Vanessa and her friends for a girl's night out. They give hugs and well wishes as they eventually make their

way out to the waiting cab. Everyone was excited and in good spirits but it was going to be a very long weekend.

The next morning Max and his wife sleep in and catch up on some rest at the hotel. They both are invited to separate parties by the bride and groom but don't want to lose sight of the fact that they are on vacation, as well.

Around 9 am, they decide to head downstairs for their complimentary breakfast at the hotel. They discuss their thoughts on the reunion last night and the upcoming parties planned for that evening. Max asks, "So what did you think about my family?" Alice replies, "Well, I had met a few of them at our wedding years ago but for the most part everyone was very nice. More or less we were all focused on Vanessa and her friends. They were walking around like the Stepford Wives." Max responds, "I found the diversity in the group refreshing. It goes to show that you can find a kinship amongst all types of people." She says, "Well...If that's what having a sisterhood looks like...I'm glad you're

my only friend." He jokes, "I'm your only friend because you don't want any other women around my sexy body" he dances and slaps his beer belly that has developed over the years.

At approximately, 8 pm, they all meet up at Liam's house to disperse to their different party destinations. Max urges his wife to be open-minded and try to have a good time. It was true that Alice was an only child and didn't have very many girlfriends...so she was unfamiliar with what sisterhood looked like....and maybe even a little jealous. Alice agrees to be open-minded and lets her hair down. Liam has already dispatched Omar's friends to the yacht to prepare refreshments and decorations before they arrive. They decide to blindfold Omar and surprise him at the undisclosed location. Unbeknownst to Vanessa...this is not the place that she had been informed the party would be. They arrive and position Omar on the pier and remove the blindfold. Liam prepares Omar for the unveiling,

“Okay, son, I wanted to give you a bachelor party that you would never forget. I just want you to know how proud I am of you. This is an amazing time in your life and I just love you man.”

Omar takes off the blindfold and views the beautiful yacht with all these people on board waving and cheering. Omar's mouth drops open as he looks at his dad and uncle. Liam had rented a beautiful, 150 foot Richmond Motor Yacht with all the bells and whistles. Max can't help but feel a little envious at this moment...because he and Alice had never had children. They had tried for quite some time but eventually had just accepted...that it wasn't meant to be. They both worked with children in their professional settings and felt blessed to have those children in their lives. It was a moment like this that the average man would ponder on what their own lives would have been like...raising a son of their own.

Omar is humbled by the gesture, "You have got to be shitting me. Dad...it's beautiful...you did all of this for me?" Liam responds, "Of course I did...you're my boy. You only get married once. Well, ideally once...but for some of us it's 2 or 3 times but I think you found a keeper." Omar responds "Speaking of Vanessa, you know she's going to be pretty pissed...dad." Liam asks, "That's why I didn't tell you...so she can blame it all on me. So are you in?" Omar looks at his dad and Max...then all his friends on the yacht waiting for him and says, "Of course, I'm in...let's get this party started!"

Meanwhile...on the other side of the city, the girls' night out celebration is taking off rather nicely. They have decided to go to Maya's house for music and cocktails. The music is playing and everyone is dancing while getting tipsy on 1800 Tequila Silver mixed with lime juice and garnished with Granny Smith apples and cranberries. A slower tempo hip hop song called "Missing You" remade

from the original Sting version of the song "I'll be watching you" begins to play. Two of the ladies step out on the balcony to smoke a little weed, while Vanessa went to the bathroom. Alice had partaken in a little hookah smoking...in the earlier stages of the party for the sake of being a good sport. She did not like the feeling and decided to stick with drinking her Tequila shots with lime. She goes to the kitchen to refresh her drink and is accompanied by Vanessa's friend, Christine. They begin to talk while helping each other in the kitchen. Christine asks, "Are you having a good time? You have some nice dance moves girl." Alice responds, "I am having a blast. I have to admit I was a little hesitant because everyone seems so different but you girls are, really, like family." Christine gives more credence to the statement, "We are family. Since our first days in college...we found each other and haven't been apart since. We are always together."

Alice says, "Well...I haven't danced like this in years. I have to start getting out more often. Max and I are homebodies and just work all the time." Christine says, "You should come to our party on the 20th of November. There are more of us and it's going to be off the chain. We have to resurrect." Alice takes the lime slice out her mouth and asks, "Wait...what? Did you say resurrect?" Christine laughs and replies, "No girl...I said reconnect. You'd better slow down, that Tequila is kicking in." Alice agrees in a drunken slur, "You might be right, this Tequila is kicking ass but that party sounds fun...what's the party for?" Christine replies, "You mean whose it for...and it's for all of us. It's our birthdays." Alice recognizes that she is tipsy but wants to fully understand. So she asks, "So...do all of you have the same birthday?" Christine laughs and says, "Heaven's no! Now that WOULD be insane. Our birthdays are just so close together that we celebrate them all at the same time. They run consecutively."

A sobering feeling starts to take over Alice before she asks, “Christine when...exactly is your birthday?” Christine replies, “November 15th.” Alice says, “You’re a Scorpio. So...all of you are fucking...Scorpios?!” Christine responds, “I never thought about it like that but yeah, I guess we are.” It was hard for Alice to tell if Christine was being sincere or condescending. Alice is already familiar with the connection that Scorpios are rumored to have...so this is her chance to test the theory. Alice nervously asks, “I’m sorry for asking but how did you all become friends in college?”

Christine reminisces about the experience, "It's a crazy story but when I started college there was a strange time when I couldn't sleep at all. It may have been anxiety or something, I don't know but I was literally, walking around in a daze. Someone suggested some fresh night air...so I went out one night and ended up in a park. I remember the stars being so bright that they were hard to

look at but they were, absolutely, beautiful. Well, these girls were in the same park at the same time...and experiencing the same sleeplessness. We all began to talk and connect in ways that no one else would understand. After that night we all felt a sense of being revived and whole. I felt like everything was just as it was supposed to be.” As Christine told the story, Alice began to remember the words of the card reader saying, "The resurrection: The reunion or rebirth of souls."

The other ladies re-enter the room to refresh their drinks and play some more music but Maya begins to complain about the lack of male testosterone in the room. On a scale of 1 to 10, it seemed as though her libido was always registering at a level of 11. Maya protests, “We need some men at this party. Vanessa...you're the only one here getting married. That shouldn't stop the single ones in here from having some fun.” Vanessa offers her resolution, “I knew you would say that. Your raging hormones are

always off the charts...so that's why I had already planned on crashing Omar's bachelor party. There should be plenty of single men there to sink your teeth into. I have absolutely, forbidden strippers so they should be ready to dance and party with us too." Alice turns her head because she had been previously informed by Max...that the party had been moved to a yacht at the boating dock. She excuses herself to the bathroom so she can try to reach Max on the phone to warn him...but she repeatedly gets the voicemail. Alice leaves a desperate message, "Max...you need to call me back. We are about to crash the pretend bachelor's party and I don't know what the fuck to do. Max...all these bitches are Scorpios. This is going to end really...bad. Please call me back." There's a knock on the bathroom door asking, "Alice are you ready to go?" She flushes the toilet that she never actually used... composes herself and confirms that she is ready. As they are leaving Maya's place...Alice attempts to stall by mentioning how hungry

she is and if they can stop for burgers somewhere. She's hoping to get a call back from Max. After stopping for burgers they head over to the bachelor's party which is supposed to be at the VIP Lounge. To Vanessa's knowledge...they had reserved a section whereas the guys could watch sports, drink, and commune without distractions from others at the club.

They arrive at the club and park in the parking lot. Vanessa notices right away that she doesn't see any of the cars that Omar or his dad would be driving. Alice offers a simple reason for the missing vehicles by suggesting that maybe they hired a driving service because of the amount of drinking that they would be doing. The reason made so much sense that Vanessa was surprised that she didn't think of that beforehand. As they walk through the crowded dance floor heading toward the VIP section, Katy Perry's song "Extraterrestrial" came on and gave the girls more incentive to join the dance floor. Alice kept checking her

phone and walked behind them at a slower pace...fearful of the reaction Vanessa would have once she found out the party wasn't really, there.

Once the song was over, they continue to make their way to the destination on the other side of the establishment. A security guard is standing outside the VIP section when the girls went up to the area. The first thing Vanessa notices are scantily clad dressed women leaving the VIP area and she immediately yells, "Aw, hell no!" She attempts to enter the private area but the attending security guard puts his arm up to stop her. The security guard says, "You can't go in there it's a private party." Vanessa says, "Yes, I know. It's my future husband's party. So move your hairy ass arm before I break it." Alice steps in to calm everyone down and says, "Okay, let's all calm down." Vanessa ignores Alice and addresses the security guard again...and this time the tone of her voice has become raspy. Alice was looking directly at Vanessa but didn't

recognize the voice at all. Vanessa directs all her anger and energy toward the security guard, "Are you going to move your big ugly ass out the way or do I rip your throat open?"

The security guard signals other security guards over to help him and issues a warning to the ladies, "I told you, bitches, that this is a private party so get the fuck out of....."

Before he can even finish his sentence...Vanessa grabs the security guard by the throat and lifts his entire body off the floor. The security guard weighed 280pds of solid muscle compared to Vanessa weighing a mere 115 pounds or so...if even that. Vanessa's display of strength is unfathomable but the other security guards are obliged to try and help their comrade. But the intervention was in vain...because the other security guards were quickly tackled and beaten by Vanessa's friends in the same unimaginable manner. One in particular...was cracked over the head with a bottle while the others are being thrown

around like rag dolls. In a panic to stop the melee...Alice screams at the top of her lungs, "Please stop! Vanessa, this is not Omar's party!" Vanessa releases the security officer's throat as he falls limp to the floor and responds, "What the hell are you talking about?" Alice finally confesses the truth, "They moved the party...Omar isn't even in there. Go look for yourself."

By this time...the rest of the club is frozen in horror, except the ones recording on their phones, watching the brutal beat down from these women. Vanessa steps over the guard and enters the VIP section. She looks around and finds Omar and his friends were nowhere in sight. She then returns to Alice for answers as to why the party was moved and how she knew about it. As she stood there Alice noticed how black Vanessa's eyes were and how her breathing had changed. The panting from Vanessa was almost animalistic and feral. Alice could feel Vanessa's anger manifesting itself around her. Alice had never

experienced anything like it before and would never want to experience anything like it again. She knew she had to think of something quick or she would end up just like the security guards...or worse.

Alice starts to stutter, "I...I can explain." Maya walks up to her and speaks in that same unfamiliar raspy voice, "Explain then." Alice continues, "I was supposed to stall you...until your surprise was ready." Reluctant to believe anything Alice has to say...Christine interjects, "This is bull shit...she knows something and I can get it out of her. Maya interjects before Christine can grab Alice and suggests..."However, we need to go before they call the police." Vanessa walks up to Alice and warns her, "We're leaving but you'd better have some answers because...you're running out of time." Alice says, "Well, I was supposed to take you all over to the real party but things got all screwed up when you said you wanted to crash this party." Vanessa's head begins to tilt as though

she is trying to see through Alice's intentions and says, "I don't like liars." She quickly responds in a stutter, "I'm...I'm not lying. Omar wanted it to be a surprise but it wasn't ready yet." Christine grabs her by the collar of her shirt and begins walking, "Well...we're ready now and you had better hope you're not lying."

They load back up into the vehicle to head toward the pier and the real bachelor party. Alice is very nervous and keeps looking down at her phone for Max to return her call. Finally, the phone vibrates showing that Max is calling...so she makes the excuse that she has to urinate and cannot hold it. Maya...who is driving tells her that she would have to urinate on the side of the road. She knew that this was her only chance to talk to Max and warn them that they were coming. Once she had him on the phone...she frantically explained that the women had supernatural strength and were very angry. She wanted to explain everything in detail but did not want to risk being

caught warning them. Alice was extremely frightened and found it hard to remain calm. He quickly hung up the phone and tried to warn Omar of the approaching ambush.

Alice returns to the truck but finds the women standing on the road in a trance-like state looking up at the stars. Their eyes were black and seemed to be fixated on whatever was going on beyond the earth and galaxy. She watched them for a moment but they seemed to snap out of it when she slammed the door of the vehicle. Unsure of what might happen when they get to the pier she tries to make amends with the women before they arrive. Alice asks, "Listen, I'm just concerned about the violence...you can understand that can't you?" Vanessa replies, "All I understand right now is the fact that my fiancé has deceived me...and used you to do it. I thought you liked me and I allowed you to be around my friends." They all felt like Alice had betrayed them all...and she had every reason to be very afraid. Vanessa continues, "We have already

established that you are a liar and I can't accept anything you have to say." Alice sits back and stays quiet...praying that the ride would end soon. She didn't care about the party or the lies...she cared about her safety and all she wanted...was Max.

Meanwhile...on the boat, Omar was in the middle of getting a very slow and sensual lap dance to the rhythmic song "Promise," by a soulful singer named Ciara. Max has to urgently interrupt and ask the young lady to excuse them while they speak. Max tells Omar that Vanessa and her friends are on the way and they are not happy. The two look around to find Liam dancing with another stripper on the dance floor and inform him of the pending chaos that was about to ensue. The music comes to a screeching halt and Liam makes a speech to the partiers that Vanessa was coming and if she found the young ladies there the situation could get very ugly. The men devised a plan to have the girls hide below the deck of the yacht and then sneak

off...after the coast was clear. One overzealous stripper is bold enough to demand more money for the inconvenience of hiding under the deck but is advised by Max that hiding is not just benefitting them but beneficial for her own, well-being...should she be found.

Just as Omar and the others prepare to engage a very angry group of women...one of the strippers runs back up the stairs to retrieve her high heel shoes. As they hear the voices of the women closely approaching and coming on board...Max has no choice but to shove her in the closet behind him before she is discovered. They quickly yell surprise when Vanessa and the women board the upper deck of the yacht. The women are visibly unconvinced of any surprise when the men give a half-assed nervous greeting. As Vanessa confronts Omar...the other women separate and begin to circle the room in an investigative manner. Alice runs to Max and hugs him tightly as if in fear of her life. She is shaken up and nervous but manages

to quietly tell Max about the women and their unnatural behavior. He tries to quiet her down as he knows the strippers are still on the boat and hiding. Vanessa demands answers, "Omar...do you want to tell me what the hell is going on...this is not what we agreed to. We're not even married yet and you're already lying to me?" Liam interrupts and accepts all blame as planned, "It's not Omar's fault it's mine. I admit I wanted to get some strippers but Omar didn't want any part of it but I had already rented the yacht...so we decided that we would just surprise you instead." Maya isn't buying the story and interjects, "So why does this whole place smell like ass?" Max uses quick thinking and says, "Well, we are on a boat. Naturally, the smell of the ocean is everywhere." Omar takes Vanessa's hand and says, "Babe...I can't think of anyone or anything but you, even at my own bachelor's party. My dad was trying to do something nice for me but all I want...is you. I know we went about it the wrong way

but I'm still glad you're here. Now can we just go home and rest up for our wedding day... before anything else goes wrong?"

She was angry but clearly, loved this man. She didn't see anything contrary to what he was saying...so she decided to let it go. Max aggressively shakes his head at Liam reminding him that they need to get them off the boat before the strippers are discovered. Liam makes an offer in hopes of Vanessa and her friends exiting the boat a little faster, "Ladies, let's all go to IHOP to eat something and head home. It's all on me."

They all start leaving the yacht but Alice becomes nauseous just as they get on the pier. The incident has clearly, upset her and she doesn't want any parts of these women...she just wants to go back to the motel. They didn't know what they were dealing with and she was at a loss for words. Max tries to calm her by stating that it all worked out but Alice is relentless to make him understand what she

had seen. Alice says, "Max you don't seem to understand. These are not normal women and they almost killed some guys at the bar! Max, I found out that their all Scorpios, I tried to tell you on your voice mail." Max thinks back to the night on the patio when he had made eye contact with Maya and her eyes had blackened for that split-moment. Alice continues her story, "When I went back to buy the book from the Tarot card reader...he tried to warn me but I didn't take it seriously. I didn't put it all together. They are dangerous Max...you have to tell Omar." He puts his arms around her to calm her down and go back to the motel room. He needed some time to think about how this story would come across and how crazy he would sound. Max may come out to look like a villain and nobody would believe it anyway. Even more, concerning would be retaliation against him or Alice. The morning of the wedding...Alice adamantly refuses to leave the motel room or go anywhere near those women. She suggested that Max

make up an excuse that she was sick or something. He wasn't gung-ho about going to the wedding either but felt as though he had to at least try to tell Omar what he was up against. He arrives about an hour before the start of the wedding and asks to speak to Omar alone.

