



A SYMPHONY OF VIOLENCE

A STORY BY T.D. LAWLER

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By T.D. Lawler

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Book Cover by T.D. Lawler

Also by T.D. Lawler

Super Beast '96

WHAT WE BECOME

I always believed I would die young—not from illness or some tragic accident, but because of the choices he made and the ones I made in return.

Everyone has a moment when childhood ends, when the world splits open and leaves a wound that never fully heals. Mine came when I was six years old—the day I watched our father kill our mother.

This is the story of a life lived through death. A glimpse into a world I once hoped to shield you from. Our story begins seventeen years ago, on a bright summer day in 1988, when the devil walked through our door and stole our mother’s life.

He hadn’t been much of a father before that from what I remember. I remember fists, yelling and blood. He left when you were just a baby. One night, he simply vanished—no warning, no goodbye, just an empty chair that became part of our lives. Our mother never knew if he was dead or if he had chosen to walk away, abandoning us for something or someone else.

I don’t try to understand why. There was no time for understanding. It happened too fast—a knock at the door, shouting, screaming. A sudden swing of his arm, and she collapsed, clutching her throat.

I was in the kitchen. All I could do was watch—and hold you.

He looked at me, his eyes locking onto mine for what felt like an eternity. And then, just like that, he was gone. I laid with you beside our mother’s body, soaked in her blood, waiting for someone to find us. The room was quiet, frozen in time. It was the next afternoon that the mailman came. He saw me curled up beside her, unmoving, and thought we were dead too. He nearly fainted when I stood up.

The EMTs took her away. The police took the utility knife our father had used, he left it there on the floor. And then they took us—to foster care. At the foster house, I learned not to make friends. What was the point? As far as I was concerned it was just you and me. I started overhearing people talking about the chance of us being adopted.

“What’s adoption?” I asked Mrs. Weston, the head of the home I we were staying at. “It means you and your sister could get a new family, a new mommy and daddy.”

My heart twisted at the thought. A *new* family? Was this supposed to make me feel better? The very idea made me sick.

“I don’t want a new mom. I want my mom.”

Mrs. Weston never brought it up again. Others tried, though.

“It’s too soon,” said the fat, bald man from social services, during one of his visits. “He needs time and therapy. It’s going to take a lot of strength before he processes like a normal child. His sister on the other hand is too young to know anything, thank God.”

Yes, thank God for letting the devil enter our home and steal our lives.

Not long after we arrived, insomnia set in. At night, I would wander the halls after lights-out. I would often sneak down the hall to check on you. You were always asleep and that made me smile. I was nearly caught a couple times. The foster home was a different place after dark. What I saw—the shadows, the whispers slipping from behind closed doors—should have made me cry. But instead, I learned.

I learned that people aren't always what they seem, that even the ones who are supposed to protect you have secrets. Secrets they'd do anything to hide. I watched the way they moved when they thought no one was looking, the lies behind their smiles. I saw too much.

Like how the fat, bald man who *understood* me liked to be sodomized by Mrs. Weston in the basement. Or how Mr. Benson, the janitor, fancied little boys. I watched from the broom closet near my room as he tiptoed from door to door, averaging three rooms a night. My room was last down the hall. That gave me two nights. Maybe.

The night I knew it was my turn, I hid in the broom closet. Something happened but I don't remember all of it—just fragments. I hid in the broom closet, waiting, watching. I felt a strange sense of dread, but then... nothing. A blackout. When I woke, hours had vanished, like they'd been stolen from me. They found me in the morning, next to a broken broom handle covered in blood. I didn't understand what had happened. But I knew something had changed.

They told me I was being sent to a behavioral health center. A psychiatric facility.

"What about my sister?!" I shouted.

"She'll stay here until you get better."

"I don't understand," I said, my voice shaking. "Why do I have to go? I don't want to leave."

Mrs. Weston narrowed her eyes, her voice sharp with contempt. "Don't play dumb—you know what you did." She leaned in, her words dripping with disdain. "There's a darkness in you, child."

I am the darkness.

The center felt even colder and darker than foster care. It was like stepping into a place that mirrored how I felt inside—cold, empty, abandoned. As I was escorted to my room, I noticed the staff watching me, whispering behind their hands. But I didn't care. I hadn't cared about anything in a long time.

"Here's your room," the center's manager said, unlocking the door with a heavy click. "Door locks at 9:00 sharp. That should keep you from wandering at night."

I stepped inside, the walls pressing in on me. The door locked behind me, but it didn't matter. I wasn't afraid of the dark anymore. Not after everything I'd already seen.

The next day he launched into a speech about the routine: breakfast, class, lunch, free time, more class, counseling, dinner, bed, repeat. Weekends were a mix of optional activities and mandatory group therapy sessions. I tuned him out. Why was I even here?

The first night was awful. I only thought about you and if you were ok, were safe. Would *he* come back for us?

Most of the kids in the center were survivors of violence—victims, witnesses, or worse. Some had already begun to mimic the horrors they’d lived through, while others, like me, were labeled as *warning signs*—potential threats, ticking time bombs that needed to be defused. The center’s mission was to “fix” us, mold us back into something that could pass for normal. But I wasn’t broken.

The first week passed uneventfully. My insomnia lingered, but I settled into the routine, keeping my distance from the others. I quickly learned that anger was a weakness here. The staff watched us closely, looking for any outbursts, any cracks. They wanted control, and anger gave them something to latch onto.

“So, your dad killed your mom, huh?” one of the older boys said to me during free time after lunch one day. He was obese, his shirt straining against his belly as he leaned in, his voice low but taunting.

I nodded, feeling fury stir beneath my skin. It clawed at me, but I kept it buried deep. *How dare he ask me that?*

“I know how you feel,” he continued, oblivious to the storm brewing inside me. “My dad did stuff to my mom. She sent me here when I started doing the same things to my little sister.”

There was no hesitation, no shame in his voice. Just an empty, matter-of-fact admission.

“Your mom’s still alive?” I asked, my voice cold and flat.

“Yeah,” he said, shrugging, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

A simple answer from a simple mind. The kind of mind that couldn’t see past itself, that would grow up to be nothing. Wasted potential, wasted breath. These were the people who should have never been born—the ones who drift through life like parasites, leaving wreckage in their wake and expecting sympathy for it.

I looked at him, really looked at him, and all I saw was emptiness. He wasn’t like me. He was a walking shell; someone who didn’t even realize he’d been hollowed out. He thought we were the same, but he couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Then you have no idea how I feel. I’m here because I have no mother. Because I’m alone. You’re here because your mother chose it. Does she not love you?”

His face flushed crimson, rage bubbling beneath his skin. I could feel it, ready to explode.

“What? What did you just say?”

“I said your mother doesn’t love you. Are you deaf as well as dumb?”

That was it—his anger flared, blinding him. He charged at me like a wild animal, fists clenched, driven purely by instinct. But rage dulls the senses. It makes people sloppy. I sidestepped him easily, sticking out my foot just enough. His face smashed into the concrete with a sickening thud.

I knew he’d come for me again. Rage like his doesn’t just disappear—it festers. But I wasn’t like him. The bullies at the center didn’t understand what I did. They acted out of cruelty, thinking their size or loudness gave them power. But they were still children. I wasn’t. Not anymore. I had seen things which would twist their minds if they ever knew.

