

don't understand. If you insist on committing RosaMarie, it will destroy my family."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Clausen. I truly am. However, RosaMarie's mental health is declining rapidly. Her anger continues to rise, and I'm really afraid that if we don't intervene, someone will get hurt."

"I will fight you on this."

Whitfield's jaw tightened. "I hope you don't. Believe me, this is the last thing I wanted to have to do, but I will get CPS to go to court for an involuntary commitment if I have to." She got up from her seat. "You two have a lot to talk about, and I'm sure RosaMarie is ready to leave by now. Please make sure she is taking her medication until this is resolved."

They made the drive home in silence. RosaMarie refused to make eye contact and wouldn't respond to anything said to her, no matter how gently the words were spoken. When they walked inside the house, she immediately went to her room and shut the door, showing no interest in eating or interacting with the family. Juanita took a plate to her room and left it inside, but several hours later, the food was still untouched.

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Jack spent the rest of the night in a haze of anger, doubt and self-pity. As he poured another scotch, he wondered how his new life had gone so wrong so quickly. Perhaps he only succeeded in swapping one hellish reality for another.

Just as he took the first swallow from his fourth drink, he heard the sound of shattering glass and a commotion coming from the other end of the house. Wobbling on legs unsteady from the effects of the alcohol, he stumbled out of the den. What he saw as he approached the living room made him pause as he tried to make sense of the scene playing out in front of him.

"RosaMarie! Put that... stop that."

Juanita stood at one end of the room, jabbering insensibly while leaning over with her arms outstretched. The boys were standing behind her, stuck in a rigid pose with their eyes locked on their sister and their mouths hanging open.

Slowly, confusion gave way to shock, and Jack felt sluggish, almost like swimming in molasses. He tried to comprehend the visual, but his brain glitched and wouldn't process the information his optic nerves provided. Someone, or something, stood near the fireplace next to the cracked and broken coffee table. It resembled RosaMarie, but it wasn't her. The entity's facial features were distorted somehow, and the thing, whatever it was, looked much, much older than his daughter. Many decades older, in fact. Maybe centuries older.

It held a jagged shard of glass in its hand, and the point was pressed against its other arm, pushing hard enough to draw blood near the wrist. In the dim light in the living room, he saw an outline behind it, which passed through it, and finally stood out in front. It flickered like a hologram while changing size and shape. Jack tilted his head to the side and frowned, but a flash of light illuminated the creature completely for a moment, and he knew.

While hideous boils and lesions created a mask that amplified the hate behind the deep snarl, he recognized the shape of its face and body. The small stature and rounded shoulders; the evenly cut pointed teeth and facial features spaced too far apart. He was looking at Torto, but not the version he encountered in the other reality. The animus and enmity drifted up from the slick layer of sweat that covered its body. Jack could smell it, a stench unlike anything he had ever experienced before.

"Why, Daddy? Why you not pay what you owe?" RosaMarie spoke with the same dialect and inflections as Torto.

"Jack? Jack, what's going on here? Why is she talking that way?" Juanita backed up, still keeping her arms extended to keep the boys behind her.

"RosaMarie," said Jack, "put the glass down, princess. Please, put the glass down."

"Torto make fair deal, Daddy. You want girl back. He do his part, but you not do yours. Now... now you not right up. Nothing right, don'cha know."

Jack held out his hand and started slowly walking toward his daughter. He stopped twice as he saw her press the sharp edge deeper into her wrist.

"RosaMarie, put down the glass and let's talk about this."

"No, Daddy," said RosaMarie. "Jack say what he did. Jack say he not pay debt."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry I let you down, and I'm sorry I didn't—I didn't pay my debt." Jack noticed the pressure on her wrist lessened slightly. A little more of RosaMarie emerged as the apparition of Torto faded a bit.

"I'll do what he wants, RosaMarie. I'll find him and do what he wants. Just drop the piece of glass. Please..."

She hesitated, and her expression softened. The next words were in her own voice. "Do you mean it, Daddy? Do you really mean it?"

"Yes, I'll make it right, RosaMarie. Just drop the glass." While they were talking, he continued to inch forward until he believed he was close enough to grab her arm.

"Jack not lie to Torto. Jack tell truth this time, right?"

Jack stiffened. This voice *was* Torto's. Instinctively, he lunged and grabbed RosaMarie. She realized his intent just before his fingers touched her, and she tried to draw the piece of glass across her wrist.

Juanita screamed as she saw the first drop of blood drip off of RosaMarie's arm and land on the tile with a small splash. Jack forced the shard out of her hand and flung it across the room before wrapping his arms around her. She kicked, screamed and struggled like a trapped animal until exhaustion set in, and she finally went limp in his arms. He held her close for a long time as Juanita ran and got a gauze bandage that she wrapped tightly around the superficial wound on RosaMarie's wrist.

In shock, and increasingly aware of her surroundings, RosaMarie started crying in deep, agonizing sobs. Juanita tried to provide comfort, but the fear and terror had grown deep roots. After sending the boys upstairs, the two of them spent the next several hours watching over their daughter as she sat wrapped in her mother's arms while sullenly staring at cartoons on the TV. She refused to eat anything but eventually started yawning and nodded off.

Juanita handed RosaMarie to Jack, who gently carried her up to her room, carefully laying her on the bed. Juanita followed and pulled the covers up, and they both stood at her bedside, watching as she stared at the ceiling with a vacant, expressionless look on her face.

Afraid to leave her alone, Jack pulled up a chair and sat down while Juanita went to tend to the boys. He watched his daughter blink periodically, but she still wasn't talking. The silence grew in volume until it became ear shattering, interrupted only by the foreboding and sinister periodic hooting of a barn owl in the distance.