Max offers a hand, "I see you're struggling with this tie so let me help you." Omar is appreciative, "Thanks Uncle Max and I want to thank you for the other night. You saved my ass." Max informs him, "Well, your ass is not exactly safe yet. Omar, you have been the closest thing I have ever had to a son and I have to be honest with you even at the risk of you being upset with me." Omar responds, "I won't be upset with you Uncle Max...you can talk to me. Tell me what's on your mind" He then continues, "It's about Vanessa. I think she could be dangerous. There's the matter of her being a Scorpio and a lot of other factors that I can't even make sense of. And I

know that doesn't sound like a big deal but at the risk of sounding crazy...I need to warn you."

Omar seems to have some knowledge, "Are you kidding me...it's a very big deal. Have you ever had sex with a Scorpio? She has a way of tapping into every sense that I have. My sense of sight, my sense of smell, sound, touch, and taste are all heightened when I'm with her. It's like nothing I had ever had before. It's like she's making love to my mind and not just my body."

He knows he will never be able to dissuade Omar with that in mind, "I'm sure it's everything you say it is but your Aunt Alice and I found out that there are certain times that she may not be able to control her emotions and could become violent. I know it's your wedding day and it's a lot to take in...but I'm just trying to protect you." Omar takes a seat, "Uncle Max when Zoe went missing I was in a dark place. I never thought I would care for anyone like that again. She stood by me and motivated me. I thank you for

your concern...but I honestly don't think I can make it without her." Max knows his concerns would fall on deaf ears and Omar would marry his intended anyway. Liam enters the room and tells them it's time to take their places.

Afterward...the wedding the hall is being cleared out and set up for the dinner and reception. Max is still troubled and steps out on the foyer to drink a glass of wine. His mind took him back to the conversation he had with Bella's mother years ago and hoped that his nephew would come out in one piece...as he did. He looks up to find Vanessa standing face-to-face in front of him. Vanessa addresses Max in a confrontational tone, "Hi Uncle Max. I guess I can officially call you that now. I'm sorry that Alice wasn't feeling well enough to attend today." Max is very direct and says, "Listen, Vanessa...I know what you are capable of and yes, I tried to warn Omar. Alice told me everything that happened the other night and if I had my choice...he would not have married you today."

Vanessa's tone deepens, "How dare you! I have loved your nephew unconditionally and been there for him. You shouldn't be warning him...you should be congratulating him on the best decision he has ever made. I consider myself to be a beauty and a beast. Whichever one you get...depends solely on you. It's a pity, though. I thought we were going to be friends but I see you have opted for the beast." Max feels she has proved his point, "No one needs that type of aggression and arrogance in a relationship. You have to know it's not healthy...he deserves more." Vanessa asks, "And what about loyalty...does he deserve that? Zoe cheated on him every chance she got. Hell...she even cheated with my boyfriend at one point. That's when Omar caught my eye." Max looks surprised and asks, "You and Zoe...were friends?" Vanessa replies, "Of course not, she was sleeping with my boyfriend and cheating on Omar. So clearly, she wasn't a friend to anyone. That's what brought us together. He didn't see it

until she was gone...that I was the one he really, needed."

Max looks Vanessa dead in her eyes and asks, "Did you have something to do with that girl's disappearance?"

Vanessa is then abruptly interrupted by her three bridesmaids and prompted to go back inside the venue...for group photos before the reception starts. She turns back to Max to properly end their private conversation. All four of the women looked at Max with expressionless faces but only Vanessa starts to speak. Vanessa says in a very inviting manner, "Come along soon Uncle Max...I'm sure Omar wants you in all the family photos. Don't forget...you have to give the toast."

With everything that had taken place...Max had forgotten that he would be the one to perform the ceremonial toast at dinner. Even though he had practiced this speech many times before but now seemed to be at a total loss for words. He accepted that he would have to grapple through it...for Omar's sake. When the time

came...Max starts the speech, "Ok everyone please settle down and I will make this brief. We are joined here today to celebrate this union of my nephew, Omar and his new bride, Vanessa. We all get caught up in fancy clothes, beautiful venues, and overflowing champagne but don't forget that the real journey starts after all of this is gone. So if you love this couple as I do, please keep them in your prayers because marriage can be work and isn't always easy. I, for one, will be praying for my nephew... every minute of every day. Expect that there will be challenges and mistakes will be made. I just hope that he doesn't make any deadly mistakes."

The comment gets mixed reactions from the wedding guests because they're not sure if this is a punchline in the speech. Omar laughs out loud as he is very amused by what seems to be a joke but Vanessa is not. She gives Max a chilling look that lets him know that he should probably wrap his speech up soon. Max comes to the end of

his speech, "So let's lift our glasses and toast to the happy couple but also agree that we will keep them in our thoughts and prayers...not only for the good times but also the not...so good." Max has had enough and decides to leave the reception early. With all the celebrating going on he figured no one would really, notice anyhow. He returns to the hotel to take care of Alice and update her on what happened at the wedding. She was anxious to hear how Omar took the news but she is more anxious to get packed and get the hell out of there. Maybe the good outweighed the bad and Omar was confident that he would be able to weather any storm that Vanessa brought forth. They both knew that only time would tell but life had to go on for them. Max and Alice return to Ohio with a new respect for nature and what lies beneath the surface of people. Max had miraculously witnessed and escaped the wrath of Scorpius...twice in his lifetime. Alice and Max understood

that some forces of nature can't be explained but only handled accordingly when recognized.

Months later in May...Liam is sitting and reading a local newspaper article about a mysterious fire that has claimed the life of a local Tarot Card reader near the airport. The fire was deemed suspicious by the State police. All the windows and doors were unlocked but seemed to be temporarily sealed in some bizarre fashion preventing the Tarot Card reader's escape. The article states, "The investigation of the death of Alec Matwau remains open...as no cause of the fire has yet been determined." Liam also calls to catch up with Max and says, "Hey...Lil bro. We haven't spoken much since the wedding. I just wanted to check on you." Max says, "Thanks for calling and checking on us big bro. By the way...we have some news for you." Liam replies, "Well, don't keep me in suspense...just spit it out." Max reveals his news, "After all these years...we had just accepted that it wouldn't happen

for us but we recently found out that Alice is pregnant."

Liam responds with excitement, "You've got to be shittin' me...a baby? That's terrific...congratulations! Put Alice on the phone so I can tell her myself." Max says, "I would but she's not handling the news too well. She just needs more time to process it." Liam responds, "Well...yeah. I know the age thing probably concerns you but don't worry about it. You both are still energetic and healthy. People have babies late in life all the time. She's worrying over nothing." Max says, "She's not just being dramatic Liam...she's afraid." Liam reassures him, "No need to be afraid. Having a baby is the most natural thing in the world and being a parent is a blessing. I just can't wait to hear someone call me...Uncle Liam."

Max attempts to explain, "She's not afraid of having a baby, Liam. She's afraid...of the baby. Vanessa is coming to her at night and she won't leave her in peace." Liam is confused and frustrated at this point. He asks,

"Max...Vanessa and Omar have been in Vegas for the last week, there's no way she's been there to visit Alice. What the hell is going on and what does Vanessa have to do with your baby?" Max seems to plead for Liam's help, "She comes to her in her dreams. Would you please tell Vanessa that we didn't mean any harm and all we want is our family?" Liam is still very confused but not getting any clear answers, "Sure thing little bro...everything is going to be fine. I'm sure Vanessa wishes you all the best...why wouldn't she? Hey...when's the baby due?" Max is very slow to answer, "The baby is due in late Oct or early Nov. I really, don't know how to explain it to you so that you would understand or even believe it. Believe me, I was a skeptic too."

As Liam holds the phone and listens to Max he is taken back when his explanation slowly turns into a continuous and disturbing rant. Max speaks about Bella and her friends...and then Alice's college report and then the U

Scorpii. In the way he explained it...everything was connected...but nothing made sense. Max continues to speak, "They are all around us but you just have to understand the traits. The intelligence level makes them stand out and independence is always good. That's what I told Alice...we'll just have to study more about them to understand what he or she needs. We can be happy but we just have to be prepared... right bro?"

Liam leans back as he listens to the crazy ramblings of his brother. He can't seem to get a word in edgewise but wouldn't know how to respond if he could...so he just listens. He wants to attribute his brother's state of mind to the nervousness of having a new baby but he couldn't ignore that his tone of voice spoke volumes. Something in his voice is saying that he desperately wants to be happy but is preparing himself...for something much darker.

The End

5. Scorpio Season and Us: Numb and Void

The first signs of spring can bring about some simple pleasures in life, such as a long walk in the park or the sound of children playing outside. However, not all activities are conducted so simplistically or productively. Unfortunately, with the spike in weather temperatures, there's often a spike in criminal activity. Officer Sam Hinton will respond to a variety of different emergency calls...from the less-serious to the detrimental. Sam was always one who looked at the greater scheme of things. But on this day...Sam finds out that sometimes seeing the greater scheme of things may cause you to miss the more important things...right there in front of you.

There's a pool of blood so thick and bright red...the police lights seemed to dance in the reflection of the puddle. There was too much blood on the ground...not be aware that this was a critical time to get help. A young

black man is standing in the street with a self-inflicted knife wound to one hand and a wooden-handled knife in the other. "You don't want to do this...son!" a desperate police officer pleads. Allen is just 16 years old and seriously injured. He shows no emotion but does respond, "You just don't understand...I need it back. I can't do this." The police officer tries to reason with Allen and replies, "Whatever you lost...we can help you get it back but you've lost a lot of blood. Let us get you some help." Allen doesn't even look like he's in pain and says, "Frankie is the only one that can give it back." Sam decides to take a more aggressive approach in a desperate attempt to save Allen's life. The other officers on the scene feel this type of suicide negotiation could backfire and ask, "Do you know what you're doing?" Sam justifies his tactic responding, "This kid doesn't want to kill himself or he would have done it by now. Trust me." The officer turns back to Allen and says, "Now listen to me. You have your family in a panic and

you are slowly bleeding to death...so put the knife down so we can get you taken care of! Don't punk out man...it takes more strength to fight." Allen looks at Officer Sam Hinton...still with no indication of whether he agreed or not...and drops the knife. He says one last thing before the police officers confiscate the knife and secure the scene, "What does it matter if I can't feel it?" The unit rushes in and gets Allen to the medic truck.

Sam's quick thinking may have saved this kid's life but still left him feeling uneasy. He had recently transferred to this particular inner-city precinct about 1 year ago to be closer to his sister, Joyce. Coincidentally, Joyce had suffered the loss of her teenage son to drinking and driving, as well. Joyce's husband had suddenly passed away after a sudden heart attack 2 years before her son's passing. This compounded her pain and increased her need for family support. Sam's shift has ended and he's packing some things in his locker. Another police officer that had been at

the scene walks by and pats Sam on the shoulder telling him, "Good job today...man. I really didn't know which way that was about to go." Sam replies, "It's lucky for him and me...that it went the right way. I think I'll stop by the hospital and check on him." The other officer seems to question the reason and asks, "What for?" Sam didn't feel the need to explain the recent tragedy in his own family, so he shook the other's officer's hand and headed out.

Sam arrives at the hospital and knocks on Allen's room door before entering. Allen is lying in bed and staring out of the window...oblivious to Sam even entering the room. Sam taps the end of the bed to get Allen's attention and offers a cheerful greeting. He said, "I just wanted to stop by and check on you. I meant it when I said I wanted to help you out." Allen slowly turns his head toward Sam and replies, "If you want to help me....find Frankie." Sam responds, "Yeah...you mentioned this kid Frankie, before. Is he a friend or relative that I can contact for you? Allen

answers, "I thought he was a friend but he wasn't...I was so stupid." Sam responds, "What did this kid take from you? Believe me, nothing's that important man." Allen slowly turns his head back toward the window and utters the words, "He took it all." Sam leaves that hospital room knowing that Allen is going to need some extensive mental counseling. Perhaps helping Allen...would ease some of his guilt for not being able to foresee his nephew's issues.

The next day included Sam's regularly scheduled brunch with his sister, Joyce. As they sit to eat they try to talk about the good things going but the conversation always seems to lead back to Joyce's son. She was convinced that he was handling his father's sudden death well...but she was wrong and carried that guilt. He was even going out more and making new friends. There was one new female friend in particular...but sadly she had never gotten a chance to meet her. She assumed that the funeral may have been too much for her to handle

emotionally. The brunch soon ended and the siblings hug each other goodbye until the next time.

Days later and on his last round of the day Sam gets a call about a vagrant acting erratically and bothering other customers at a corner store. Sam arrives to find the homeless man rambling and pleading loudly in front of the store. Another police officer tells him, "Yeah we know this guy. His name is Joe Blanco but everyone calls him Breezy. He's a neighborhood junkie that's usually harmless but sometimes he gets some bad dope and flips out." Sam asks the other officer, "So what should I do with him?" The other officer replies, "We can take him over to the VA hospital and they'll take him from there. They'll check him out and make sure he's ok. He's a regular." Sam heads over to the hospital with the Vietnam vet rambling on the back seat. Sam interacts by saying, "Hey, guy, I'm going to take you over to the hospital to get checked out. You probably just had a bad trip. Maybe they can even get you into a

treatment center and get you off that dope for good." The man responds, "I don't need the hospital and I don't need dope...I just need Franklin. Did you see which way he went?" Sam continues to talk with him, "Sorry, old-timer the store clerk didn't mention anyone else with you." The man contends and starts to reminisce, "My friend was there. We served together in Vietnam. When I saw all of my friends being killed I thought I would lose my mind...so he offered to take it from me. He was just about to give it back when you guys showed." Sam reassures the man by saying, "Right now you need to concentrate on getting better." The man begins to plead with him, "Please, you have to help me. I'm begging you...I need it." Sam tries to calm him down and says, "Ok...ok calm down. What's his name and where does he live?" Joe Blanco responds, "I don't know where he lives but his name is Private Franklin Little." Sam basically, tells him anything he wants to hear. Sam helps him out of the car and to a nurse. As she takes

him away Joe calls out to him, "He won't look old like me. He didn't change at all. He looks exactly, the same!" Sam looks and listens to him as he disappears into the building.

Sam was already in the area so he decides to visit Allen, as well. As he approaches the room he stops the nurse and asks, "I'm here to visit Allen...is he doing any better?" The nurse asks, "Are you a relative?" Sam responds, "No, I'm not a relative. I'm the police officer that responded that day and I'm just checking on him." The nurse takes a deep breath and then decides to talk with Sam about Allen's condition. She says, "I have to be honest...I'm having a hard time with him. He doesn't feel anything." Sam agrees with her and states, "Yeah, he was pretty depressed when we brought him in and pretty upset." The nurse looks around to make sure no one hears her and then says, "Are you sure...because I don't think you understand. Allen doesn't feel anything emotionally....or physically. Our tests aren't showing any apparent cause for

it. I have seen cases of anhedonia before whereas people have emotionally flat-lined but I rarely see cases whereas it affects the physical body, as well." Sam tries to comprehend what the nurse is telling him and asks, "If he doesn't feel anything emotionally or physically, how is he able to cope? The nurse responds, "The only way I can describe it is...a ticking time bomb. He's not only a danger to himself...but to everyone around him." Sam thanks her for the information and then proceeds in the room.