It was during my time at the center that I met someone unlike the others—a boy I would later call Skoll. His real name didn't matter. What mattered was the quiet intensity that surrounded him like a fog. He never spoke, never reacted to the taunts or the rocks they threw at him. He just existed, head down, always drawing. Always alone.

Until, one day, he snapped.

In the lunch line, without warning, Skoll slammed his forehead into the face of the boy behind him, shattering the kid's nose in one brutal, efficient motion. Blood gushed everywhere, but Skoll didn't even blink. He calmly turned back to his tray as if nothing had happened, unfazed by the chaos around him.

Later, he gouged out another boy's eye with a spoon. No reason. Just... because. And when I heard about it, I laughed. It was brilliant.

I planned to approach him the next day. I wanted to know why he let them throw rocks at him but then chose to break a kid's face for no apparent reason. There was something there, something I needed to understand. But he was gone. Vanished from the center for days. No one would tell me where he went, and when I asked the staff, they snapped at me, "Just leave him alone."

But I couldn't. When Skoll finally returned, something had changed. He no longer ate with the rest of us. They had him in some hidden room behind the kitchen, separated, isolated, constantly being watched. They thought they could contain him, but they were wrong. I could see it in his eyes—the same quiet rage I felt. He wasn't done.

And neither was I.

So, I set a distraction. Joey and Matt—names as dull as their lives—were perfect for it. Two bullies, always puffed up with bravado, but terrified of being exposed. I whispered to Matt that Joey was spreading rumors about his bed-wetting, and to Joey that Matt had been laughing about the same. The tough guys who cried and wet themselves at night—terrified someone might find out.

As expected, they tore into each other, fists flying. Their snarling and cursing drew everyone's attention, just as I'd planned.

I slipped through the chaos and into the back room, the one where Skoll ate alone. It was barely a utility closet—four walls, a table, a chair. He sat there, eating with his hands, his tray filled with the same tasteless slop we all got. No spoon, no fork, just bare hands shoveling food into his mouth.

"Hey, no spoons today, huh?" I said, leaning in the doorway, half-expecting a smirk.

He looked up, smiled slightly, but didn't respond.

"You don't get to eat in the lunchroom anymore?" I pressed.

No small talk, no warming up. I went straight for it. "Why do you let them throw stuff at you, day after day, but then smash a kid's face for no reason?"

"Simple," he said, his fingers swirling lazily through the mush on his tray. "Those who throw things at me... they're seeking attention. When I refuse to give it to them, that frustration

grows. What starts as a small seed will fester inside them. Spreading. And it consumes them in the end.”

“And the kid you smashed your head into?”

“His breathing annoyed me.”

He said it with an eerie calm, as if the statement were as ordinary as commenting on the weather. His hands moved absently through his food, like none of it mattered. He glanced up at me, and for the first time in a long time, I smiled.

There was something about him—something familiar. It wasn’t just his words. It was the feeling that we understood something the others didn’t. We were the same, though we never had to say it aloud.

After that, we started sitting together during lunch and free time, though he was always under close watch. They never gave him utensils, and I noticed a bright red band around his wrist—a warning for the staff. "High-risk." We didn’t talk much most days. Sometimes, we sat in silence, both of us comfortable in it. But on the rare occasions when we did talk, the words were brief, cryptic. Enough to confirm we were alike in ways that didn’t need explaining.

Over time, I learned more about what happened the day Skoll shattered that boy’s face. After the incident, they locked him in isolation, deep in the basement. He grew familiar with the place, he said. Cold concrete walls, no windows, no light. It sounded like the same isolation I felt, but mine wasn’t physical. Mine was insomnia, the endless racing thoughts that never gave me peace. The door to my room locked every night, trapping me with those thoughts until morning.

Eventually, I found a way to numb it. A little theft from the infirmary—just enough benzodiazepine to dull the edge, to steal a few hours of sleep each night. But sleep never brought peace.

One night, after barely an hour of sleep, I woke to find him standing at the foot of my bed. Silent. Still. My eyes flicked to the door—it was locked. Then back to him.

“How did you get in?” I whispered.

He didn’t answer. Just stared at me, his eyes unreadable, as if waiting for something.

“Is my door locked?” I asked, breaking the heavy silence between us.

He nodded, and I didn’t bother to inquire how he had gotten in. I’d grown indifferent to the logistics of his nightly visits. They had become a ritual, always occurring during that haunting hour when sleep claimed me. Eventually, I abandoned the pills and surrendered to the sleeplessness altogether.

When we both turned fourteen, everything shifted. He had grown bigger and stronger, while I had shot up in height and quickness. Other boys, by this time, had learned to leave us alone. Over the years prior whenever someone tried to bully or bother us, we dealt with them swiftly, often ending up in solitary confinement. The staff, orderlies and the like, were a different story. In solitary they liked to push us around. I remember one tripping me on my way to the room and my head hit the floor. He just laughed. In fact, Mark, I believe his name was, made a habit of abusing the boys that found themselves locked in the basement. Some would come back with

physical bruises while others came back with mental. I was a particular target for Mark because I never gave him what he wanted; I never broke. On one of my visits to solitude he tripped me, causing me to smash my face on the concrete floor. I calmly stood, spit blood from my mouth, and gave him a wide crimson grin.

One fateful night, during one of Skoll's clandestine visits, he posed a question that caught me off guard.

"Would you like to participate in an experiment of self-exploration?"

It wasn't a sexual question—though the whispers and slurs from the other kids often labeled us as gay and worse. Their taunts rolled off him like water off a duck's back. Me? I envisioned darker outcomes for them, fantasies of bloodshed that left me exhilarated. His proposal intrigued me, and without hesitation, I agreed.

What followed was madness. He attacked me, and we grappled for hours, lost in a primal dance of fury. By dawn, we were both battered, bruised, and bloody but alive—and somehow more connected than ever. Skoll was stronger, but I was faster. We were opposites, yet we complemented each other perfectly. Chaos and control. We understood each other without needing to share our histories. He never pried into my past, and I refrained from asking about his. It felt unnecessary.

We shared only one class together: art, or as they called it, "creative sessions." One day, Ms. Carson announced a rare treat.

"Today is a free day," she declared. "Create anything your mind desires."

While we were forbidden from using anything dangerous, we improvised. I can't recall what I created that day—if anything at all. But Skoll? He crafted a mask: plain, white, and unrefined.

"I am a palette for creation," he said, staring at me through the eye holes.

Inspired, I took a brush, dipped it in black paint, and let my imagination run wild, transforming the mask into a crude horrific face. The mask itself was white, so I used black to paint large dark hollows for eyes and a twisted smile of ragged teeth that went from ear to ear. He was thrilled, and from that day on, he wore it during his nightly visits to my room.

Aside from art sessions and mandatory therapy, the center offered little to engage the mind. A small library housed a modest collection of books, most of which were geared toward children. Still, we managed to find a few that captured our interest. Together, we poured over volumes on mythology and anatomy, absorbing all we could from their pages.

Then, one night, he didn't show. I waited, my anxiety mounting. Driven by curiosity, I fashioned a makeshift lockpick from the springs in my mattress and freed myself from my confines.

I wouldn't say I have control over him. No one does. To suggest otherwise would be misleading. But for some reason, our bond allows me to reason with him. If he had a plan that would attract too much attention or risk landing us behind bars, I could offer alternatives—ways to execute our ideas quietly. I had witnessed the fates of those who tried to dominate him. It was never pretty. I could only set "mind bumpers," as I called them. Sometimes he listened. Sometimes he didn't.

That night, as I searched for him, I found him in the bathroom on the lower floor of the center, ruthlessly beating the lifeless body of a faculty member. The man had already met his end by the time I arrived. Why had he killed him? I didn't need to know. Perhaps he was merely testing the limits of how much blood he could extract from a cadaver. He wore the mask again—the one I had painted for him. It suited him perfectly.

“Come on. It's time to go,” I said, my gaze locked on the gruesome scene before us.

He halted and looked up at me, his hands slick with blood. He released the corpse, which crumpled to the floor with a wet thud. Skoll glanced down at his blood-splattered shirt, worry flickering in his eyes.

I sighed, feeling the weight of the moment. “Yeah, I know. It's your favorite shirt. Let's get you cleaned up.”

While I was helping him get cleaned up one of the night security guards came into the bathroom and froze. On the floor was the dead orderly and standing by the sink was me washing off a boy wearing a mask and covered in blood. We looked at him and he looked at us, we waited for someone to do anything. He reached for his radio but before he had a chance to say anything Skoll launched from where he was and knocked the man to his ground and viciously hammered his face and chest. I ran and locked the door and turned back. While Skoll was slamming the man's skull into the tile floor, I searched him and came away with a night stick, handcuffs, the keys to everywhere, mace, and taser. He did have a gun, but they're too loud. I did, however, take whatever cash he had on him.

This wasn't planned. But the opportunity was too perfect to ignore, and we both knew it: it was time to leave. We had nothing here, only the threadbare clothes they issued us and whatever scraps of our projects. There was no need to return to our rooms.

We slipped from the lower level to the main floor, sticking to the shadows. Skoll could melt into darkness like he was born there, while I, barefoot, crept silently. The second guard didn't even hear me coming before I brought his colleague's baton down, hard, knocking him out cold. I rifled through his things again, taking more cuffs, cash, mace, and a second taser. I handed Skoll his own gear, and we pressed forward. As we reached the front offices, I heard a familiar voice drip with venom from behind me.

“You little fuck.” The voice said coldly. I paused and looked back. Skoll was nowhere to be seen, instead stood my old friend Mark.

“You're going to get it this time you little shit.” He said as he approached me. I smiled in response.

I told you Skoll had a way to blend into the shadows. He was so good at it that Mark never saw him. It took one swing from the baton to knock him out.

When Mark woke up, he was handcuffed to a chair in one of the offices.

“You know Mark,” I started, “all you had to do was keep walking, not saying a word. But you couldn't help yourself, could you?”

“What the fuckkkkkkkkkk...” Skoll, beside me, had pressed a taser to his testicles, his eyes lit with morbid curiosity. We watched Mark twitch and convulse, and I couldn't help but chuckle.

When he came to for a second time, I glanced at the faint light creeping through the windows. We were running out of time. I leaned in and whispered, “Goodbye, Mark,” then slammed the baton across his jaw. Teeth flew, and he slumped forward. His head lulled and I swung again, and again, and again until I heard the satisfying crack. Skoll shocked him again for good measure before we made our way.

As we walked out of the rehab center, no alarms sounded, no one called out, and no one came chasing after us. This was the first time we have been outside the facility and its walls since we arrived. The air outside seemed cooler than I remembered, prickling against my skin as if reminding me what the world out here felt like. Freedom, or something like it, stretched wide and open before us, but it was oddly hollow. There wasn't a rush of exhilaration or a sense of liberation—just a quiet, indifferent emptiness that settled over us like a heavy fog.

We drifted toward the city, drawn by the lights that flickered in the distance. After a while, we stopped looking over our shoulders; no one was coming for us. In the city, we slipped through alleys and shadows, moving like ghosts. There was a sense of familiarity in the cold, cracked pavement and abandoned buildings with shattered windows that watched us pass. We found shelter in the ruins of forgotten places, squatting in homes that had long since been emptied of life or shuttered factories that moved their business out of the country. The broken floors and peeling wallpaper felt like a step up from where we'd come from.

By day, I haunted the streets, keeping my head down and hands tucked in my pockets, slipping in and out of the city's unnoticed places. At night, the city became ours. We made connections with those who lingered on the fringes—the owners of small businesses who looked at us with wary eyes, sizing us up. Sometimes we made demands, sometimes just suggestions. Either way, we got what we needed. A few threats here, a few subtle gestures there, and they understood. We were survivors of something dark and unspoken, and that gave us power in a world that ran on violence, hate, and silent agreements.

Not a single day passed—inside that center or in the years since—when I didn't think about you. Wondering where you were, what you were going through, if you were safe. But no one would tell me. No matter how many times I asked, I was met with silence.

I didn't learn the truth until years later. By then, I had stopped waiting for answers and started taking them. Skoll and I broke into a police station, slipping through the cracks of their security like shadows in the night. We weren't just looking for information but also something I hadn't seen since that day he took her from us. And buried deep in their files was exactly what I had been searching for: the truth about you.

THE DEVIL'S OWN

"Please state your name for the record," Detective Lawrence said, settling into the chair across from me, the steel table between us.

"No."

His brow furrowed. "Excuse me?"

"My name doesn't matter. By the time this interview is over, none of this will matter."

Annoyance flickered across his face. Good. We were getting right to it.

"Alright then," he said, leaning forward. "Why don't you tell me about the body we found last night?"

I tilted my head, a small smile tugging at my lips. "Why don't you answer a question for me first?"

His eyebrow arched.

"Tell me about that murder years ago. The one where a man killed his wife, then ran off, leaving his kids behind. What prison did he end up in?"

Lawrence's expression shifted, his confusion evident. "Prison? That case is still open. It went cold."

A slow burn of anger coursed through me, but I kept it contained. How incompetent was this department? Seventeen years, and they had done nothing.

His eyes narrowed. "How do you know about that, anyway? That was, what—almost twenty years ago?"

"Seventeen," I corrected. "And I know because the man responsible is my father."

He let out a short, disbelieving laugh. "Come on," he scoffed. "Don't bullshit me."

Detective Lawrence grabbed the radio off his belt. "Hey, Conner, bring me the cold case files. I want to check something."

Minutes later, a man—Conner—walked in, set a dusty box down on the table, and left without a word.

Lawrence ran a hand over the lid before flipping it open. "That one shook up the whole town. We had the entire force hunting for your father after that night." He started sifting through the contents.

"And what did that accomplish?" I smirked.

His jaw tightened. For a split second, I caught the flicker of anger in his eyes before he forced it down. Barely. He sank back into his chair, feigning calm, but I saw through him. He wasn't as good at hiding as he thought.

"You've got a real mouth on you, don't you?"

I grinned. “Yeah. Helps with things like talking. And eating.”

The tension in the room crackled like static. He ignored it, pulling out a file and thumbing through it before selecting a photograph. Holding it side by side with my face, he studied the image, then turned it so I could see.

“I can see the resemblance,” he muttered.

It was a picture of a child—me, but not me—clutching you. The sight of you, even frozen in time, pulled at something deep in my chest. I hadn’t seen you in so long.

He slid a folder across the table. Just one.

“Go ahead. Take a look,” he said, too casual, too controlled.