Allen is sitting up in bed eating when Sam walks in and says, "Hey, it's good to see you up with an appetite." He looks up from his plate, "I don't know what you want from me." Sam smiles and replies, "Hey, I just want you to be ok. You have your whole life ahead of you and you should be happy." Allen drops his fork in his plate and begins to speak in a monotone voice, "You're right...I should be happy and I should be sad...and when I shoved that knife through my hand, I should have felt pain...but I

didn't. He took something from me and until I get it back...I'm your worst nightmare." Sam couldn't tell if his encouragement was helping but in honor of his nephew...he refused to give up that easy. Before he leaves, he is compelled to turn around and ask Allen one last question, "Hey, Allen what's your friend's full name...maybe I can find him and you guys can squash whatever's going on?" Allen has begun to stare out of the window again and responds, "Frankie...Frankie Little." He pauses and then says, "Just make sure you're not broken inside because if you are...he just may find you." It doesn't hit Sam until he is in his car that Allen's friend had the exact, same name...as the veteran's friend.

At that moment, while Sam was still sitting in his car...Allen's nurse taps on his window. She felt the need to share some disturbing information that had been troubling her. She informed him of another incident similar to Allen's situation. There was a mother who had brought her 10-

year-old son to the emergency room. The child had been kicked out of school and disrespecting the mother on a grand scale in recent months. The mother attempted to discipline him and regain some type of control. She became panicked because of the way...he just stared at her while she reprimanded him without a reaction or acknowledgment. She said he even went a substantial amount of time without even blinking an eye. The mother assumed the child was having some sort of seizure and rushed him to the emergency room. Sam listens to the story and then asks, "What happened at the hospital?" The nurse responds, "Well, we assessed that the child was not having seizures...so a social worker was called. I walked into the room and saw the child bending back his fingers as if he was trying to break them. It appeared that he didn't even feel it and didn't care that I was watching. I wanted to run more tests but my supervisor didn't see the need...so he was released." Sam is trying to put the pieces together from her

story, "Are you saying he was like Allen?" The nurse definitively says, "They are exactly alike. Neither of them possesses a sense of touch, emotion or remorse. These people can move around us under the radar and no one notices the signs...until the damage is done." Sam listens to the nurse's account of the story but wonders why she has come to him, "I have a fear that there are more of these people out here. I'm asking you to talk with the mother and see if there's any connection between the two." Sam doesn't necessarily see a connection but finds the nurse attractive. After further conversation, he agrees to speak with the mother and takes the opportunity to ask the nurse out on a date.

Some days later, Sam decides to do an online person search in hopes of getting a glimpse of this Frankie Little character. The problem was he didn't know if he was looking for a Vietnam Veteran in his 70's or a young man in his early 20's, either way, nothing came up. Days

later...he had his regularly scheduled breakfast with his sister and then decided to visit the mother of the 10-year-old. He explained that his visit wasn't official but more out of concern for her situation. Surprisingly, the mother was more than eager to explain herself...as she was made to look like the villain. She explains, "My son was on the honor roll in school and never gave his teachers or me...a moment's trouble." Sam listens and then asks, "When did all of that change?" The mother does her best to give approximate timeframes, "Well, I know it became hectic last year when two different classmates and friends lost a parent each to opioid overdoses.

We attended the funerals together and he handled it rather well...or so I thought. That's until his two friends moved away with other relatives and he was devastated." Sam continues to ask questions, "What happened after that?" She continues, "There was a new student that joined his class. I never met the little boy but he was ecstatic about

having a new buddy. That's when all hell broke loose. He became belligerent, rude and out of control...at school and home. He said the little boy had stolen something but wouldn't tell me what it was." The story then takes a darker turn. She says, "I had a meeting with his teachers and attributed this bad behavior to hanging out with this new student but his teacher was very confused. She had never heard of this child. I was so upset that he had lied to me and gotten kicked out of school totally on his own accord. Yes, I was angry and chewing him out but I quickly realized that...something wasn't normal about him and I rushed him to the emergency room."

Sam asks her about recent developments between her and her son. She explained, "I am working closely with social services but they are ignoring what I'm trying to tell them...and if I press the issue...I'll come off looking like a crazy person." Sam encourages her to keep working with social services but asks one last question before leaving, "I

know this doesn't mean very much but would you happen to remember the little boy's name that your son claimed took something from him?" The mother doesn't remember right away and shows Sam to the door. Before she closes the door...the name suddenly comes to her and she says, "Little Frankie...I don't recall his last name but my son called him...Little Frankie. It doesn't matter anyway because he doesn't exist right?" Sam is floored and confused...which is something he has felt quite often lately. But now he is experiencing fear. The fear of connecting these random people in some dreadful way to one name and the pain...or lack thereof. If he presses forward he might find something that he'd wish he hadn't...but now he is compelled. He decides to make a trip to Allen's house and speak with his family. When a police officer randomly shows up on your doorstep you're not exactly expecting good news...so Sam wasn't surprised by the initial cold greeting. A woman in her 70's opens the

door and asks the reason for the visit. Sam explains that he was the officer that responded to the call that saved Allen's life. The woman's demeanor immediately changed and invited Sam inside. She says, "I'm Allen's grandmother, Hattie. I was just about to cut me a piece of chocolate cake. Come on in and join me." Sam follows her inside but declines the offer of cake, "Oh no...I can't but thank you. I have been going by to check on Allen at the hospital and just wanted to know if I could help in any way." Hattie says, "Yeah, this has thrown me for a whole different loop. This child has been my rock since he's been living with me and then he just changed." Sam asks, "How long has he been here with you?" Hattie lifts a coffee mug and asks, "Coffee?" Sam nods his head yes to a cup of coffee and sits down. Hattie pours the coffee and says, "He's been with me since he was 12 years old. His mother, my daughter, was found dead in an abandoned house. She had been in the streets for years and Allen's dad had never been in his

life...so he came to live with me. Losing a child is something you never get over. You just cope." Sam responds, "I imagine it had to be hard for Allen, too." Hattie remembers the time, "That child was my rock. He took care of me and that's the only way I made it through. He's lost some other friends along the way but most recently his best friend, Kelvin, was killed. He dedicated his time to Kelvin's mom and little sister since his death until they moved away." Sam replies, "It's funny that you should mention that...because he did mention a friend but the name was Frankie...not Kelvin." Hattie, "Yes, he does have a new friend named Frankie." Sam asks, "Ms. Hattie do you know where I can find this Frankie kid. Allen seems to be convinced that this Frankie has the answers to a lot of his questions. I promised him that I would try to talk to him." Hattie responds, "Well, I can't help you there. I have only spoken to him once on the phone...he wanted to come by and visit me for some reason but I was leaving with my

sister. All I know is he and Allen would meet at the basketball court faithfully every morning. Its right across from the little smoke shop on Livingston Ave and Alum so maybe you can catch him there." Sam thanks Ms. Hattie for the coffee and conversation. He also gives her a card with his phone number on it should she remember any other details on how to find Frankie."

In the upcoming days, in addition to working his shift, he goes back by the Veteran's hospital to find out if there may be some record of a Private Frankie Little or Franklin Little on the patient's list. Now...he's thinking that it may be the case of a grandfather and grandson with the same name. Once again, he had come to a dead-end with no record of this name or person. He explains his dilemma to a passing staff member. He can't find a record of this person anywhere. She asks, "Where did you come across the name?" Sam explains, "I'm trying to help a veteran that I transported to the hospital. He's trying to locate a fellow

soldier." She shakes her head and offers a reason for the lack of information and asks, "Are you sure that this person even exists?" Sam asks, "What do you mean?" The staff member says, "After seeing and experiencing what these vets have gone through you'd be surprised as to what the mind can do. Sometimes even create people or places for comfort." Sam leaves taking what the staff member said into account and thinks it could be plausible when applied to Joe Blanco but what about Allen? After all...Ms. Hattie had actually, spoken to this Frankie person on the phone.

While on his shift...he decided to stop in the smoke shop and speak with the clerk. He walks in and is greeted, "Good day, Officer," the clerk says. Sam replied, "Good day. I just wanted to ask you about a kid named Allen...he plays basketball across the street a lot." The clerk replies, "Sure, I know Allen. He's a good kid. He isn't in any trouble is he?" Sam responds, "Oh no...It's nothing like that. I'm actually, looking for a friend of his by the name of

Frankie." The clerk thinks for a moment and says, "I don't know of anyone by that name and Allen doesn't have very many friends. There was his friend Kelvin but he was killed not long ago." Sam notices a security camera over the entrance and at the very top of the building. He asks, "Hey... does that security camera capture any footage of the basketball court?" The clerk says, "Yeah, I'm sure it does." Sam sits down at the computer and starts to pull up video footage showing an area of the basketball court. He focused on the early morning hours from at least 2 months ago. Sure enough...faithfully each morning Allen is captured playing basketball on the court...just as described. But disturbingly, Allen was always alone. Sam had reached another dead end...there was no Frankie there on that court with him but then it reveals something else. It shows Allen making some kind of gesture with this hand. Sam then leans in and watches Allen talk to someone and gives dap. Dap is something friends do with their hands when saying

hello or good-bye but eerily...there was no one there. One thing's for sure either Allen was losing his mind or Sam was losing his.

He decides to return to Allen's hospital room and speak with him but the nurse informs him that Allen had been released. He pulls her to the side and explains that he had been doing his own, research and found her concerns had validity. However, he was reluctant to tell her how dark the validation could be.

Sam was scheduled to meet with his sister the next morning for breakfast so he heads to bed early. During the early morning hours, Sam is awoken by a call from Ms. Hattie. She says, "Officer Hinton, this is Ms. Hattie...Allen's grandmother." Sam inquires, "Ms. Hattie...are you ok? Is Allen ok?" She responds, "Yes...I'm ok, but I'm worried about Allen...he's heading to the basketball court to meet with that Frankie boy. His hand is still in bandages...so it just doesn't make sense. I'm

worried." He says, "Don't worry...I'm on way" and hangs up the phone. When Sam finds Allen sitting on the basketball court...he asks, "Hey Allen, you look like you're waiting for somebody. If you're waiting for this Frankie kid...whatever he has...maybe you're better off without it." Allen looks at Sam without any emotion and says, "No...but maybe my grandmother is better off without it. She is still hurting from my mother's death so maybe he can take her pain and give me back mine." Sam tries to reason with Allen and asks, "Why would you want him to give you pain?" Allen responds, "I met him here...the day after my friend Kelvin was killed. I was crumbling inside and he understood everything I was going through. He said he could make all the pain go away. I thought he was bullshitting but...what did I have to lose? So I gave it to him." Sam is looking for a straight forward answer and asks, "Son, I can't help you if you don't talk to me." Allen looks at Sam and says, "He was a wendigo...he didn't just

take the pain...he fed off of any emotion or feeling that I had. So you see...I wasn't trying to kill myself...I was just trying to feel something again."

Sam tries to reason with Allen, "I'm here to tell you that this person doesn't have that kind of power, over you. We all have obstacles in our lives but with proper counseling, you will be okay." Allen says, "It felt good for a couple of days...not having to care for anyone or about anything but you can't live like that. He leaves us like this...in return we cause more trauma and the cycle goes on and on." Sam asks, "If you really, believed this...why would you take this person to your grandmother?" Allen does his best to explain his thought process, "If he took my grandmother's pain...I would be free from him...and her. I was only 12-years-old when she became totally, dependent on me after my mother's death."

Sam is visibly shaken after listening to this story and more so...because he has looked over the community of

people that he interacts with every day and sees the trauma that they cause each other with lack of remorse or feeling. He looks at his phone and realizes that he had forgotten the breakfast with his sister and she had called and left messages. He decides to listen to the messages later because he feels compelled to stop Allen. He says, "Listen...it doesn't matter if I believe you or not. The most important thing is that you believe this thing is happening to you so I'm asking you not to involve your grandmother with this guy until I get help." Allen agrees to give him time to find help.

Sam remembers the similar story shared by the homeless man so he returns to that area in hopes of finding Joe Blanco. Although he sees several vagrants, Joe Blanco is not one of them. Just as he is about to give up...he notices a man making it up the street pushing a shopping cart. He pulls him over and yells, "Hey, I need to talk to you." Joe Blanco yells back, "I'm not doing anything

wrong." Sam tries to explain, "No, it's me the officer that took you to the hospital. You asked me to find someone named...Frankie Little." The homeless man stops and inquires, "Did you find him?" Sam replies, "No I haven't found him yet but I need to know what he took from you in Vietnam." The homeless man begins to tell his story, "I was afraid from the very beginning but when I began losing my friends...I became petrified. Then I met Private Franklin Little and he seemed to have it all together. He said, 'I know how afraid you are but I can make it go away.' So I gave all my fear to him and I survived my tour of duty...but I was never the same. I came home to a girlfriend and family that I no longer could connect with or love. I looked for him but no one knew who the hell I was talking about. But I saw him that day in the store and then he was gone." Sam says, "Don't give up. I'll keep looking for him." Sam decides to go back by the store that he had removed the

man that day to view the footage and hopefully prove that this Franklin person does exist.

The owner pulls up the footage from that day and sure enough, he sees the homeless man walking around the store in what seems to be a conversation with himself...but Sam knew he was not alone. He wanted someone to tell him he was crazy for believing that he was dealing with something other than a severely depressed young man and a disturbed drug-addict Vietnam veteran who all seem to be fighting the same demons. He decides to stop in a church and ask the pastor for his advice.

Before sitting down with the pastor...Sam listens to his sister's voicemail message informing him that she had finally connected with her son's friend and would be meeting her on Friday. Sam had been so distracted...he felt better knowing she had someone else to talk to. The priest listens to Sam talk about this invisible "Frankie" person who has impacted so many lives...at the risk of sounding

crazy. Surprisingly, the pastor listens to the entire testimony without hesitation or judgment. The pastor seems a little more level headed and says, "It seems like both men have experienced trauma fairly young and never had time to grieve. We see it all the time in our communities but we expect them to go to school and go through life acting responsibly in this mental state. Bring the young man by here and let me talk with him." Sam was just happy to have someone willing to help him.

Once they met up with the pastor Sam asks if he should step out to give them privacy. The pastor replied, "No Sam, I want you to stay because...I want you to hear this. When I was 12...I lost 2 of my older cousins due to violence. My mother sent me to stay with the youngest cousin more often to keep him company after his brothers' passing. One day...my auntie told me that my cousin had met a new kid on the block and they were at the park. She told me to run to the park and bring him home...so I did. I

saw my cousin sitting on the ground talking and interacting like he was with someone...but he was all alone. As he got up and started walking with me...he suddenly turned around as if someone had called his name. I turned around and then I saw it. It was a man-like figure but very skinny with dark and sunken eyes with its empty stomach caved inward...so much so, that its ribs were protruding against its gray skin. Its long slithery tongue was hanging out of its mouth and its feet were hooved like an animal. It looked at my cousin in a desperate cannibalistic way as if I had interrupted its meal. I was terrified and told my mother that I never wanted to go back...but soon after she told me there was no need.

My cousin had become withdrawn and unmanageable...there was no laughter, anymore. I can only assume...that thing had finally got what it wanted from my cousin that day. That's the main reason I became a priest...I know that our loved ones are being hunted by this demon in

their weakest moments in life and the pain goes unnoticed or unaddressed." The pastor speaks to Allen and tells him that they need to have an uncomfortable conversation. He explains he has to be completely honest when talking about the memories of his mother...the good and the bad. Allen then speaks about the pain, shame, and confusion he experienced when he was told his mother had been found dead. He spoke about neglecting his own needs to be there for his grandmother and feeling rejected by his father. When Allen speaks his truth...the pastor begins to pray for him. The pastor knew that bringing that pain up to the surface wouldn't be a pleasant experience.