“It doesn’t matter.” My voice dropped to a whisper. “I see it every time I close my eyes, whether I want to or not.”

Still, I flipped through the photos. The images felt distant, like someone else’s nightmare. My mother’s lifeless eyes stared back at me from glossy prints, hollow and cold. In a few shots, there was a small boy. That boy had died shortly before these pictures were taken, swallowed by the same darkness that had claimed her.

Then, at the last photo, my breath caught.

In the second Lawrence glanced at the other file, I palmed the paperclip from the table. Smooth. Effortless.

“Look familiar?” He leaned in, watching me closely.

The picture showed a close-up of a bloodstained utility knife—the kind no one thinks twice about until it becomes something monstrous. A red evidence tag in the corner read: T13.

“What does that mean?” I asked, though I already knew.

“Evidence locker number,” he said, his voice calm, almost amused. “Crazy, isn’t it? The very thing your father used... just sitting downstairs in this building.”

I met his gaze. “Can I see it?”

He didn’t even hesitate. “Sorry. The case is still open.”

“You really are him then, the kid. The one that killed all those people and escaped the facility.” He said, sitting back down on the opposite side of the table, his gaze darting to the two way glass.

I nodded.

“What happened to my sister?” I asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know. It just said she was adopted six months after everything happened. With any luck she’s having a good life and doesn’t know anything about you or your fucked up dad. “Now tell me about the body we found last night.”

"That's why I'm here, isn't it, Detective?" I leaned forward slightly. "You got a call. Someone decided I'd make a convenient suspect."

He blinked, caught off guard, his eyes flicking toward the two-way mirror—a reflex, or maybe a silent signal. It didn't matter.

"How did you know about the call?"

"Small towns." I said, grinning.

After a beat I explained to him that I didn't escape alone. That Skoll, my brother for lack of a better term, escaped with me. I told him about our years together in the facility and the years since living on the edges of town, living off things we take and procure from vagrants of the city.

What did it matter now anyway, this was almost over, it didn't matter.

"So, what happened to your friend? Where is he now?" the detective inquired, skepticism dripping from his voice.

"Oh, he's around," I replied casually, shrugging as if it were no big deal. "I'm sure of it."

"Enough with the games. Get to the point!" His fist slammed the table between us, rattling the papers.

"All good things..." I retorted, maintaining my calm demeanor.

"You're going away for a long time for what you did to those people," he said, a smug grin spreading across his face, his voice thick with arrogance.

I lit a cigarette, fumbling slightly with the match as I maneuvered my cuffed hands. The façade was almost at its end.

"You want to know what I think?" he asked, leaning closer, his eyes narrowing.

"Not particularly," I said, taking a drag, but he pressed on.

"I think you're fucking nuts. I think you made up this 'friend' of yours. There is no mask faced killer—just you. You're as crazy as your old man. Guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, huh?"

The jab was intended to provoke me, but I found it amusing. The illusion of power often makes men reckless with their words.

His grin widened, triumph gleaming in his eyes as if he'd already declared checkmate.

"It's bad enough how fucked up this town is, we have gangs and organized crime, a new group calling themselves the demons or something, and now we have you. A bat shit serial killer."

I snuffed the cigarette out on the table.

"Before I go, Detective, you should understand something. My friend is very real. Some might call him the boogeyman, others the devil. But to me? He's family."

“What about the body?! He demanded.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot. They were just unlucky enough to have crossed our path and giving a reason for me to be arrested and being placed in this specific police station.”

“What?” he stammered, confusion flickering across his features.

“Did you think it was just luck when you received that anonymous tip leading you to me?” I leaned in, a smile creeping onto my lips.

“I don’t—” he faltered, a hint of panic creeping into his voice.

“I called you myself. Your station had information and the evidence room holds something I need,” I declared, letting the words hang in the air.

“You’re crazy if you think you’re walking out of here.” His bravado was cracking, beads of sweat forming on his brow like a telltale sign of a gambler losing the game.

“What if I’m not the crazy one?” I asked, my tone turning conspiratorial. “What if it’s everyone else?”

He laughed nervously—just before the power went out, plunging the room into an oppressive darkness.

“What the hell?” he barked, his voice quavering slightly.

Fumbling for the flashlight on his belt, he clicked it on. The beam illuminated my face as I sat still, a calm predator waiting in the shadows.

“Don’t move!” he shouted, tension coiling tightly in his voice.

He spun around, his fingers brushing against the two-way mirror as he searched for the intercom. “Kyle, what the fuck is going on?” he yelled, but the only answer was silence. Frustration built within him as he snatched his walkie-talkie from the table.

“Kyle? Dave? Where the hell are you guys?”

All that met his inquiry was a static-filled void.

The detective hadn’t spotted *him* yet, but I knew he was lurking nearby, I saw the door behind the detective crack open briefly. A faint mist, the white of his face, drifted past us in the darkness. I stood up, feeling the ache in my back from sitting too long.

“Sit the fuck down!” he barked, panic creeping into his voice.

I dropped the handcuffs to the floor, having picked them earlier with a paperclip I’d swiped from one of the files.

“Shit!” he cursed, his panic escalating as he instinctively reached for his gun.

I wondered if he realized the strap on his holster was already undone. Had Skoll left it that way on purpose? Of course he had. It was a distraction, a desperate attempt to blind himself to the unfolding reality. He pulled the gun, aiming it unsteadily at my face.

“I’ve never used a gun,” I said, my voice steady and measured. “Too quick and too loud for my tastes. Maybe I’ll give it a... *shot* one day.” I allowed a smirk to curve my lips.

His eyes widened, yet he didn't lower the weapon.

He grabbed the doorknob with his free hand, twisting it frantically. Nothing.

"Locked?" I mused, directing my words more toward the figure lurking in the shadows than to him.

"Shut up!" he barked, too rattled to grasp the situation.

With the flashlight no longer blinding me, I could see him—Skoll—drawing closer. The black eyes and grin I had designed years ago merged seamlessly with the darkness. The detective still hadn't noticed him. I stepped forward, and the detective's gun swung in my direction, following my movement.

"I will kill you!" he screamed, his voice cracking with desperation as he aimed the gun squarely at me.

A small metallic clink echoed through the room. The rectangular magazine fell to the floor beside my feet, the sound reverberating in the tense silence.

"How do you plan to shoot me without a clip?" I asked, my tone calm and genuinely curious as I gazed up at him.

The detective's eyes flickered down to check the butt of his gun, and that split second was all Skoll needed. In one fluid motion, my towering friend seized the detective by the throat and slammed him against the concrete wall with brutal force. I couldn't help but wonder if the detective noticed that Skoll wasn't wearing the mask anymore. He didn't need to. After I'd secured the right tools, I had tattooed the dark eyes and twisted grin directly onto his face—etched it into his skin, permanent and unmistakable.

"Oh my God," the detective gasped, choking as Skoll's grip tightened around his neck.

"No need for formalities," Skoll said coldly. "You can simply call me Skoll."

The detective's bravado evaporated, replaced by sheer terror as his pants darkened, urine pooling at his feet. I grinned at the sight, relishing his fear. "I always thought it was a fitting name for him," I said, my tone dripping with mockery. "Wouldn't you agree? Now, about that little bit you mentioned earlier—apples and trees?"

His bloodshot eyes bulged as he struggled for breath, Skoll's hand slowly crushing the life out of him. As I walked out of the interrogation room I heard a faint crunching sound. It reminded me of someone biting into an apple. I wonder if that's why it's called an Adam's apple.

I turned away, strolling out of the interrogation room, my boots tapping rhythmically against the floor. Behind me, I heard a soft, wet crunch—the unmistakable sound of bone and cartilage collapsing under pressure. It reminded me of biting into an apple. Adam's apple. I smirked at the thought as I made my way through the police department lobby.

The aftermath of Skoll's handiwork was a grotesque tapestry of chaos. The receptionist remained at her desk; her intestines grotesquely wrapped around her neck like a perverse necklace. Nearby, a young officer's severed head was impaled on a nightstick, his body conspicuously absent. Blood splattered the walls, mingled with chunks of flesh and brain

matter. One officer had shot himself in the head; how Skoll managed that particular trick was beyond me, but it didn't surprise me in the slightest.

A severed hand lay just outside the evidence room, still clutching a set of keys. I crouched down and plucked the keys from its stiff fingers, letting the hand drop to the floor with a wet thud. The locker I was searching for stood out easily amidst the carnage.

I admit, this might seem like an elaborate plan for something as simple as a utility knife. But my reasons are my own, and they are just. When our father comes back for me or us—and he will—I want him to die by the same blade he used on our mother. This knife won't be stained by anyone else's blood. It's meant for him alone.

I returned to the interrogation room to find Skoll looming over the detective's convulsing body, his work an unsettling form of art—blood painting the floor in wild patterns, the detective's flesh torn and mangled like butchered meat. The man resembled a pig on a table, writhing desperately for breath, for life.

"He's still alive?" I asked, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

Skoll shrugged, his indifference palpable. The detective, barely conscious, rolled onto his side, fixing his desperate gaze on me. Blood dribbled from the corners of his mouth and pooled in the gashes Skoll had carved into him.

"Please," he gurgled, his voice wet and trembling. "I have a wife... we just had a baby."

I crouched next to him, staring into his terrified eyes. "Don't worry, Detective," I said with a smirk, my voice dripping with false comfort. "Skoll and I will personally deliver the news of your death."

I reached into his jacket and took his badge and ID.

As Skoll continued his brutal work, I noticed a file folder lying on the table—one the detective hadn't shown me earlier. Curiosity piqued, I opened it, my heartbeat quickening.

Inside was confirmation that they had no idea where our father was. The next page told me that you were, in fact, adopted, by a Kevin and Vanessa Cain.

Skoll noticed my distraction. "Erik, we go?" he asked, his voice tinged with a hint of confusion.

I looked up from the folder and smiled.

BLOOD AND SHADOWS

It was a couple days after Skoll and I infiltrated a police department. That file revealed the truth of who adopted you. They gave you their last name but kept the first one our mother chose. I visited one of our contacts, someone we use when information slips through the cracks, let's call him John. I paid him extra, but even then, he came back with almost nothing. "Poor records", he said. But the biggest lead? You've been missing for fourteen months, listed as a runaway.

"She found out she was adopted," John told me. "Left a note. Called her parents liars. No one's heard from her since."

"Are they still looking?" I asked.

"Yeah. They call the police every week, hoping for news."

That's when I decided to meet these so-called parents. This is one of the differences between Skoll and me. I can blend in, disappear in plain sight. I know how to read people and how to act. But Skoll... his appearance doesn't allow that. He stays hidden. No one ever sees him unless he wants them to.

After securing a suit and fabricating some convincing documents, I slipped into the role of Detective Lawrence. The real Detective had been generous enough to lend me his credentials.

Your adoption file didn't offer much insight into Kevin and Vanessa Cain, but as I traced my way to their address, I got the impression they might lean toward the "trashy" side of the spectrum. When they finally answered the door, I gave them my most trustworthy smile.

"Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Cain. Detective Lawrence," I introduced myself, voice smooth. "I've recently taken over several missing persons and runaway cases. Your daughter, Sandra, is one of them."

Vanessa, warm and eager, welcomed me in, while Kevin's expression hardened. "We already told you people everything," he muttered, voice tight with impatience. He wasn't angry—just inconvenienced.

Ignoring his tone, Vanessa ushered me inside, her hand gesturing toward the kitchen. "I understand, Mr. Cain. But as I mentioned, I'm new to the case. I like to reexamine things myself—sometimes a fresh set of eyes can spot something others might miss." Kevin shrugged, rolling his eyes, before disappearing out of my line of sight. I heard the fridge door open—probably another beer—then the faint creak of floorboards as he retreated further into the house. Vanessa apologized quietly, eyes downcast, the look of someone used to making excuses for him. I touched her shoulder, offering a reassuring smile, and she looked up, visibly softening under my charm. It never failed.

"Now, as I understand it, Sandra discovered she was adopted and hasn't been in contact since?"

Of course, I already knew this, but appearances had to be kept.

"Yes, that's right." Vanessa's expression grew pained. "She must've found the papers down in the storage room. We'd decided not to tell her. We didn't want her to know about... well, the

incident involving her birth mother. It's not something anyone should grow up knowing. She doesn't have birth parents anymore."

The story of our mother was practically local folklore. I could see why they wanted to shield you from the darker parts of your origins. But Vanessa's words caught me off guard. Birth parents—plural. Was she saying our father was dead, too? That would be... unfortunate.

"Just to clarify," I pressed, "both of her birth parents are deceased? Our records only show the mother."

Vanessa hesitated, brow furrowing. "I'm not really sure about the father. As you know he's never been found. No one knows why he did it.

"I can tell you why," Kevin's voice cut through the air as he re-entered the kitchen, a fresh beer in hand. He glared down at Vanessa before turning to me. "She was probably a fucking slut who was messing around. I'd do the same if you cheated on me," he spat, eyes locked on Vanessa's bowed head.

He dares to call our mother a slut? The rage ignited within me, but I swallowed it, letting it simmer just below the surface. It wasn't time—not yet.

"That doesn't make much sense," I said calmly, though my fists clenched beneath the table. "If he left her, why would he kill her?"

Kevin shrugged, taking a long swig of his beer. "Who said it had to make sense? Just what I'd do."

The tension snapped as Vanessa cut in. "When do you need to leave for work, honey?"

Kevin glanced at his watch, then drained the last of his beer, the can crumpling in his hand. "Yeah, I better get going. Someone's gotta bring in money around here." He grabbed his jacket, threw it on, and slammed the door behind him without a second glance.

Silence settled like a fog after his departure. I let it linger for a moment before breaking it, my voice gentle but probing. "If I'm out of line here, tell me. But... is he always like that?"

Vanessa exhaled slowly, her fingers fidgeting. "He wasn't always. He used to drink— heavily. But when we adopted Sandra, he quit. For a while, things were better. But when she hit her teens, he started again. Maybe he didn't know how to handle a teenage girl. I don't know. After she ran away, it only got worse."

I leaned forward, lowering my voice, coaxing her gently. "Did he ever hurt you? Or Sandra?"

Her eyes flickered with hesitation, fear flashing across her face. She was weighing her options, deciding how much she could trust me.

"It's alright," I said, soft and reassuring. "You can tell me. I'm not here to file a report. I'm just trying to understand why she left. This stays between us."

She looked down, her shoulders tense, before finally meeting my gaze again. Her voice trembled as she spoke. "Yes. He did."