When Allen recants the painful moments in his life his chest begins to rise but incredibly, he does not exhale. The pastor knows that there's a spiritual battle is being waged inside Allen's body and soul. The pastor puts his hand on Allen's chest and says, "Breath son. It's okay to remember your mother and its okay to talk about losing

your friends. It's okay to feel pain because without pain...how would we know joy? Breathe son...release that pain...and let it out!" Sam looks in horror as Allen's chest has risen to an unnatural size and capacity. The inhaled air is then violently released from his chest accompanied by hellish screams and moans of torment. Sam covers his ears in fear of his eardrums being burst from the dangerous decibels of noise. Allen begins to cry showing the first signs of emotion that Sam has ever seen...since meeting him. The pastor continues to encourage him and says, "You've been holding it in for far too long." Suddenly there's a crashing sound that knocked the pastor to the floor and shook the church walls. When the eruption was over...there sat the beast on the back pew of the church. The pastor laid there paralyzed but immediately regained his composure. He stands to his feet only to be suddenly grabbed by his throat by this demonic beast. The pastor speaks, "There are no souls here for you to feed on! Get

Out!" The beast hesitates and then speaks in a low demonic growl, "No matter...there are plenty" ...and disappears. Even though, this battle had been won...the pastor knew the beast was right. People are numb to the world around them...trading their souls but at what price?

On Friday, Sam remembered that Joyce had canceled their breakfast together some days before. He had grappled back and forth as to whether he would share the story of his terrifying supernatural experience with her. He often wondered how she didn't lose her mind after burying her husband and then her son. He decides to give her a call to check on her. Sam says, "Hey, are you on the way to meet up with this girl now?" Joyce replies, "Yes, I am and I see why my son was so captivated. She says she even can help me with my coping skills and right about now I'm open to anything. Lately, it's been pretty bad." Sam says, "I'm sorry I haven't been available lately but that's a story for another time. So, what's her name?" Joyce answers

him, "Her name is Frannie...Frannie Little." Sam drops his glass which shatters all over the floor. He screams, "Joyce, listen to me don't go! Joyce, turn around!" Just as he's trying to warn her a surge of static comes over the phone line that distorts his words. Joyce asks, "Sam, are you there? I can't hear you...so I'll just call you later. I love you, bro!"

Trauma screenings are dangerously low in a lot of inner-city communities leaving adults and children to self-medicate or suffer in silence. Wherever there is pain...the wendigo will always offer its hand. Was Joyce on the way to meet this beast and stealer of souls? As supportive as Sam had tried to be for his sister...he could never really know her pain. If asked...he would like to believe that Joyce would choose pain over no emotion at all...but who's to say.

The End

6. Scorpio Season and Us: Steps and Stones

Some people say the best way to describe a healthy relationship is the way the couple deals with an argument. Asia Monroe is confident that her marriage will be perfect because she and her fiancé, Micheal Lopez, don't argue at all. They met Norfolk, VA and have exclusively dated for 4 years. Even though Micheal has been married once and has children...Asia has never been married and has none. They also differ quite a bit in financial statuses but what Micheal lacks in funds he more than makes up for in other ways. Micheal has a set of twin girls from his first marriage living in California with his ex-wife. The girls are 11-years-old and share Micheal's birthday on November 1st. Now the couple has happily decided to tie the knot. When Micheal left his first wife and children...shamefully his support was non-existent and secondary to his new-found lifestyle. Whenever he would start to feel remorseful about the

abandonment, Asia would quickly entice him and redirect his attention back to her. But Asia had to grin and bear it when surprisingly, news came that Micheal's ex-wife was allowing the girls to attend their wedding and stay for the summer. Asia hid her disappointment because she wanted her romantic honeymoon and Micheal all to herself. She reluctantly agreed to wait until after the kids have left. She curiously searched up pictures of Micheal's ex-wife, to compare her looks to her own, as many women commonly do. She honestly felt as though she was a huge upgrade and has what it takes to keep Micheal happy. No one had ever accused Asia of being humble. In reality, her narcissistic behavior was only matched by Micheal's...and that made them quite a couple. Asia dictated how Micheal and his ex-wife would communicate about the children. She had no qualms about monitoring their Facebook messages for her own, assurance that they only pertained to the children. You would think that a man such as Micheal would put his

foot down but Asia's large bank account made him privy to the lifestyle that he was now grown accustomed to. So he stroked her ego and obliged her wishes to keep her happy at the expense of developing a healthy relationship with his daughters.

The twins, Lola and Leslie, arrived on May 25th as scheduled for the June 5th wedding. They had grown so much since the last time Micheal had seen them and he was overjoyed. Asia thought that they strongly resembled Micheal more than their mother. She readily admitted that any obvious reminder of Micheal's ex-wife would have been extremely annoying. As they settle in the car to leave the airport, Micheal says, "I'd better call your mom to let her know that you guys have arrived safely. I don't want her biting my head off." Lola responds, "Oh yeah, mommy got me this phone so we can keep in touch with her. You have to know that she's not your biggest fan right now...with the wedding and everything. Besides, I called

her when we landed.” Asia quickly redirects the conversation to a more desirable subject for her than Micheal contacting his ex-wife. She addresses the girls, “We’re so happy to have you both here with us. Believe me, we are going to have so much fun.” Leslie speaks, “We have missed you, dad, so much.” He looks in the rearview mirror at his daughters and replies, “I have missed my girls too...my mistake, my young ladies now.”

The girls are so amazed by the size of the house they can hardly contain their joy. In their minds, his absence in their lives was due to him becoming a successful businessman, but they were wrong. Asia’s family was considered well-to-do after successfully starting a lucrative insurance agency. Micheal was employed at the company as an insurance agent but quickly moved up into a managerial position after he and Asia started dating. If one would ask why he hadn’t been consistent with child support payments and visitation...the perception would be that he

simply didn't care. It wasn't hard to see that Micheal had begun a whole new life and career without them.

Asia informs the girls that they will meet her niece, Skyy who is 12, the next day. She has made plans to go shopping with her best friend, Rena who is Skyy's mother. Micheal had made plans to go to the gun range, as target shooting is a hobby that he enjoys. Later that night as everyone is getting ready to retire for the evening Lola and Leslie have a conversation in their room. Leslie asks her sister, "Can you believe how big this house is?" Lola replies, "It's so cool, daddy made sure it was perfect for us. I told you everything was going to be great." Leslie asks, "Do you think dad missed us as much as we missed him?" Lola responds, "Of course, he did. I told you it was our mother...who ran him off and kept him away." Leslie then asks another question, "So, what do you think about Asia." Lola responds "It's natural that he was lonely without us...so he found someone but soon he'll see that he doesn't

need her either. We're here now." They soon turn off the lamp and go to bed.

Meanwhile, Micheal and Asia are having a conversation of their own. Micheal says, "I can't believe how big they are." Asia agrees with the sentiment, "See, I told you they wouldn't hold it against you. Kids understand that sometimes a dad has to leave and pursue his career to make a better life for them." Micheal responds, "Yeah, but I wonder if they would understand if they knew how I just up and left their mother with nothing." Asia reassures him, "You shouldn't have to stay anywhere you're not happy but you're happy now. Besides, you can make up for it now...with my help." He kisses her passionately and turns off the nightstand light for bed.

The next morning Asia and Micheal wake up to the smell of breakfast cooking. They walk in the kitchen to find Lola cooking pancakes while Leslie watches. Lola greets them and says, "Good morning you two. Daddy, I cooked

your favorite...blueberry pancakes.” He kisses Lola on the forehead and says, “Oh baby girl, I can’t believe you remembered.” Lola gives Leslie her serving of pancakes, as well, and replies, “Of course, I did Daddy. Now sit down and enjoy.” Asia pours coffee and protests, “No baby...too many carbs. You have to fit that suit perfectly on our wedding day. You have to keep your weight down.” He responds in a very disappointed voice, “I know...I know. Thank you, sweetie, but the boss says I have to watch my waistline.” Asia looks over to the kids and rudely says, “No problem guys, it’s just more for you but by the looks of it...you might want to consider cutting some carbs, as well. Honey, we have to get dressed anyway, we have a lot to do today.” The twins then look at each other and then their expressions drastically change. As Micheal and Asia turn to head back upstairs, they are startled by a huge crash against the floor. They turn around to see the plate of pancakes shattered on the kitchen floor. He runs back into the

kitchen, “Are you ok...did you get cut?” Lola replies, “It just slipped off the counter.” He calms her and says, “Oh honey, it’s just a plate. It’s no big deal.” He grabs a broom to sweep up the broken glass as Asia grabs the dustpan to help. Asia says, “Maybe you girls are too young to be cooking in the kitchen...I don’t want to lose any more dishes.” Leslie responds, “Our mom lets us cook at home.” Asia then asks, “Speaking of your mom, have either of you spoken to her this morning? I would like to know her thoughts on putting you girls on a little diet over the summer.” Lola responds, “Yeah, she’s ok. She said she might even take a trip of her own while we’re gone.” Micheal chimes in, “Well, that sounds nice. I’m sure she could use it.” After cleaning, they all head upstairs to get dressed for a day of activities.

Asia and Lola arrive at the mall to meet up with her best friend Rena and her daughter. Leslie declined the shopping trip and wanted to spend more time with her

dad...so she went with him target shooting. Asia explained that Skyy was actually, her best friend's daughter and not a blood relative. Asia giddily introduces Lola to the mother and daughter team. The women were especially interested in getting their nails done so they give the girls some pocket money to do some shopping in the mall. Skyy cheerfully says, "Hey, I'm glad you're here so we can hang out. Whenever I stay with Auntie Asia and Uncle Mike, it gets a little boring." Lola is confused and asks, "Why would you stay at my dad's house?" Skyy shuffles through some clothing racks and replies, "Oh, if my mom goes out of town with one of her boyfriends, I stay with them. They treat me like a daughter." Lola is quickly enraged and says, "Well he has his real daughters now. So when the whore leaves you again...you'll have to find somewhere else to go." Lola storms out the store to find Asia and Rena sitting in a nail shop awaiting service. She approaches the women with Skyy close behind and says, "I don't feel well. Can we

go now?” Rena looks at Skyy with a disappointed expression and says, “But we just got here. We haven’t had a chance to get our nails done.” Lola ignores Rena’s plea and looks at Asia waiting for an answer to her question. Asia is annoyed but says, “Well, if she’s really, not feeling well...we’d better head home. We’ll get together later this week.” Lola storms out of the shopping mall toward the car. Asia hugs her best friend and daughter good-bye before getting in the car to leave.

Asia is unsure if Lola is really sick or just upset about something, so she decides to inquire. “Did anything happen at the mall to upset you? You can tell me.” Lola looks at Asia and asks, “Were you trying to replace me with Skyy? Were you using her so my dad would forget about us?” Asia quickly denies the allegation, “Honey...we would never do that. Your father loves you very much.” Lola replies, “I know he loves me and he definitely, doesn’t need a whore’s daughter hanging around trying to replace

us.” Asia pulls the car over completely astonished by the foul language and says, “Listen, I don’t appreciate you speaking about my friend like that. Skyy is a perfectly mannered little girl...who I think you could take some lessons from.” Lola responds sarcastically in a mild-mannered voice and says, “I’m sorry, I’m only going by what her daughter said.” At this point, Asia feels like it’s best to let Michael deal with this. She had been completely blindsided by a different child than they had picked up from the airport and she was not prepared.

In the meantime, Micheal is spending time with Leslie at the gun range. Leslie is visibly disturbed by the loud noises of guns being fired. He tries to encourage her by explaining safety regulations and the need for protection. He says, “There’s no rush but at some point, I’m going to make sure you know how to handle a gun safely.” Leslie replies, “But Dad, I don’t need it.” Micheal offers a scenario, “But what if you need to protect your

mom or sister?” Leslie responds, “There are lots of ways to hurt people without guns and some are even painless.” He stops in his tracks during the comment and asks, “Honey, what are you talking about?” Leslie declines to continue the conversation and adjusts the ear protection earmuffs to her ears. Soon after, they pack up to head home for the day.

When they arrive back at the home, they are greeted in the driveway by Asia. Micheal tells Leslie to go ahead in the house while he speaks to Asia. Asia says, “Babe, I think we have a problem. Your daughter is jealous of the time we spend with Skyy and was very rude.” Micheal responds, “Honey, that’s silly. All girls get jealous of each other, it’s no big deal.” Asia desperately tries to make him understand how rude Lola was and says, “Micheal, she called Rena a whore. That mother of hers should have taught her some manners.” This finally gets his attention and he replies, “Okay, I’ll speak with her. I’m sure it’s nothing...she

probably just has that protective Scorpio thing going on.”

Once again he makes light of the situation and laughs.

Later that evening, Micheal goes into the kids’ room to speak with Lola about her behavior. He starts, “Sweetheart, I heard about the conversation you had with Asia and her feelings are very hurt. I want you to know that I’m not mad but that can’t happen again. You are a beautiful young lady and I want you to act accordingly.” Lola replies, “Daddy, I was only repeating what her daughter said but you’re right. I will apologize. Asia has been wonderful and I didn’t mean to hurt her.” He seems satisfied with her answer and says, “That’s my baby girl. You know that no one could ever take your place, don’t you?” Lola answers with confidence, “Of course not, Daddy...that’s silly.” He kisses their foreheads and playfully tickles Leslie before leaving the room for bed.

Micheal then returns to his bedroom quite impressed with his parenting skills and tells Asia that

everything has worked out. He says, “Well, I think you overreacted a bit but Lola wants to apologize to you. She adores you but I’m not so sure about her hanging around Skyy. I never knew that she had such a filthy mouth on her.” Asia sits up in bed confused as to how Skyy has now become the deviant and asks, “What do you mean?” Micheal adds, “Well, she’s calling her own, mother a whore. That’s not the type of influence that I want around my girls.” Asia seems almost insulted that he would say that and asks, “...and you actually, believe that?” He says, “How about giving my daughter the benefit of the doubt. Don’t forget she’s soon to be your daughter too.” Asia realizes that he has a point and says, “Okay, you’re right. Let’s just wipe the slate clean and start over.” They kiss before heading to bed in hopes of a brand new beginning with the girls.

Asia wakes up to the smell of coffee brewing. She hears Micheal with the kids in the kitchen preparing to go

to work. As he pours a cup of coffee Asia comes up behind him and hugs him around his waist. She jokes with him “Baby I know I’m the one trying to get pregnant but you’re the one gaining the weight.” He laughs and turns around to give her a good morning kiss “Ha Ha...very funny.”

Suddenly, she is confronted by Lola standing there asking, “Are you trying to get pregnant?” Asia assumes Lola’s question is rhetorical and asks, “Good morning kids, how did you sleep?” Leslie pleasantly answers her, “I slept pretty well.” Lola demands an answer, “I said...are you trying to get pregnant?” Micheal notices the aggressive tone and answers, “Well, honey, of course, we hope to start a family. Wouldn’t you like another little brother or sister?”

Leslie then hugs Asia and says, “That would be wonderful.” Lola, on the other hand, struggles to compose herself and says, “Yes daddy that would be nice.” Micheal ends the conversation by saying, “Alright ladies, have a good day and I’ll check you out later.” Lola eases back

upstairs to quietly display her anger in the bathroom. The thought of Asia becoming pregnant with her father's child made her physically ill. Leslie enters the bathroom behind her and tries to encourage positivity. Lola turns to her and says, "Did you hear that bitch? She's trying to get pregnant and get rid of us." Leslie responds, "Well, maybe a little brother wouldn't be so bad." Lola asks, "And where do you think that leaves us?" Leslie then sees her point of view and asks, "What if she tries to make us leave? Where are we going to go?" Lola reassures her by saying, "Don't worry, I told you I would take care of everything and I will. We're not going anywhere." She puts her arms around Leslie to convince her that everything was going to be okay and thinks about her next move.

That afternoon, Micheal and the kids are playing basketball in the driveway when they hear a scream come from the house. They run into the house to see what's happening and find Asia standing on a kitchen chair. She

screams, “A mouse, it just ran under the stove. Micheal, do something!” He begins to laugh and replies, “It’s just a little mouse.” At this point, the girls start to laugh too and he says, “Okay, I’ll put some rat poison down behind the stove. C’mon kids let’s get it from the garage.” Micheal takes a large bucket down from the top shelf, puts on gloves and removes a portion of the powdery substance to take in the house. Lola asks, “Dad, why don’t you just keep it in the house? That’s where my mom keeps it.” He gives a warning in his response, “This stuff is so strong and dangerous to people it’s better to keep it here until we need it.” They soon head back inside to put the poison down behind the stove and refrigerator.