The admission came out like a confession, and I could see the weight of it bearing down on her.

“You’re a good person, Vanessa. A good mother,” I said, my voice steady, though a coldness crept into my words. “I understand why you stayed. Fear can make you do that.”

She stared at me, her eyes wide, as if there was something more she was holding back. Something darker.

“What else, Vanessa?” I asked quietly. “What else did Kevin do?”

She swallowed hard, her hands trembling as she brought them up to cover her face. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper.

“I think... I think he did things to her.”

The world around me blurred for a moment, my vision narrowing as the fury surged. My fists clenched so hard I thought I might shatter bone. Beneath the table, my knuckles went white, trembling with the effort to keep control.

I wanted to tear the room apart. I wanted to drag her to her feet and gut her for standing by while he did this to you. I could already see the scene in my mind: her entrails spilling out, and I’d strangle her with them. I could feel the tension in my muscles, the raw, primal urge to kill her where she sat.

But I didn’t.

I forced the anger back, the beast clawing inside me for release, but I locked it down, tightened the chains. If I lost control now, I’d lose everything. The information. The plan. I still needed her—at least for a little longer.

I inhaled slowly, my breathing measured, my voice calm when I finally spoke again. “Thank you for telling me. That must’ve been hard.”

This is one of the many ways Skoll and I differ. I have mental barriers—walls, if you will—that keep me in control. I know that if I let my rage spill out, if I acted on impulse, I would lose the one thing I needed: information. Skoll, though, doesn’t have these walls. His actions are pure instinct, unfiltered by thought or consequence. He’s not a mindless animal—no, far from it—but when Skoll decides to end a life, there’s no hesitation. It’s as if something outside of himself, some force, drives him. It’s always been that way with him. Somehow, he makes it work; the ends always seem to justify his brutal means. I can guide Skoll—“control” isn’t the right word, but I can steer him. I’m more like a compass or a rudder, keeping him on course, preventing him from straying too far. He doesn’t follow orders, but when I speak, he listens. That’s enough.

After our talk, Vanessa led me down the hallway, her steps soft and tentative, as if she was still unsure whether to trust me completely. She opened the door to your old room, and I could feel her sadness hanging in the air. It looked untouched, preserved as if waiting for you to return. But I didn’t care about her sentimentality, not anymore. My mind had already moved beyond this place, onto what I needed to do next. Vengeance burned quietly in my chest, simmering.

Still, I feigned interest, scanning the room until my eyes fell on your picture. And just like that, any lingering doubts I had about our connection dissolved. I saw our mother in you—her face echoed in yours, especially in those deep blue eyes. The truth was undeniable.

“Beautiful.” I whispered to myself.

Vanessa, of course, misunderstood. She thought I meant you, which was true in a way, but what I really meant was the resemblance between you and our mother. The connection between us.

“Please find her.” Vanessa’s voice broke behind me, shaky and vulnerable.

I could hear the tears threatening to spill over, and when I turned around, her eyes glistened. Instinctively, I pulled her into an embrace, not out of compassion but to maintain the facade. But before I could pull away, she leaned up, pressing her lips to mine.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, stepping back, her face flushed with embarrassment. “it’s just... been so long since anyone held me like that. You’re a good man, Detective Lawrence.”

She was wrong about that, of course. So very wrong.

Before I go any further, you need to understand something crucial. The purpose of this letter isn’t to provide you with answers, nor is it to justify the choices I’ve made. I’m writing this so you can glimpse the world I inhabit—a world that is not for you. This is *not* your fate, and it never will be.

As you read on, you’ll find things in these pages that will unsettle you. Some will frighten you, others will disgust you. And there will be things that make you hate me. Things that might even make you want to kill me. But whether you like it or not, you are the last thread connecting me to my past, the last tether to our mother. For that reason alone, I swear that as long as I live, if there is breath in my body, you will never be hurt. No one will ever lay a hand on you again.

She didn’t say a word, just gave a slight, awkward smile. Maybe she felt guilt or shame. Whatever the reason, it didn’t matter anymore.

"Unfortunately, Vanessa, this is where your life ends."

The smile vanished from her lips. She blinked at me, confusion clouding her expression.

"That’s right," I continued, grinning coldly in the soft light filtering through the window. "Sandra is my sister. And you... you stood by and let your husband hurt her, violate her. For that, your death won’t be quick."

Her voice came out as a whisper. "Your sister?"

I nodded.

Her mouth fell open in silent horror. She finally understood.

"I'll be leaving soon," I said, turning toward the door. "Time to pay Kevin a little visit. But before I go, there's someone you should meet."

Her eyes widened as Skoll's hand clamped around her throat before I could finish the sentence. She hadn't noticed him, lurking in the shadows, slipping into the room earlier. Despite his size, he had a way of becoming invisible until he wanted to be seen.

"Didn't know we had company, did you?" I said, smirking as I watched the panic swell in her eyes. "Skoll is gifted that way—sneaking in, especially when people are too distracted to care."

I winked at her as I stepped out of the room, leaving her to Skoll. She didn't even have time to scream before the sound of tearing flesh filled the silence.

Skoll and I live on the outskirts of the city, near the river, in an old, abandoned factory. Judging by the rusted welding equipment and the skeletal remains of conveyor belts scattered throughout the building, it was likely an assembly plant in its past life. We chose this place because it's far from prying eyes—no busy roads, no curious neighbors. Occasionally, we get the odd vagrant or thrill-seeking teenager wandering too close, but they're easily dealt with. But lately, we've noticed more activity a few blocks away—people gathering, loitering around the other nearby abandoned buildings. A gang, most likely. There have been rumblings of a new crew in town calling themselves the 'Draugr's'. A little egotistical for my taste with their leather jackets with red demon face branding. They're aware someone's holed up in this factory, but so far, none of them have had the nerve to investigate. Sooner or later, though, Skoll and I will need to decide—relocate or handle them ourselves.

Kevin was easy enough to bring back here—patience and a syringe full of tranquilizer was all it took.

"Ah, so your search is over," Skoll said when he saw Kevin's unconscious body.

I bound Kevin to a steel chair, wrapping chains tight around his wrists and ankles, securing him in place in one of the disused offices on the second floor.

"Yes," I said, tightening the last link. "Now, I need to tell you what I've been up to."

I reached into my pocket, pulling out your photograph—the one I'd taken from your bedroom—and handed it to Skoll.

"She is not to be harmed." I said firmly.

Skoll glanced at the picture and nodded once.

"It's a family matter, she's my—"

"No need for a story." Skoll interrupted, his voice low and dismissive.

I smiled. That's what I liked about Skoll—no need for details.

"I can see it." he said, studying the photo. "You and her, you share the same blood. It's obvious. Almost disappointing, really. I had hoped for something more... arousing." He flashed that grin of his, the one that could send shivers down a man's spine. "But all I see is you. And, no offense, but you don't exactly... arouse me."

His grin widened.

A groggy sound interrupted us—Kevin, slurring as he regained consciousness.

"Huh? Wha... what the fuck?" Kevin mumbled, his eyes struggling to focus.

I turned to face him, my smile growing darker.

"Good Evening." I stepped toward him, my voice slicing through the dimly lit room.

I moved into the pale light of a single bulb hanging from the ceiling. Kevin's eyes, still glassy and unfocused from the tranquilizer, blinked sluggishly as he struggled to orient himself.

"Hello, Kevin," I said, leaning down so our faces were inches apart.

He squinted at me, confusion painting his face. Then the fog lifted, and recognition struck him.

"Detective Lawrence?" he asked, his voice shaky.

I smiled coldly. "I'm afraid the real Detective Lawrence has been dead for a few days now."

"What? Who the hell are you then? And why am I tied up?" His voice climbed in pitch, panic creeping in.

"Silence, meat!" Skoll snapped, his voice thundering as he lunged forward, towering over the bound man.

At that moment he stepped fully into the light. His face—once hidden by a mask—now tattooed in a grotesque black-and-white smile. It was simple but effective. The whites of the face were bright enough that if he was wearing a hood it looked like a floating skull. The dark around the eyes gave a hollow effect that stared directly at Kevin. The sight was too much for him.

"Oh my God," Kevin whispered, barely audible.

Skoll leaned in close, his breath hissing like steam escaping from a broken pipe. "No God," he whispered back.

Kevin's terror was palpable now. "What... do you... want?" he stammered, his words breaking into fragments of fear. The smell of urine filled the air as his body betrayed him.

Skoll smiled, a slow, predatory grin. "For you to stop wasting my oxygen."

Skoll is a curious creature. Like me, he doesn't sleep—not in the traditional sense. Once a week, his mind shuts down for a few hours, slipping into a state that can only be described as hibernation. His body, however, continues to move, almost on autopilot, as if some part of him remains conscious enough to carry out basic tasks. We don't speak during these times; it's as though he's programmed himself to operate without thought, a bizarre phenomenon I've never fully understood.

But right now, Skoll was very much awake.

Kevin's voice rose, shaky but defiant, a tone that had no place coming from a man sitting in a pool of his own piss. "What the fuck is going on here? Why am I here?"

"You're here to die, Kevin." My words were calm, final.

His eyes widened, but he said nothing.

"I'm going to end you for what you did to my sister. You enjoy causing pain, don't you? You think you know what it feels like? You have no idea. But I'll show you."

"Sister?" His confusion returned, masking his fear for a moment. "What the fuck are you talking about, psycho?"

"Sandra!" I yelled, the name tearing through my throat. "You violated her, and now, you'll beg for death."

He flinched at my outburst, the weight of it sinking in.

"But I'm a generous man, Kevin," I said, my voice dropping back to a sinister calm. "That's why I'm going to untie you and give you a fighting chance."

"Sandra? Sandra is your sister?" His voice trembled, his disbelief thick.

I nodded slowly.

Kevin's eyes grew even wider. "Oh my... You're the boy... the one who saw it all."

"Yes," I replied, my voice steady.

"Look," he said, his voice suddenly softening, desperation creeping in. "I never touched her. I swear. Just let me go. I'll give you anything."

I shook my head, a slow smile forming. "It's too late for lies, Kevin. And even if it were about money, you have nothing I want. I've been inside your house, remember? No, Kevin, what I want... is for you to beg."

I stepped back, shedding my jacket and unbuttoning my shirt. They fell to the floor as I stood in front of him, now dressed in nothing but a white tank top and pants. Slowly, methodically, I unbuckled my knives, letting them clatter to the ground at his feet.

He looked down at the pile of weapons, then back up at me, his face pale.

"I told you I'm generous," I said. "I'm going to untie you. You'll choose a weapon, and you'll attack me. If you can take me down, you walk out of here alive. If not, well... you don't. Simple"

He shook his head violently, his voice rising again. "I know what you're doing. The second I take you down, that... thing over there will attack," he said, nodding toward Skoll.

Skoll chuckled, the sound low and dangerous. "He's confident, isn't he?"

"Skoll?" I said, raising an eyebrow.

He took a step forward, his eyes gleaming.

"If he even manages to knock you down, I'll do nothing," Skoll said calmly, his voice cutting through the stillness. "This is your fight. I know how much you need this."

He was right. I *did* need this. The anticipation coursed through me, a dangerous energy I couldn't shake. Maybe I wanted Kevin to fight back, to offer some challenge. Or maybe... I wanted him to be the one to end me. Either way, I had to see it through.

I removed the restraints holding him back and stood before him. Slowly, he rose, unsteady on his feet, eyes flicking between me and the scattered blades on the floor.

"It's your choice, Kevin," I said, my voice low and challenging.

His hand hovered over the pile, then he reached for one of my favorites—a sleek, black switchblade. With a press of the button, the blade snapped open, gleaming in the dim light. But Kevin hesitated, staring at the weapon as if it held all his doubts.

"Attack me," I urged, my voice laced with venom.

He looked at me, bewildered. "What's the point?"

I smirked, circling him like a predator. "I remember a story from a few years back," I began, my words dripping with mockery. "A 13-year-old boy killed another child. You know why? Because the boy was defenseless. That's the kind of person you are, isn't it, Kevin? You like your victims weak. Where's the fun in that? You are weak. You are a coward, preying on defenseless women."

Still, he made no move. I needed to push him over the edge. I needed his rage, his hate.

"You know, I wasn't just in your house today," I said, watching his eyes narrow. "Vanessa is a tender woman isn't she?" I added, my lips curling into a wicked smile.

The effect was instant.

"You motherfucker!" Kevin screamed, his voice trembling with fury.

I stepped back, smiling.

He didn't hesitate. Fueled by rage, he lunged at me, swinging the knife with blind fury. The blade sliced across my chest, shredding my tank top and leaving a thin line of crimson in its wake. I could feel the warm blood seeping through the fabric.

Oh, the pain. The glorious, electric pain. It surged through me like a drug, igniting something primal inside. This was what I wanted—what I *needed*.

"Ah, stupidity," Skoll's voice echoed, his tone laced with disdain. "You're given the first blow, and you waste it on a scratch. You lack precision, Kevin."

I didn't retaliate. I was too caught up in the sensation, savoring the sharp sting of the wound. Kevin came at me again, slashing wildly. I deflected the blade, but it still grazed my forearm, leaving another red line in its wake. The pleasure of pain rippled through me once more.

His third swing came, but I was done waiting. I caught his wrist mid-swing and twisted—hard. The sickening snap of bone echoed in the room as the knife flew from his grasp, clattering to the floor. Kevin collapsed, cradling his broken arm, groaning in agony.

But I wasn't close to done yet.

I walked away, retrieving something I had been working on—a crude, makeshift gauntlet. It was a vicious thing, cloth and leather wrapped around my arm that covered my knuckles and ran up to my elbow, embedded with shards of broken razor blades. It wasn't meant to kill. It was meant to punish. To carve slow, deliberate lines of suffering.

And I would suffer too, just enough to taste the pain I would inflict.

"Your chance is gone, Kevin," I said, sliding the gauntlet onto my arm. "My generosity has run out."

I grabbed him by the back of the neck, forcing him to look up at me. His eyes widened in terror as he stared at the jagged shards gleaming on my fist.

"Kevin," I whispered, locking eyes with him, "this is going to hurt."

With a slow, deliberate motion, I clenched my fist, the razors biting into my own skin as I pulled him closer. The fear in his eyes was intoxicating.

And then, I began.