That night Asia’s taking some pain reliever for a headache. The days before a wedding are said to be the most stressful. She and Micheal also discuss a budget for school clothes and supplies when the children head back home. She is more than happy to help out financially as

long as they are far away with their mother and out of her hair. Micheal makes a suggestion, "Maybe you should talk with my ex-wife before you buy anything, just to be sure." Asia has always felt that messaging was a sufficient form of communication, "Honey do you think that's my place?" He says, "Listen the money that we're spending is mostly yours. At some point, you two will need to have a conversation." She concurs and says, "I suppose you're right. I'll just let the kids know to put me on the phone with her the next time she calls." Asia exits the master bedroom and enters the kid's bedroom to discuss her plans with them. She asks, "Hey girls, did you call your mom today?" Lola answers for both of them, "Yes, we spoke with her this morning." Asia lets them in on her plans, "We want to make sure you have everything for school when the summer ends. So I want to speak with your mom to make sure we get everything you need." Leslie quickly sits up in bed and asks, "When?" Asia puts her at ease, "Maybe the

next time she calls you but there's no rush." Lola ends the conversation and says, "Okay, no problem." Asia kisses their foreheads and leaves the room.

Leslie turns to Lola in a panic, "What the hell are we going to do now? She's sending us back at the end of summer." Lola calms her down and says, "Relax, the wedding is in a couple of days. She'll be too distracted to remember. I need you to trust me, relax and let me deal with it." Even at the same age, Lola has taken on the more protective role of the twins. She spoke with such confidence and determination Leslie felt comfortable that she indeed had everything under control.

The next morning, Lola gets up and prepares breakfast for everyone. She understands that Asia is watching her weight carefully to look her best for the wedding. Lola wants to show her support by making her freshly squeezed orange juice and allows Leslie to pour the glasses. Asia appreciates Lola's efforts but tends to show

more favoritism toward Leslie because of the rocky start between the two. The day went along without incident but by 2:00 pm Asia was experiencing menstrual cramps that put her back in bed. Lola steps in to help with dinner and give as much support as possible. She figured all the support around the house would be recognized when the twins ask Micheal if they can stay permanently. Micheal is very appreciative of all the help around the house and figures Asia will be too.

The next day and now 3 days before the wedding, Rena shows up bright and early to go over any last-minute arrangements with Asia. As she waits in the kitchen for Asia to come downstairs, Lola offers her some freshly squeezed orange juice but Rena graciously declines. Asia finally arrives in the kitchen and looks absolutely, drained. Rena is aghast at Asia's appearance, "Asia, you look horrible...you are getting married in a couple of days!" Leslie hands Asia some orange juice as she starts to speak

to Rena. She says, “I think I might have a stomach virus. I’m just cramped.” Rena asks the question, “Do you think your monthly is coming on?” Asia shuts down the notion and says, “I thought so but now, I don’t. I think it’s just nerves.” Lola steps in to offer a suggestion, “Why don’t you two go on a spa date and just relax. Leslie and I will be fine for a few hours.” Asia responds, “I don’t know about just leaving you girls. Maybe I should just wait for Micheal instead of leaving you alone.” Lola reassures her, “You deserve to look your best and we are not babies. Go on and enjoy your day you need this.” Rena doubles down on the sentiment and says, “Listen to your stepdaughter. She’s thinking of you, as a good daughter should.” Asia finally agrees...believing Micheal will be home in an hour or so. Asia was not made aware that Micheal had sent a message stating he would be working late.

She returns to find a very angry Micheal sitting at the kitchen table. She greets him and says, “Hey babe. I

hope you ordered in because I feel awful and don't feel like cooking." He looks at her and says, "Where the hell have you been?" She is totally confused and answers, "Didn't the girls tell you I went to the spa to get my hair and nails done?" Micheal frowns and asks, "So your hair and nails mean more than my kids? Why didn't you take them with you? You knew I wouldn't be home until late tonight." Asia tries to explain, "Honey I didn't know that and the kids wanted to stay here until you got home. They didn't want to be treated like babies." Micheal replies, "Lola tells me that Leslie has been crying because you wouldn't take her with you. I'm starting to believe that you have something against my daughters." Asia immediately defends her actions, "Honey, I didn't know you were working late and I absolutely, adore Leslie. It's true Lola and I have had some run-ins but I wouldn't just hurt her feelings either." He storms out of the room and leaves Asia speechless. She questions herself...why wouldn't Lola

relay Micheal's message and then insist on her leaving? Not only is Asia confused but she's also cramping again. She heads upstairs to calm Micheal down and resolve the argument. The energy of the house had drastically changed in that short amount of time. She's has been feeling absolutely horrible and now she and Micheal are arguing, which is something they never do. It's like their lives were suddenly changing overnight and she didn't know why.

The next morning and now 2 days before the wedding, Asia wants to have a one-on-one conversation with Lola. Asia feels as though Leslie is an absolute joy to be around but wants Lola to understand that she will never destroy what she and Micheal have. Micheal is sleeping in and she hears the children downstairs in the kitchen, so she takes the opportunity to speak frankly. As she enters the kitchen, she is immediately greeted with smiles, scrambles eggs and fresh fruit juice. She wants to keep the same positive energy going so she accepts breakfast before

beginning to speak. Asia starts by apologizing to Leslie, “Listen, sweetie, if I made you feel like you weren’t welcome to come along yesterday, I’m sorry. Your dad said you were pretty upset with me.” Lola interrupts the apology and speaks for Leslie, “She didn’t want to sit around a beauty parlor all day. We had fun right here watching TV and playing video games. Do you want some more eggs, I made plenty?”

Asia was now sure that either she had stepped into the Twilight Zone or she was being set up by her future step-daughter, Lola. This was the second argument between Asia and Micheal that involved conflicting stories from Lola. She now knows to keep Micheal close because she has other influences working against her to cause unnecessary conflict. Asia saw no need to pursue a relationship between Lola and herself. She would play her part until the end of summer and send them back expeditiously. She started with whole-heartedly

apologizing to Micheal for her bad judgment and lets him know that his children are a priority in her life. She wants him to believe that, anyway. She knows this move will show solidarity on her part and deter any of Lola's misleading efforts.

In the early morning hours of the next morning and 1 day before the wedding, Micheal is awakened by a call. It's the police informing Micheal that his ex-wife had been found dead in her home. He is in shock and horrified. He asks them, "Oh my God...what happened to her?" The police officer informs him, "It looks like an apparent suicide. There are empty pill bottles all over the scene." He thanks the officers for the call and wakes Asia to tell her the news. After the initial shock, they both agree to let the children sleep and break the news to them in the morning.

Later that same morning, Asia is desperately sick at the stomach and heads downstairs. She has been taking all kinds of pain relievers and indigestion liquids to mask the

discomfort. Her stomach pain is getting worse by the day and this news is not making it any better. The kids are already downstairs so she says, “Hey guys. Your dad is on the way downstairs and we want to talk to you about your mom.” Lola quickly responds before anything else can be said and says, “Oh yeah, we talked to mom this morning about the school supplies and she said whatever you get is fine with her.” Asia is stunned by the statement because she knows they could not have spoken with their mother...she was already dead. Why was Lola lying?

Micheal soon joins them in the kitchen and delivers the bad news of their mother’s death. The girls are inconsolable and clinging to their dad for support. This was the wrong time for Asia to confront Lola, as this could cause a serious argument with Micheal, so she’s quiet for now. Later that day Asia informs him that she is leaving with Rena to meet with the caterer, she asks him to step out into the hallway, for privacy. She goes into detail, “I’m

going with Rena to make sure the menu is correct for the wedding tomorrow.” Micheal seems surprised, “Honey, we can’t ask the girls to be in this wedding right after the death of their mother.” Asia seems understanding and says, “Of course not. We’ll have someone sit home with them during the wedding and we’ll return home before the reception. Honey, I hope you’re not thinking of canceling our wedding for someone who’s not even a part of our family. People have flown in and made arrangements to be here for us.” He takes a deep breath and has realized that she is making sense. His ex-wife’s death was no reason to cancel their wedding that had been planned for months. He agrees that she should go ahead with preparations and walks with her downstairs. Unbeknownst to them, Lola has been listening to their conversation at the bedroom door and is bedside herself with rage. How dare Asia continue this wedding and disregard the twin’s feelings.

Rena is already waiting and greets Micheal as they leave. During their drive, Asia shares her selfish thoughts about the ex-wife's death. She speculates if Micheal's ex-wife killed herself in hopes of ruining their wedding day and forever associating her death with their union. Rena shows consideration and asks, "How are the kids holding up?" Asia answers, "Micheal has been consoling them. But I have been planning this for almost a year and I won't let anybody ruin my wedding...not his kids and especially, an ex-wife. We had never even spoken." Rena asks, "Are you saying you haven't spoken to this woman since the girls have been in your home?" Asia shakes her head and says, "No, I haven't and the girls said they were speaking to her daily but now I'm finding out how much of a liar Lola is." Rena says, "It's just so sad. Maybe the children leaving and the wedding of her ex-husband sent her into a depression. Maybe they were just embarrassed." Rena's thoughts seem to make sense so Asia responds, "I don't know...maybe."

Asia then begins to cough aggressively and sits back to say, “I don’t know what’s going on with me. I’m sick as a dog but I won’t let anything spoil this wedding.” Rena asks, “I hate to bring this up but have you even began to think about your biggest challenge?” Asia inquires, “What are you talking about?” Rena states, “You better find out who’s going to take the kids now that their mom is dead. Micheal might feel obligated about keeping them permanently.”

With everything going on Asia hadn’t even thought about it. She scrambles the possibilities in her head and remembers that Micheal’s ex-wife had a sister named Bertha. Rena suggests that she get her contact information off Facebook and make arrangements with her to return the girls. Asia just wasn’t ready to become a full-time mother to someone else’s kids and more importantly...she wanted Micheal all to herself. That night she gets the information and leaves a message on Bertha’s page to call her back.

They go to the caterer as planned and confirm everything

for the big day. The wedding reception will be held in the beautifully decorated back yard of the venue after they return home to change clothes.

The next morning, Asia is regurgitating and cramping worse than the days before. Of course, everyone told her the symptoms could be attributed to wedding day jitters but she knew this was something different. She is now convinced that she needs to go to the doctor but that would have to wait. Asia wanted that wedding ring on her finger and nothing was more important. She has hired a nanny to sit with the kids while they are away at the wedding and to help when they returned before the reception.

The wedding finally comes and is more beautiful than what she could have ever imagined. The venue was beautiful and Asia looked ravishing in her wedding gown despite how she was really, feeling. All her friends and loved ones gathered to share her moment of marital bliss.

Micheal looked very handsome in his suit and Asia's family had spared no expense. Everything had fallen in place for her, financially and romantically. Now they were married and going to be starting a family of their own.

They arrive back at the house in a decorated horse-driven carriage. They will change clothes upstairs while some of the guests make themselves at home until the reception. Asia sends one of her bride's maids to get Rena so she can assist her with taking off her wedding dress. She has put on a brave face during the ceremony but she feels horrid and wants to rest a bit before heading downstairs. Suddenly, Rena enters the room with Asia's cell phone in hand and says, "Asia, its Bertha...the children's auntie. I figured you might want to take this call so I'll give you a moment." She then leaves the room as Asia gathers herself and takes the call. She starts, "Bertha, this is Asia...Micheal's new wife. Let me start by saying that I'm so very sorry for your loss. I want you to know that we can

send the girls back in time for the funeral.” Bertha’s response is cold, “Thank you for your condolences but I would worry more about your own, situation.” Asia responds, “Well, funerals can be very difficult. I want you to know...Micheal and I will help you with the children financially after they return.” She responds with shock, “Excuse Me?!” Asia explains herself, “Well, I just assumed that you would be taking the girls now that your sister is gone. As you know Micheal and I are now newlyweds and need our privacy.” Bertha enlightens her, “Why the hell would I want them when I think they killed my sister. It would serve Micheal right to have to raise the monsters he created. All three are Scorpios born on the same day...you should watch your back.” Asia is stunned at such a hurtful comment and says, “I know people say hurtful things when they are grieving but make no mistake those kids loved their mom. They spoke quite often.” She then makes Asia privy to information that she didn’t know, “That’s

impossible. The coroner said my sister had been dead for about 2 weeks. Make no mistake about it, my sister was never suicidal.” Asia is in shock and asks, “But who would want to hurt her?” There’s a moment of silence before she speaks again, “Why don’t you ask those little monsters that are in your house? They were the only two she was ever afraid of.”

Asia has not had a chance to take her dress off because she had been on the phone with Bertha. She feels the need to speak with Micheal immediately about everything she had said and the things that had been going on. She now knows the children have been lying about speaking with their mother for weeks now. Besides, Lola has been manipulating Micheal, since she has been there. She needed to know what Lola was really, capable of. She holds her stomach as the cramps begin again and ran to the top of the stairs to call Micheal. She is in a panic and calls out to him again and again until she sees him appear at the

bottom of the stairs. As soon as she opens her mouth to speak, she feels a push from behind and begins to violently fall down the stairs. At that point, everything went black.

Sadly, Asia awakens in the hospital with Micheal sitting by her bedside and holding her hand. He is glad when she opens her eyes even though she cannot speak. He begins to talk to her and says, “Oh baby, I’m so glad you woke up. I wanted a chance to say goodbye. You took a hell of a fall.” Asia is unable to speak due to the breathing tube on her mouth but her eyes show that she is very aware of what he is saying to her. He continues, “I want you to know that I loved you very much but it’s time that I stepped up to be a father.” Asia’s expression shows confusion because Micheal is using the past tense. At this time, Lola enters the hospital room. Asia’s eyes become very wide with fear. She somehow knows that Lola had a hand in pushing her down the stairs and becomes agitated. He puts his hand on her shoulder and tries to calm Asia down

because her frightened reaction is certainly understandable. He squeezes her hand and says, “Relax darling, Lola is very apologetic for pushing you down the stairs and putting rat poison in your orange juice every day. But she panicked when you didn’t die right away... like her mother. You have to understand that I feel partly to blame because I haven’t been there for her and now I have the opportunity to be with my girls full-time. If you report this, they will take her away and I can’t allow that to happen...you can understand that can’t you. At the end of the day, it puts me in a very hard position but I know what I have to do. Don’t worry about me because Rena has made herself more than available to me. She has even been spending the night with us and she’s home with Leslie right now.”

Micheal then signals Lola to keep watch by the door. Asia begins to struggle to reach the nurse’s button as he stands over her. He begins to cry and tells her, “Don’t struggle, darling, it’ll be over soon.” He smothers her with

a pillow and then alerts the nurses that something is wrong. Asia's family and friends assumed she had tripped on her wedding dress, fallen down the stairs and subsequently died from her internal injuries. Micheal quickly made arrangements for a cremation to destroy any traces of poisoning. Not to mention, he would be anticipating a large insurance policy payout because the marriage was legitimately officiated. During the drive home from the hospital, Micheal reassures Lola and asks, "No matter what happens, we have each other now but you guys are going to need a full-time mother...so what about Rena?" She gives him her thoughts and then asks, "Rena's great but Daddy, why do you think I was the one who pushed Asia down the stairs and poisoned her?" He doesn't even want to talk about the incidents but addresses the subject one last time, "It doesn't matter anymore but don't you remember telling me about the poison and I saw you girls standing behind her when she fell down the stairs. Don't worry, daddy took

care of everything and no one has to know.” Lola looks over and says, “But I never said it was me...it was Leslie. Micheal looks over at her and asks, “But why? Asia thought it was you creating conflict.” Lola explains, “Leslie will get rid of anyone that tries to take you away...she blamed mom when you left and figured Asia would do the same thing. I told her to let me handle Asia but she kept putting poison in her drinks against my wishes. I was standing at the top of the stairs trying to stop her but she pushed her anyway.” A look of terror comes over Micheal’s face as he realizes that Rena was alone with Leslie at the house. Rena could now very well face the same fate as the others. He is now facing the consequences of abandoning his children and overcompensating by covering for their crimes. He knew nothing about them...and in his efforts to make amends and protect them...he was creating the perfect storm. He is now a murderer and the trickling effects have resulted in an

endless web of lies. Unfortunately, for Micheal and the people around him...the worst is yet to come.

The End

7. Scorpio Season and Us: The Jerikans

As we age, we not only have to deal with the physical and emotional changes within ourselves that affect our moods and activities but we also realize that in a social setting we may well be the most respected or the most dismissed group depending on the environment or situation. Whereas historically most cultures have put their elders on a pedestal, modern times suggest respect can no longer be just given because of a longer-term of life but instead has to

be earned. And then, there are also the wishes of the elderly to take into consideration. As we continue to age into the elderly bracket we wonder if we should reject or embrace the treatment, innuendos, and nicknames that describe our generation as a whole. What do you think?

Jerry Weisel has been both lucky and unlucky in life. Just like any of us, he wants to be respected although some would consider his life unrespectable. His circumstances have once again led society to judge him by either his age or his merit but he simply just wants to be judged as a human being.

Early one morning on November 8th, 2024, a stone-faced parole officer taps his fingers on his desk while looking at his computer and some light paperwork. The

parole officer's name is Steven Bail, a heavysset black man, full beard, 48 years of age and glasses sitting on the tip of his nose. On the other side of the table is an older white man at the age of 72, gray short hair, mustache, and a small scar under his right eye. His name is Jerry Weisel and he's being released from Whitehall Prison in Detroit MI after serving 7 years out of a 9-year sentence for felonious assault with a deadly weapon. The parole officer breaks the silence by saying, "You need to check in with me every 2 weeks and I'll be stopping by whenever I feel it's necessary to check on you. Do you understand?" He reiterates but speaks louder "Do you understand?" Jerry answers, "Yes...yes, I understand. I'm 72 but I'm not deaf." Mr. Bail leans back in his chair, puts the paper down and says, "Alright then, re-verify the address with the

receptionist, keep your nose clean and I'll see you in 2 weeks." Jerry sighs and stands up with his hat in hand. He heads to the front desk as he is told. He had become immune to taking orders because he had taken them for the last 7 years but being patronized because of his age seemed to irritate him more than anything else. Although his wife had passed, he still had a son living in the area with a family of his own and just as anxious to reconnect. Jerry mostly just kept his head low and away from anything or anyone that looked like trouble. In his pre-prison life, he wasn't any type of "billy badass" but he definitely, wasn't a pushover. He had taken up boxing in high school but wasn't good enough to achieve any type of scholarship or career. Naturally, he wanted to step in and help some poor schmuck who was new to prison life but his own life

depending on minding your own business and getting through the day. So now he plans to live out his days reconnecting with his son, Diego and connecting with his daughter-in-law, Janelle, and grandson.

The release program generated a job interview that landed a position bussing tables and washing dishes. It wasn't a lot but it would pay the bills and keep him looking favorable in the eyes of Mr. Bail. He works the night shift which can be later than expected but he doesn't mind. It wasn't like Jerry's social life would suffer because he didn't have one. He rented a 1 bedroom apartment close to the restaurant that he could walk to and save money. After 7 years, a nice walk and fresh air are things people take for granted until you have it taken away from you. Jerry didn't

care about a social life but his landlady was hoping he would spend some of his time with her. Her name was, Adelaide Boveau, a 62-year-old divorcee who was awarded the property in her divorce settlement. She was an attractive fair-skinned creole woman who reminisced about growing up in the bayous of Louisiana in every conversation. She spoke of her dreams of becoming an actress before meeting her husband and was convinced that she would one day be discovered. The fact that Jerry had just been released from prison and was a very quiet man-made him all the more a fascinating romantic conquest. She definitely, wanted him to notice her and realize that she was available for nightcaps if he so desired. He thought her flirtation was silly but also found it flattering at times, so he would be careful not to encourage her but also not offend her. Her

style included the hair meticulously pinned up in curls and make-up that was sometimes overly done but looked nice. She always stayed camera ready.

A year and ½ had quickly passed and Jerry was enjoying his simple life. He would even let Adelaide come over to cook dinner and enjoy each other's company. He helped out with small repairs around the apartment building and things ran smoothly. In another 6 months, Jerry would be off of parole and free to travel without asking permission of anyone. He didn't have any particular place in mind but given the opportunity, he would love to see some parts of the country. He would even on occasion babysit his grandson if needed but for the most part, just enjoyed visiting and being there to play with. Even, Mr.

Bail considered him to be the example of a good parolee and didn't feel the need to give Jerry a hard time during visits. Life seemed to be returning to normal and after 7 years Jerry's sleep patterns had slowly begun to return. He wanted to put those days behind him because he was home and wasn't ever going back.

One night in December around 11:30 pm, Jerry had finished work and was about to begin his walk home. The news weather report had reported the temperature drop and possibly snow flurries, so he was glad he had grabbed his gloves before leaving for work that day. He passed a bar with some patrons standing in front of the building smoking cigarettes or waiting for valet with their cars. The bar he passed was adjacent to an alleyway where he heard a

couple arguing. The woman was small in stature with black curly hair and the gentleman was much taller, wearing a long leather coat with a very deep voice. It was no business of his so he pressed on and focused on getting home out of the cold. It wasn't until he heard the shriek of the woman that he knew the argument had turned violent. He thought to himself "Well if I heard it...that means the people standing in front must have heard it too. They'll do something to stop it for sure." Within seconds he heard the next scream and he knew the strike had now turned into a beating and was continuing without intervention. The last thing he wanted to do was get involved because he was cold, tired, didn't want to risk his safety and most definitely didn't want to risk his parole. He talked to himself and said "just keep walking" but every step seemed to take an

eternity. He then heard another scream and seemed to appear back in that alley by osmosis. No matter how much he wanted to keep walking his conscience just wouldn't allow him to do it and listen to a woman being assaulted. His first approached the guy with kind words, "Hey I don't want to get in your business or anything but why don't you just talk it out instead of hitting her man." The guy reacted as if he had just been cursed out and responds, "What the fuck did you just say to me?" Jerry knew it would take a little more convincing to end this but at least he had tried the diplomatic approach first. The guy goes in his pocket, shows an open pocket knife and asks, "You trying to get sliced?!" Jerry holds up his hands and replies, "Nah, man...I just want the young lady to be alright. Look, brother, I know neither of us needs the trouble." While saying this,

Jerry scans the ground for something to defend himself and spots a metal pipe. The guy looks down at the young lady who is on the ground and responds, “Oh now I see, so you want to fuck my bitch?” He kicks her and says, “Now I’m going to fuck both of you up.” At this moment, Jerry grabs the metal pipe and cracks the guy across his head. The guy is stunned, drops the knife and then spots it again. Jerry steps on the knife and squares up for another fight with the pipe. He flips the pipe around in what looks like some type of martial arts moves. He holds the pipe in one hand and offers his other hand to the young lady to get up and out the way. Jerry says, “It’s over man...just let it go and nobody has to get hurt.” The man stunned and furiously decides to take one more swing at Jerry. Jerry dodges the swing and cracks him across the back with the pipe which brings the

man down to one knee. The man then gets up and reluctantly starts to walk away holding one side of his head. Jerry pushes the young lady behind him and continues to hold the pipe in hand until he assuredly knows the man has left. The young lady grabs Jerry and hugs him around his neck in gratitude. The patrons standing in front were now coming up and shaking Jerry's hand for showing such bravery and getting involved. During all this, Jerry did not realize that most of these people who were patting him on the back were also recording with cell phones and posting the altercation online. It's certainly not the way he expected the night to go but he was desperately ready to continue on his path home and get ready for work the next day. As the saying goes all was well that ended well.

The next morning Jerry gets up and performs his regular, routine before going to work on the morning shift. He was one of the few who is versatile when it came to picking up different shifts at work. On his way out the building, Adelaide calls down from her apartment window and yells, “Good Morning, handsome.” Jerry yells back up at her, “Good Morning.” The cold morning air bites at your skin if you’re exposed too long so Jerry quickly hurried to the bus stop to avoid the freezing walk. He was able to grab a seat on the crowded bus amongst the other early risers and started his day.

Usually, it’s a quiet ride on the bus because everyone is preoccupied with their cell phones oblivious to anything going on around them. It’s a sign of the times

when you see everyone's head down into their phones instead of looking around and engaging with other people but this morning seemed a bit different. Jerry noticed that people were looking at their phones and then looking at him. Some people were whispering, some were smiling and some seemed a little giddy when looking back at him. It seemed strange but he didn't have time to focus on foolishness, you definitely, come across oddballs on the city bus from time to time. He finally arrives at his stop which is only a few blocks away but feels like an eternity if you're walking in single-digit temperatures. Jerry had lived in these weather conditions all his life so regardless if his shift was morning or afternoon he prepared for any type of weather. He didn't care as long as he had a steady paycheck coming in and could pay his bills. Just as he gets off the bus

along with some other riders, he feels a tug on his lower right arm. It was an elderly white lady maybe a couple of years older than him tugging on his arm to get his attention.

At first, he thought she might be bracing him for leverage to keep from slipping so he looked at her and smiled. She looks back at him and says, “It really, is you...I just wanted to be sure. Keep kicking ass!” and she hugs him. Jerry is really, puzzled but not rude. He knew the elderly woman meant no harm and it was just a case of mistaken identity. He brushes it off and enters the diner to punch in at the timeclock located in the back of the establishment.

He clocks in and is greeted by one of his male co-workers stocking items on the shelves. “What’s up, Rambo!?” asks Gio, the male co-worker. “Not much man,

what's up with you?" responds Jerry. Gio enthusiastically replies, "You are, man. How do you like being the new ghetto superstar?" Jerry asks, "Man, whatchu talking about?" Gio responds, "The fight, man! At first, I couldn't believe it was you but then I saw your face. Man, you opened up a can of whip ass on that dude!" Jerry doesn't take it as a compliment especially since he could have gotten in trouble or hurt and responds, "Damn man. How did you find out about that? It just happened last night." Gio now has a look on his face realizing that Jerry really, doesn't know what has happened. Gio puts his hands on Jerry's shoulders to turn him around to see the crowd of people coming in and says, "Aw Jerry man, you really, don't know...do you? Everybody knows man, you went viral last night!" He turns Jerry around to see the crowd of

people entering the diner to greet him and give well wishes.

The fight had been recorded, posted and shared by millions of people, Jerry had gone viral. He walks to the front of the establishment to the smiling faces and friendly handshakes of all those strangers, a lot of them of the younger generation but mostly, of his age or older. It was a great feeling but in the back of his mind he was thinking, “Oh shit, my parole officer might have seen that shit.” The crowd is growing, so the manager who was the only other person on the planet who hadn’t seen the video calls Jerry into the office. Gio follows closely alongside Jerry amped up about all the attention Jerry is getting and offers his Facebook page so they can view the video together on the office computer. After they watch the video Jerry offers the manager his apologies thinking the manager would be

disappointed about the unwanted attention. Surprisingly, the manager sees it as an opportunity to drum up some new business and profit off of the newest viral sensation, Jerry. Just as the manager was mentioning making t-shirts and posters in Jerry's honor to boost sales another co-worker calls out to Jerry and informs him that his son, Diego, is there to see him. He is happy for the surprise visit from his son and greets him with a firm handshake and hug. Diego says, "Dad, I'm so proud of you and glad you didn't get hurt. Dad, you're all over the news. The young lady in the video is speaking out about how you saved her from her abusive boyfriend but she didn't even know who you were." Jerry responds, "Son you don't know how good that feels to hear you say that but I didn't do it for all of this, I just saw someone that needed my help. They'll talk about

me today and someone else tomorrow.” Diego responds, “You’re exactly right dad, that’s why you have to make the most of this moment.” Jerry replies, “Diego, you have to remember that I’m still on parole. I don’t want this attention.” Diego says, “Dad, they wouldn’t dare come after you after what you did to help that lady. You are a voice of the older generation that people just dismiss...you are a hero. As crazy as it sounds, you already have a group of people that are following you and supporting you online...they call themselves the Jerikans.” Jerry responds, “That’s ridiculous son, I don’t even have an online page. Where are you getting this stuff from?” Diego answers, “Um yeah...I took the liberty of starting you a page when I saw the story on the news. I know you aren’t that computer savvy so I wanted to help out. Please tell me you’re okay

with this because they were going to find out who you are anyway so it's better if you profit off of it than someone else." Reluctantly, Jerry agrees remembering the manager mentioning making up t-shirts and posters to sell in the Diner and agrees, "I suppose you're right son. Well, what the hell do I do now?" Diego is ecstatic that his dad agrees with him and says, "I'm glad you asked because a couple of news stations have already reached out and want to set up an interview. People are really behind you, dad. 72 is the new 50 and you've shown that you can't be pushed around anymore." Personally, Jerry didn't really, think his actions would affect how people viewed and treated the elderly but the circumstances gave him a new chance to reconnect with his son on another level, so he was all in.

Diego started by connecting with the local news stations to schedule interviews with the newscasters. Diego also contacted some of the organizations that advocate for the care and interest of the elderly community to bring awareness to people. He knew that Jerry could gain popularity if he was associated with these groups and this would open other opportunities. Before they knew it they were being asked to do interviews on a national platform. Jerry's present employer was happy to adjust his schedule around his traveling because he would get free advertising when the restaurant's name and location were mentioned. Even Steven Bail, his parole officer, was on board as long as he denounced the violence and stuck to just bringing awareness to the needs of the elderly. He definitely, didn't want the message to be misconstrued and elderly people

putting themselves in positions to be hurt. By the end of the month, Jerry had accumulated a little over 1 million followers nationwide and was being offered small parts in some local commercial ads, things seemed to be working out rather well for everyone.

Around 7 months after the viral sensation had taken off, things had started to simmer down a bit. Jerry knew that things would never go back to the way things were but he wanted to preserve some type of normalcy in his life. He opted to continue working at the restaurant but not as a dishwasher anymore. Management decided to make him a host because of the large number of people that came in just to thank him for his advocacy work in the community. The Jerikans were nationwide and they would stop in to

take pics with him to post on their pages or just to shake his hand. Some shared stories of going back into the workforce after years of being overlooked because of their ages.

Others shared stories of continuing their education and achieving life-long aspirations. He still couldn't believe that a simple display of kindness and assertion could bring on this amount to support and change for the elderly community but he was proud to be a part of the movement.

One evening, Diego stopped in the restaurant as Jerry was about to clock out and head home. Jerry thought this was perfect timing so he could spend a moment of free time just talking with him but Diego's face seemed to be different than his usual enthusiastic self. He expressed that he had a bit of news that was concerning but wanted to prepare Jerry for it none-the-less. He drove Jerry home and entered

Jerry's apartment with his laptop in hand to show him what was concerning him. He opened the video of a local blogger named, Izzy that had been gaining popularity in many social media circles. His claim to fame was to expose celebrities and give opinions that he thinks everyone wanted to say but were afraid to. One of his favorite expressions was "I tell it like it...Izz!" He thought the expression was a very clever play on words and his name. He was only 28 years of age, short blonde hair, glasses, and one slight lazy eye. It was almost like a defense mechanism to attack other people to draw attention away from his self. Diego started the video where Izzy Moyer unleashed a rant about digging up information about Jerry being a violent ex-con. Izzy felt as though the viral video of Jerry was staged to reinvent himself and scam the American people.

Izzy had been contacted by another ex-con, Gene O'Hare, and paid him for an exclusive interview. Gene O'Hare confirmed that Jerry was a violent man and always looking for the next scam. Izzy states that he feels the world was conned and Jerry Weisel was not an advocate for anyone, much less the elderly community. Izzy goes on to wrap up the story by revealing his pet peeves. His complaints included the elderly who take forever to find their money in the checkout lane, the elderly wheelchairs riders on and off the sidewalks and the elderly people who cross the street so slowly that the red light turns green and then red again by the time they make it across. He told his viewers that he knew they thought the same way but didn't mind being their voice because it's not politically correct to say such

things. He explained that the world needed more honesty and he was the one to give it.

Jerry watched as much as he could take and then closed the laptop. Diego says, “Yeah, it pretty hard to watch, the guy’s an asshole.” Jerry responds, “Yeah he’s an ass but he must be pretty popular or you wouldn’t be here.” Diego replies, “He does have a lot of followers and I just wanted you to be aware.” Jerry continues, “The truth of the matter is, I do have a past and if you think my past will damage the legitimacy of the movement I will fall back.” Diego responds, “Dad, you have to make that decision for yourself but remember you didn’t ask for any of this. You got this recognition by doing the right thing. So you can step out and tell your truth which is no ones’ business or

you can just walk away and let the movement go on without you. Nothing this scumbag says can take away your true character and intentions.” There’s a knock at the door, Adelaide enters with a cake in hand and says, “Hi guys, I just wanted to stop by and share my dessert.” Diego responds, “Oh that looks good Ms. Adelaide but I was just on my way out, maybe another time. Dad, we can talk tomorrow.” Jerry replies, “Ok son, have a good night and thanks for having my back.” Diego exits the apartment and Adelaide then made herself comfortable. She was hoping Jerry would be in the mood to give her some special attention that night and she was right. They shared a semi-romantic evening and ended it with no commitments or head games. He had the next day off of work so he decided to sleep in and a catch up on some R&R.

On the other side of the city, Izzy is working on more ways to gain popularity, spark outrage and get more of a following. He was known to target different celebrities, politicians, ethnicities, religions, and demographics based on what he considered was the need at the time. He felt as though he spoke for the masses even if the masses didn't want to admit it. This particular morning, Izzy wanted to start the day with an early morning jog through the park so he grabbed his iPhone for music and headed out. He's making his second lap around the park when out of nowhere he collides with another jogger. The jogger falls to the ground which surprises Izzy because the collision wasn't strong enough to knock either one of them to the ground but he is apologetic when he realizes the other jogger is maybe in his mid- 60's. Izzy extends his hand to

help the other jogger back up to his feet and hears the crackling of his iPhone under the jogger's feet. It had fallen during the collision and landed at the feet of the jogger. The jogger picks up the broken iPhone, hands it to Izzy and apologizes for the accident. Izzy is clearly, annoyed about his broken iPhone but has no reason to think it was anything other than an unfortunate accident. He cuts his run short and heads home for breakfast.

After breakfast and a shower, Izzy confirms dinner plans with his girlfriend, Amina, who is on her way to work. Amina is a full-figured girl with brown shoulder-length hair and brown eyes. She never has a mean word to say to anyone and has lots of friends. She has a smile that seems to make everyone around her feel very welcoming

and comfortable. People say opposites attract and that's the term that most of their friends use when describing the couple but he knew by gaining her love was his greatest accomplishment, thus far.

He then decides to go to the mall to pick out some new items to wear that night. After finding some news shirts and shoes he spots a popular coffee shop and orders a coffee before leaving the mall. He orders his favorite drink a Double Mocha-Cinna, pays for it and heads out the shop. Just before leaving the shop he takes a sip of his drink and realizes that he has an Almond milk cold brew. He returns to the line and waits for another customer to be served before addressing the issue with the cashier. The cashier was a blonde woman in her early 60's with dangling

earrings and red lipstick who says, “What can I get you, sir?” He looks at her name tag before starting to speak and says, “Well, Beverly you can get me what I ordered. I ordered a Double Mocha-Cinna but you gave me an Almond Milk cold brew.” Beverly graciously replied, “No worries sir, I’ll fix that right up for you.” Beverly takes the cup from Izzy and returns with his drink. Izzy is satisfied that everything had been corrected and leaves the shop, heading for his car. As Izzy walks toward his car he takes a sip of his drink only to realize that he has a Flat White Espresso instead of what he ordered. Annoyed nowhere describes how Izzy is feeling at this point and he decides it is worth the trip back in the mall to correct this once and for all. He approaches the counter again where Beverly greets him with “Yes sir, what can I get for you today?”

Izzy responds, “Are you really, going to act like you just didn’t wait on me just 5 minutes ago and give me the wrong drink again? Now you can give me my Double Mocha-Cinna like I ordered the first time or I can have a talk with your manager! Which do you prefer, Beverly?”

Beverly replies, “Yes sir, yes sir...I will get that right away. There’s no need to call the manager I can fix it right now.”

Beverly quickly turns around to fix Izzy’s drink. She apologizes, hands him his drink and free drink card for the future. He calms down believing her apology is sincere and accepts the drink along with the card. He turns to walk out of the shop but has the urge to stop and open the lid before leaving to see what he had been given this time. Izzy yells, “You have got be fucking kidding me! Lady, what is your problem, you just gave me green tea?” The yelling caused

other customers to take notice and alert the manager. The manager comes out and tries to calm Izzy down, “Sir, I can help you but you have to stop yelling and using profanity.” Izzy rudely responded, “I’ll stop yelling when you get some younger employees who can take an order correctly. Beverly has her hearing aid turned down and can’t hear me correctly. This shit is ridiculous!” The manager responds, “Okay sir, I can get your order but there’s no need to be rude. We value all our employees.” The manager takes a step back to talk with Beverly and ask her what was the problem. Beverly explained to the manager that Izzy kept returning and changing his order. She tried to appease him by fixing his drink and giving him a free drink card but he still wasn’t satisfied. The manager was inclined to believe Beverly because she was a long time employee vs. Izzy’s

aggressive attitude and rudeness. He approached Izzy to take his order and promptly get him out of the shop. The manager asks, “Okay sir, I can help you now. Which drink would you like this time?” The condescending question seemed to imply that Izzy’s was, in some way, confused or being difficult. One thing was for sure, he was about to lose it and responds, “The same damn drink I asked for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd time. I ordered the Double Mocha-Cinna. You don’t want to mess with me, buddy. I am the voice of the people and my viewers are going to hear about this!” The manager quickly gets Izzy his drink, gives it to him and tells him to have a nice day. Izzy could only hope his day would end better than it had begun with the first 2 unfortunate incidents. After having his iPhone broken by a clumsy jogger and his order botched by a senile cashier he

was determined to dismiss the incidents as just bad luck. He heads home to relax and work on his website. One way Izzy has learned to unwind and relieve stress is to blog about what's stressing him out. He starts his live stream by greeting all his viewers and followers who probably will view the video at a later time. He recounts the incidents with the jogger and the cashier that left him with a broken iPhone and screaming like a madman in the middle of a coffee shop. He then asks the viewers if it was just a coincidence that both of the offenders were elderly. He makes the story somewhat comical by comparing the jogger's fall to one of Vlade Divac's famous foul flops during an NBA basketball game. He contended that he barely even bumped the elderly guy when he fell to the ground and subsequently crushed his iPhone. He suggested

that the elderly wait until a different time of day to use the park because of the people who are out there that time of morning trying to get some serious workouts in and the elderly people are either getting hurt or slowing the serious joggers down. He jokingly suggested that this should become a park rule and encourages his viewers to leaves comments and subscribe. Of course, he knows a restricted schedule would never happen but he also knows that this is an entertaining joke and rant. Izzy goes on to describe the debacle at the coffee shop, stating that Beverly should have been in the back washing dishes and not upfront messing up his coffee order. He goes on to blame management for not stationing the younger employees at the register that may be able to move faster, hear more clearly and see better than Beverly who he exaggerates as being in her

90's. He ends his video on a lighter note by sharing with the viewers his plans for the evening with his girlfriend.

They have reservations at The House of Indigo, an upscale restaurant they had been trying to get reservations at for months. He tells the viewers he will be back on later that night to give them a full review of the restaurant and tell them if the hype about the place is real.

At 7:30 pm Izzy is dressed to impress in a suit and tie for a lovely dinner with Amina. They arrive at 8 pm and greet the valet on schedule. When entering they are greeted by the host who asks if they have reservations. Izzy confidently replied, "Yes, my good man, it's under Moyer." The host scans the list and spots the name Moyer on the list but responds, "I'm sorry sir, I don't see a Moyer." The host

was a very distinguished older gentleman of around 65 years of age who had William on his name tag. Izzy calmly responds, “No problem just look again, it’s definitely, there. We’ve been planning this dinner for months.” The host appears to scan the list again for the name but replies in a questioning manner, “I’m sorry sir, perhaps it was for another night?” Izzy looks behind him at the people waiting to be checked in and becomes annoyed along with embarrassed, he says, “Look chief, get your glasses and find my name on that list. I will spell it for you M...O...Y...E...R.” Amina touches Izzy on the arm to deescalate the situation and hopefully, from causing a scene. She is now becoming embarrassed as well. The host finally admits to seeing the name that he actually, had seen initially and said, “Ah yes...Moyer, it’s right here. Silly

me...let's get you seated right away. I'm so sorry for the mix up so let me make it up to you. I have a very romantic and secluded table away from the noise of the restaurant but closer to the pianist." William walks with them over to the table and introduces the waiter, "This is Richard, I trust he will make sure all your needs are met. Enjoy your meal." Richard is silver-gray, tall, distinguished and looks to be in his late 60's. Richard asks, "Would you like to start with drinks and hors d'oeuvres? We have a delectable selection to choose from." Amina responds "Oh yes, I would like a glass of red wine but first I would like to powder my nose. Please direct me to your ladies' room." Richard responds, "Of course, madam. It's right over there to the right but just let me add that you look ravishing tonight." Amina giggles like a schoolgirl. She then gives

thanks to him and leaves the table. Richard then turns his attention to Izzy and says “Red wine for the lady. What shall I get you to drink sir?” Izzy looks at the wine list and says “I think I’ll go with a glass of white wine, any recommendations?” Richard responds “Oh yes sir, I have the best choice for you.” Izzy continues to look over the appetizer menu as Richard is pouring the wine. He pours Amina’s wine first and then begins to pour Izzy’s glass. As Richard is in the process of placing the glass down Izzy hears the odd sound of something plinking into the glass. He looks over the top of the menu folder to see a bridge of false teeth in the glass. He squeezes his eyes together in horror and opens them again in disbelief of what he thinks he just saw. He seems to be frozen in a state of shock and when he then sees Richard take the false teeth out the glass

right in front of him. He immediately jumps up from the table and starts to yell at the waiter, “Dude, what the fuck? What the fuck?” The waiter has a look of shock and confusion as to why Izzy is behaving in such an aggressive manner. Amina returns from the bathroom to find Izzy in a complete rage. The yelling immediately gets the attention of William the host and other customers that were dining. William asserts authority and says, “Sir, this is not the way we run our establishment. If you cannot control yourself you will be asked to leave.” Izzy replies, “Well, I should hope the hell not...Uncle Fester’s teeth just fell into my glass and the killing part is he took them out and acted like it never happened.” The manager tries to reason with Izzy and says, “Please keep your voice down. We have other patrons dining. Richard, do you have any idea what this

gentleman is talking about?” Richard responds, “I absolutely, do not. The suggestion is ludicrous and unfathomable.” Amina tried to reason with Izzy and calm him down by saying, “Baby, maybe you made a mistake. Let’s just sit down and have a nice dinner.” Izzy quickly lashes out at Amina, “Are you fucking crazy?! First old ass William can’t find my name on the list and then Uncle Fester gives me a glass full of gums! Oh my god, I can’t even think about it!” he feels nauseous and holds his mouth gagging at the thought of sipping that glass of wine. “I should sue your asses for treating me like this and calling me a liar,” he protested. William steps in one last time to resolve the issue and put his on-looking patrons at ease. William says, “Mr. Moyer, Richard is one of our most loyal and dedicated employees but if any part of this story is true

we will gladly rectify the issue and offer 2 dinners, at no expense to you. We have surveillance cameras in the office that we can view privately. Please follow me.” All parties involved began to follow William to the office and view the footage. As they continue to walk Izzy thinks of his vindication, looks over at Richard and yells, “You’re going down now Fester!”

They gather in the office and view the footage which shows Richard serving drinks from his backside and Izzy reading the menu from a side view. The footage doesn’t show anything to support Izzy’s claim. Izzy says, “Well, just show the footage from another camera’s angle.” William explains, “That is the only camera on this particular table and I’m sorry but we don’t see anything to

substantiate your claims. Let me add that Richard's reputation and job status are on the line here, we must be very clear. Let me ask you Madam, were you in any way dissatisfied with Richards' service?" Amina seems to diminish Izzy's claim by saying, "Oh no, he was very polite and professional. We definitely wouldn't want him to lose his job over a misunderstanding." Richard thanks Amina responding, "Oh madam, it was a joy to have served you and let me add that your hair is the most beautiful brown color I have ever seen." Amina again giggles like a schoolgirl and says, "Oh stop...you are sweet." Izzy's jaw just dropped open at the conversations going on around him as if he's not even in the room and yells, "You people are crazy! We'll never eat here again. Well, hell we never got the chance to eat here in the first place! A

misunderstanding...my ass!” He grabs Amina by the hand and angrily walks out of the restaurant. They grab some burgers at a local fast food joint and head home. Izzy has had enough run-ins for one day and just wanted to be in the comfort of his own place. Amina tells him that she is going to shower and head to bed. Izzy concurs but remembers that he had promised to stream a personal review of the restaurant and wanted to post one before going to bed. He sits down at his laptop, logs on and immediately notices that his number of followers had increased by 7000 than more than the 30,000 he had that morning. The only thing he could attribute it to was his report exposing Jerry Weisel and his accounts of his recent encounters with the elderly that day. He usually just expressed his opinion but this time his rant was comical, maybe that was the key. He went into

detail about his experiences like the coffee shop and jogging incidents that people could relate to without the fear of seeming uncompassionate. He was overjoyed about the increase of followers but also noticed that there was no change in the number of comments but that was no deal-breaker because the goal was to get more exposure and he had clearly, done that. He spoke about how outraged he was that this waiter had dropped his false teeth in his glass and then denied it. He waged a one-man war against the establishment referencing the elderly host and over-the-hill waiter. He posted the review but declined to answer any questions from the viewers until the morning. He was exhausted from all of the day's events and opted for a good night's sleepover chatting with his viewers.

The next morning when Izzy wakes up Amina has already left for work. Izzy wants to get a morning run in before leaving out to run errands. Before the run, he wants to check something online so he scratches his ass, grabs a glass of orange juice and flips open his laptop. He logs on to his account and yells, “Holy Shit... 10,000 more followers!” He sits back and was thinking to himself, “My horrible restaurant experience must have really, hit home to a lot of people. People are really, relating to my experiences but are afraid to say it. I am the voice of the people.” He sits back in the chair with his arms folded feeling pretty proud of himself. He decides to skip the morning run and head to Sal’s Market to upgrade his live streaming camera. With that many new subscribers he

definitely, wanted to upgrade his equipment for a more professional look. He was very excited indeed.

He arrives at Sal's Market to begin shopping only to realize that he had left the shopping list on the fridge and it would take a little longer to remember everything. He had pretty much found everything he needed and began heading up to the checkout lanes. He stopped in his tracks once he remembered that they were out of paper towels, so he makes a U-turn with his cart and heads to aisle 10. He sees the pretty paper towels on the top shelf that Amina likes but he also notices the cheaper plain ones on the bottom shelf. Izzy opts to bend down, get a couple of those and save money. As soon as he bends over to grab the paper towels he is hit in the side by a motorized shopping cart. He grabs

his ankle and hops in agonizing pain. He looks over to see an elderly lady with a ponytail of silver-gray hair sitting there looking at him. He waits for a moment thinking she wanted to apologize but soon realizes that he is not going to get one. So in a sarcastic manner, he begins to apologize to her instead and says, “My bad...how silly of me to be bent over in plain sight in front of your scooter. I should have had a caution sign on my ass.” The lady looks at him with disdain, puts her chin in the air and continues to drive by him on her motorized shopping cart. He holds his side, bends over quickly to snatch some paper towels off the shelf and throws them in his cart, clearly hurt and annoyed. He limps slightly to the checkout lane to purchase his items and heads for the door. He comes across the door greeters and waves his receipt at them. Well, the two greeters, one

male, and one female both approximately the age of 70 stopped him and asked for the receipt to review it. He knows this is a pretty quick process and these greeters take their responsibilities very seriously, sometimes too seriously. He allows it and just wants to move on but he notices that the greeters seem to be having their own side conversation when they should be checking his cart. One greeter would start to check the cart when the other greeter would interrupt the process for no apparent reason other than just to stall. Izzy, finally says, "Excuse me, can I go now?" The male greeter responds, "Ok buddy, just let her do her job, relax." The female starts again by checking items and comparing them to the receipt, just as it looks like she about to be done, she answers a call on her walkie talkie and begins another side conversation. As he is

standing there in disbelief of how long this is taking he looks over to see people passing by without their carts or receipts being checked at all. He sees people walking by with visible items sticking out from under their shirts and people rushing by with large TVs on dollies while the security buzzer is going off but these 2 greeters were focused solely on him and only him. Finally, in a totally unreasonable amount of time, they give his receipt back to him and allow him to exit the store. Once again, he is completely flabbergasted at this Sal Market experience but feels powerless to do anything about it except express it on his website to his thousands of followers that need his voice of reason.

When he went live to share his horrific experience at Sal Market, he notices that he has quite a few viewers but not very much feedback. They seem to be listening and watching but aren't interacting with him. He overly exaggerates the story a little to make it more entertaining and poke fun at the elderly that are making his life miserable these days. He notices that more people are joining his live-stream but still very little feedback is coming through. He then makes a joke about more elderly people being like Jerry Weisel, he says, "He makes being elderly look good even though he's a fraud." That comment alone started a firestorm of comments on his live feed. Some of the comments were insulting and direct attacks on Izzy and his lazy eye but he expected a little backlash. He knew not all of his followers would agree with him all the

time but that was okay, as long as he had them listening. He noticed that quite a few of the negative comments were followed by the #Jerikans but he concentrated more on his supporters than the protestors. He figured they would be a small minority of his viewers. Somewhere around 5 pm Amina arrives home from work and greets Izzy who is excited to share the news of his growing subscribers. He explains that the increase in following is more than likely connected to the live videos he has been making lately. She responds, “I know it’s exciting honey but your most recent videos have been about bashing older people. You don’t really, want to gain popularity by doing that? It doesn’t seem like a proper thing to do.”

Izzy replies, “I don’t think its bashing honey. I mean these things are actually, happening and not just to me. Even though you sided against me, that dude’s teeth really did fall into my glass and don’t even get me started on what happened at the Sal Market today. I was almost killed by a drunken Betty White on a motorized shopping cart and she didn’t even apologize. She looked at me as if I had hit her or something.” Amina continues, “I just don’t think it’s productive to attack the whole older generation and for the record, I am always on your side.” Izzy says, “It’s not about attacking them, honey. It’s more about placing them in more appropriate job positions and activities. Respect has to be earned and not just given because of someone’s age. More recently it’s about making Jerry Weisel out to be some type of superhero because he beats some guy up and

he happens to be old. The truth is he's a common thug just getting out of prison and the guy he beat up was probably acting. He's only going to encourage more stunt behavior from communities of geriatrics and someone is going to get hurt. My website is more entertaining than anything else, people think it's funny." Amina adds to her argument by saying "Honey you don't want to come off as a total douche, so how about ranting about something else for a while." Izzy responds, "Rant? I don't rant, I express my opinion and people relate. Now if the experiences just happen to involve these gangs of old people, so be it. It's my constitutional right." Amina sees there is no convincing Izzy so she decides to go take a shower while he watches TV. It's a pretty uneventful night at home and they retire after watching a new episode of a horror series, "Scorpio

Season and Us". During the night Izzy is awakened by a tapping on the door. He rolls over to look at the clock showing 1 am, in the morning. He stumbles to the door and finds a neatly wrapped package addressed to him but no one with it. He figures it's a piece of computer equipment that he has previously ordered and brings it in so it doesn't get stolen. He quickly realizes that this package has a foul odor and needs to be opened immediately. What he finds is a neatly wrapped pile of dog shit waiting for him. Of course, he is disgusted and his first call in the morning will be with management about the deviant teenagers in the area pulling pranks on innocent bystanders.

Izzy gets up early to catch up on some running because had been slacking for a couple of days. He notices

that the park is a little more crowded than usual but he concentrates on getting a full run in. He notices a couple of people in front of him but they weren't close enough to affect his speed. Oddly enough, the people coming up from the rear were speeding up and the people in front of him were slowing down. He then realized that the people slowing down in front of him had started to run side by side across the lane, this would make it impossible for him to pass and would box him in. He looked around and found himself surrounded by a group of joggers that seemed to weave in his path every time he tried to pass. What he hadn't realized early on was the fact that all of the joggers were of an older generation. He ends up taking a seat on a bench realizing that this was some sort of organized attack by a group of older people. He assumes that they must have

heard about some of the smart remarks he made about the elderly, so they were retaliating. He gets up, waves at the group of joggers and says, “Ok I get the point, you win.” He retreats to the building to let them enjoy their so-called victory.

On the other side of the city, things were going good for Jerry Weisel, he hadn't received any backlash from Izzy's live stream as of yet. The CAA (Coalition of Aging Angels) contacted Jerry to speak at several fundraising events. Jerry told Diego that he was reluctant and thought he should maybe begin to keep a low profile. Diego explained that he didn't think Izzy's website carried any weight and he should just ignore it. So Jerry agreed to speak at one of the functions that were being aired on a

local TV station in support of the organization. It just so happened that Izzy and Amina were sitting at home on the couch flipping through channels when he stopped on Jerry Weisel speaking at the organization's awareness program for wheels and meals for the elderly. He says aloud, "Boy this guy is milking this thing for everything it's worth and these people are buying into it even after I exposed him, unbelievable." Amina is painting her toes and says, "Babe, why don't you just leave the guy alone. I'm really, starting to think you have it out for older people." Izzy responds, "Amina, the guy is a fraud, fresh outta prison, beating people up and no one seems to care. Well, I'm gonna double down on him and he can go right back in the hole he came from." Amina shakes her head and fans her toes, she knows it didn't matter what she said. He goes to his website

and starts another live stream. He doubled down on Jerry Weisel just as he said he would. The number of viewers started to rapidly climb and comments coming through the feed were not what he expected. He expected a couple of hecklers but nothing to this extent. Every vile, hateful and vicious comment directed at Izzy had the #Jerikans behind it. The messages came back to back and were overwhelming. It soon became apparent that the new followers that he had acquired were not fans of his at all. They were the Jerikans, die-hard fans of Jerry and they were a coalition. He found out that the Jerikans were a fan-based group much like the Beyhive or Little Monsters that come to the defense of their beloved public figures but they were much worse. It was hard to believe that the nasty comments were coming from an elderly generation but the

majority of them were. They were there to defend Jerry Weisel and they were not backing down. Izzy thought it was a bit funny at first until they started posting his phone number and address along with threats. They referenced the car he drove, the park he frequently jogged in and items he had recently purchased at Sal Market. As his cell phone suddenly rang he hesitated before picking it up. His phone number and address had just been given out to 1000s of people. He didn't recognize the number but answered it anyway and did not speak right away. The voice said, "I hear you breathing bitch. So you like to pick on old people. I'll be over there to stick my cane up your ass!" Izzy hangs up the call immediately but the phone rings again instantly. He was growing fearful but curiosity combined with disbelief led him to answer the phone. Once again he does

not speak and the woman's voice on the other end says, "You got off easy the first time in Sal Market but next time I might run over your neck." He quickly hangs up the phone, sits back and now realizes that the incident in Sal Market was an attack. Then the notion hits him like a ton of bricks, the coffee shop, the dog shit package, the Sal Market shopper's cart incident, the greeters and worst of all, the restaurant debacle, were they all attacks? He remembers the jogger that broke his iPhone and the host that couldn't find his name on the list, how could they facilitate this? Amina comes from the bedroom while Izzy sits in the chair stunned at the viciousness of the messages coming through. She says, "Hey babe, I forget to tell you. Some of your fans had called my phone by mistake and wanted to talk to you about some ads on your website. I

told them they needed to call your phone instead, so I gave them your number.” Izzy is absolutely floored and realizes, “That’s how they got my number.” He logs off because the insults and threats were coming by the thousands and he needed to figure out what to do. Does he ignore it until it runs out of gas, does he shut down the website, does he change his phone number or does he come out swinging. He opted to just ignore it and just stay off the website for a couple of days until it ran out of gas. He had worked long and hard to build this website and wasn’t going to let a bunch of geriatrics run him off.

Izzy was pretty much addicted to his laptop so he had to come up with ways to past the time and distract himself from logging on. He and Amina decide to go out

for Mexican food to relieve some stress after work but he walks out to find he had a flat tire. He doesn't want to seem paranoid so he quickly changes the tire without alarming Amina about his suspicions but deep down he has an idea that the flat tire wasn't just random. After leaving the Mexican restaurant, he pulled up to the red light alongside a person on a motorcycle. The person wore a helmet and gloves as most do for safety and colder temperatures at night, so this didn't send off any warning bells. Just as the light turns green the cyclist yells, "You wanna fuck with the Jerikans Bitch?!" and throws a brick at the car that cracks the driver's side window. Izzy swerves to avoid an accident and abruptly stops the car. The cyclist speeds away to avoid being caught and identified. They find themselves at the police station trying to make a report. The

police officer looks at Izzy and asks, “Are you sure this wasn’t some type of road rage? Do you want me to believe there’s a gang of elderly people trying to hurt you? Do you realize how crazy that sounds?” Izzy agrees, “I know how crazy it sounds, I can barely believe it myself but it’s true.”

The police officer asks, “I thought you told me the biker had on a helmet, sir?” Izzy responds, “Well, yes he did.”

The police officer asked, “Well then, how do you know how old he was?” Izzy replies, “He yelled something at me.” The police officer looks at Amina who has no intention of sounding just as crazy as Izzy and asks,

“Ma’am was your boyfriend attacked by an elderly group or an angry motorcyclist?” Amina looks at Izzy wanting to help him but also wanting to answer honestly, “I only saw one person and didn’t see his face. I’m sorry.” Izzy opens

his website on the laptop to show the officer all the threats he's been receiving but he actually, started playing his live feed videos ranting and speaking negatively about elderly people as a whole. This raises the police officer's eyebrow at Izzy showing disgust for the videos. They ended up making a traffic incident report and leaving with his laptop in hand. They arrive home and Izzy decides to go to the mailbox while Amina heads upstairs. He gets to the mailbox and notices a foul odor that is reminiscent of the package he had received days earlier. He pulls his mail out the box only to discover it's been covered in dog feces. He drops it to the ground and looks around to see if another attack is near. He can't bring himself to take the mail any further so he throws it in the trashcan by the entrance door. He tries to explain to Amina that these attacks have been

on-going but he was unaware that they were attacks, so he didn't bother to tell her about them. The next day he watches as the mail truck pulls up to the mailboxes. He watches the mailman, an approximately 65- year-old man start to distribute the mail. He suddenly stops and looks up at the window that Izzy is standing in and cunningly waves at him. Izzy is startled and hides behind the curtain to block the mailman's view. He didn't know what to do, they were everywhere and they were after him. The calls were still coming and the messages were getting worse, he was fighting a losing battle.

The final straw came when Amina came into the house in tears. She explained to Izzy that she had gone to lunch with a co-worker and noticed that some people were

staring at her. At one point it felt like everyone was staring at her so she excused herself to the bathroom but a group of elderly women followed her in there. They started asking her questions and insulting her intelligence for dating someone like Izzy. They became belligerent and rude which frightened Amina enough to run out of the restaurant immediately. She said, “You have to make this stop. I don’t care what you have to do just make this stop!” He knew his cavalier attitude had gotten them to this point but Amina doesn’t have a malicious bone in her body, she didn’t deserve the harassment. He had to protect the only good thing in his life, Amina. Izzy reaches out to Diego in hopes of convincing Jerry to call off the attacks. Diego ignores the first contact requests assuming Izzy just wanted to attack Jerry as he has done many times before. But he soon

came to realize that Izzy was contacting him in desperation and need of Jerry's help. What he didn't understand was, Jerry was unaware of and had no part in planning or implementing any attack at all. In fact...Izzy was the one who had done all the attacking with his online rants.

The 3 have a sit down to discuss the things Izzy had been saying on his website and the nerve of him to come and ask for help calling off the Jerikans. Jerry had no idea his fans were capable of such acts and definitely, doesn't want his name associated with such bad behavior. But before he would even entertain the idea of helping Izzy he wanted to get some things off his chest. He explained to Izzy that the reason he had been imprisoned was because of a break-in of his home that left someone seriously injured.

He had been a victim of repeated home invasions so he planned to catch the thieves in the act to put an end to it.

When the intruder got seriously hurt he was charged with premeditated felonious assault for protecting his home. He admittedly was sick of it and wanted it to stop but he was not the monster Izzy had made him out to be. He had never been in trouble before and has never been in trouble since.

He also, informed Izzy that the exclusive interview with Gene O'Hare that he paid for was a complete lie. If he had done his homework he would have figured out that they didn't even serve time at the same prison, he was just another person looking for a come up at someone else's expense. Izzy had definitely, been scammed but not by Jerry. The consequential night that he became an overnight internet sensation he had done nothing more than helping a

girl who was being assaulted. He was never a fraud, a common thug or a clout chaser. He was just merely trying to help someone.

Izzy hung his head in shame knowing all the reckless things he had said about him and the whole elderly community. He could not even blame Jerry if he had declined to help him at all but the truth of the matter was Jerry didn't know how to help him. Diego offers a plan that could help but warns that it may not make a difference at all. Izzy is willing to try anything at this point and was definitely, humbled by any effort on their part. Diego suggests that he go back on his live stream and have Jerry as a guest. He suggests that Izzy let Jerry use his platform to talk about the issues important to the elderly community

and have an open dialogue. This would help Jerry with the movement and hopefully call off the attacks from the Jerikans, without actually asking them.

Jerry and Diego join Amina and Izzy at their apartment. They intend to stream the interview between the two from there. Izzy is a little nervous because he hadn't been live-streamed since the last attack online. They sit and start the live stream with introductions and greetings. The attacks through feed started immediately and his phone started ringing repeatedly as well. He ignored the comments as best he could and concentrated on the interview with Jerry. Once the interview started to seem genuine and not staged the comments started to slow down and the phone finally stopped ringing. Amina took a deep

breath of relief when the ringing finally stopped. After the show ended, Jerry advised Izzy to be more responsible when reporting on the content of someone's character because there may not be a superman like him to save his ass next time. Izzy definitely, agreed and thanked him.

They knew that all the attacks wouldn't stop immediately but there was a definite change and eventually, things went back to normal for everyone involved.

Everything seemed to be going along as normal until Diego shows up again at quitting time with his laptop. Jerry notices the look on his face and almost declined to ask what was going on this time. Through Jerry's appearances and interviews, he had met a woman by the name of Helen Cage. They had started dating and seemed to have a lot in

common. Diego needed to tell Jerry that his landlord Adelaide was now seeking her time in the spotlight. Another internet blogger had asked her to do an interview exposing Jerry as a womanizer and heartbreaker. She went into detail about the dinners and romantic relationship that they had shared only to be blindsided by his new relationship with Helen. Once again someone was trying to discredit Jerry for no other reason than selfish gain, jealousy, and desire for fame. Diego was surprised at Jerry's cool response when he was informed about Adelaide's shenanigans. Jerry explained, "I feel redeemed by the work I have been doing for my community. These people are willing to expose themselves, their loved ones and sell their souls just for that 15 minutes of fame. If they want it that bad by all means just let them have it. I

guarantee you after the 15 minutes is gone they will want their souls back.” They both feared the backlash that she possibly could be facing and also feared the fact that they may not be able to stop it this time. Jerry had no way of controlling a group that he had not started or interacted with on a personal level. Adelaide had always expressed that she thought her place was in front of the camera and now she was getting her wishes. When it comes to the Jerikans she will soon find out if she is up to the challenge and become up close and personal with the old saying “Be careful, what you wish for because you just may get it.”

The End

I hope you enjoyed reading Scorpio Season and Us Horror

Anthology: Volume 1. Please look forward to Scorpio

Season and Us Horror Anthology: Volume 2! Thank you

for all the support.

C. Darnell