I drove my fist into his mouth, feeling the satisfying crunch of teeth breaking beneath my knuckles. His head snapped back, and I didn't stop—punch after punch, each one more violent than the last. Blood sprayed with every impact, his face quickly turning into a grotesque mess of torn flesh and shattered bone. When I'd finally had enough, I dragged my razor-lined forearm across his cheek and down his neck, peeling away skin like cheap wallpaper.

His breathing had turned into a wet, rattling gurgle, his cheeks and lips replaced with raw, exposed muscle. He was unconscious, slumped in his chair, slipping away.

Now, it was time for the real fun.

When Kevin woke, he found himself hanging from the ceiling by thick iron chains, his body dangling like a gutted animal. His eyes widened in panic when he looked down—his pants were gone, his shriveled genitals exposed to the cold air. He tried to speak, but only a sickening, wet smack escaped his ruined mouth.

"I apologize if you thought we were finished," I said, stepping forward with a grin. "I didn't mean to give you false hope."

His eyes darted to the door. Skoll's silhouette loomed in the shadows, waiting, watching.

"I hoped our 'fight' would last longer, but you disappointed me," I said with mock regret, pacing slowly beneath him.

"P...pluueeeasshh," he garbled, blood spilling from the torn remains of his lips.

"Excuse me?" I leaned in, grinning.

"Please... just kill me," he sputtered, his words thick and incoherent, his face leaking blood like a broken faucet.

I laughed, shaking my head. "Oh, Kevin, I told you you'd beg for death. And now here we are. But death won't come quickly for you—I guarantee that."

His eyes flitted desperately toward the door again, searching for any glimmer of hope.

"Ah," I said, following his gaze, "your guest has arrived."

Skoll stepped into the light, and Kevin's bloodshot eyes widened in terror. Skoll wore Vanessa's face like a grotesque mask, her features stretched and distorted over his own. The skin sagged in places, held together only by the memory of its former structure.

Kevin's body convulsed as he vomited all over himself.

Skoll chuckled. "This disgusts you?" He peeled Vanessa's face from his own, holding it out in front of him, the skin still slick with blood. "Do you know what she did before I removed this?"

He pulled the skin back to his face, then pressed his lips against the shredded mask, licking it with slow, deliberate strokes. His tongue traced the lines of Vanessa's once-beautiful features, pausing at the eyeholes. He flicked his tongue through one, his eyes never leaving Kevin's horrified expression. With a wicked grin, Skoll tucked the flesh mask down the front of his pants.

"Now *that's* disgusting," he said, turning back to me, his tattooed face twisted in amusement.

"Did you bring it?" I asked, eyeing the bulge in Skoll's crotch.

Skoll nodded, producing a thin glass thermometer from seemingly nowhere. It was no wider than a Q-tip, about six inches long—perfect for what I had in mind. Kevin's eyes rolled back, his body trembling, as though his mind was trying to escape into the comfort of unconsciousness.

"He's fading. Skoll, give him a wake-up call."

Skoll moved with precision, plunging a syringe full of adrenaline into Kevin's arm. Within moments, his eyes snapped open, wide with fear, his heart pounding.

"You're going to want to be awake for this," Skoll whispered, tapping Kevin's swollen, bloodied cheek gently, like a mother comforting a child.

I grinned as Kevin's panic returned in full force. "Now, Kevin," I said, my voice low and deliberate, "you violated my sister. So, it's only fitting I take away the tool you used to do so."

I coated the thermometer in motor oil, ensuring it would slide in easily. Skoll grabbed Kevin's limp, shriveled member with a pair of pliers, stretching it out with clinical precision. As Skoll held it steady, I slid the thermometer into his urethra, watching it disappear inside him.

Kevin's body writhed in the chains, his face a mask of silent agony. I could see the horror in his eyes, but I wasn't done.

Skoll handed me a pair of needle-nose pliers, and I turned to Kevin, locking eyes with him. "This," I said softly, "is going to hurt."

I pinched his penis with the pliers and squeezed, feeling the satisfying crack as the thermometer shattered inside him. His body jerked violently, his screams muffled by the mess of his broken face. I moved the pliers up another half-inch and squeezed again, grinding the glass to dust inside him.

Kevin choked on his own blood, his body convulsing in the chains. He wasn't long for this world, and I was about ready to see him off.

Skoll and I carried his limp body to the riverbank, dumping him unceremoniously into the mud. He lay there, barely breathing, broken and bleeding.

"Either he bleeds out and dies," I said, lighting a cigarette, "or he survives, and we do this again."

I flicked the lit match at him, the tiny flame extinguishing as it hit Kevin's eye, the last insult to his dying form.

I haven't decided yet if this letter will find its way into your hands or not. While I am adamant about making sure no harm comes to you I don't think you should know of my existence, or your own past for that matter. You might be better off not knowing anything.

"Let's go," I said to Skoll, "We're going out."

"Out." He repeated the word, grinning.

We rarely leave our sanctuary together. Usually, if supplies are needed, I will visit one of the local grocers whom we have an agreement with. They give us anything we need and in return we won't slaughter their families. Occasionally the opportunity arises when we can both go out in public and blend in. Tonight is one of those nights. There was a heavy metal band performing at one of the local clubs and, lucky for us, they happen to fancy theatrics.

As we left the warehouse we split up and took different routes like we usually do. We do this for many reasons, for example, Skoll's existence. No one knows he exists and we like to keep it that way. I looked around once I entered the club taking in my surroundings. Skoll was already there pretending to be part of a small group close to the bar, no doubt eavesdropping on their conversation. I sat at the bar, not too close to Skoll, and lit a cigarette. This is another reason we separate, we don't want to appear that we are associated. It has proven to be very beneficial in certain situations. I listened in on a few conversations myself; Skoll and I like to know what activities are going on around the city.

"Left. Male. Black jacket." I heard coming from Skoll's direction.

I looked out of the corner of my eye to the left and noticed a man wearing a black jacket staring in my direction. I didn't pay him any mind. Perhaps I looked familiar or maybe we had an encounter in the past. I eyed him from the corner of my eye as he played on his phone. Occasionally he looked in our direction. We listened to other conversations but nothing really came up.

I grew restless. I had this feeling I couldn't explain that I needed to find you and soon. Not that I wanted you to know me, but to make sure you were safe.

A little later I noticed Skoll was gone so I left and met him back at the warehouse.

“You think that guy was looking at you? Interested in your appearance?” I asked.

“He was oblivious to my existence; however he seemed very interested in you.”

I thought about it for a few minutes and wondered what sparked this man’s interest in me and that’s when I realized I was still wearing the tank top I had on during my encounter with Kevin. Besides the long wound on my chest, the once white cloth was also covered with dried blood.

“Perhaps he was interested in your appearance” Skoll said chuckling.

There were a few hours of night left so Skoll decided he wanted to pay our gang neighbors a visit and make sure they had a reason to stay away from our building. After he left I decided to meet up with our associate.

“So this is the girl then? Sandra?” John asked after I handed him a copy of your picture.

“Yes.”

“What is she to you?”

“That is none of your concern.” I replied.

“She’s a looker huh? I bet she...”

“I would strongly advise you to rethink your words.” I said cutting him off.

I stared him down for several moments wondering if he would challenge me.

“Right; well I’ll see what I can find.”

“Good.” I said before leaving.

As I expected I didn’t see any gang members nearby, or anywhere for that matter when I returned. What I did see, however, were two cop cars and an ambulance. It appears Skoll had taken care of our Draugr problem.

Thankfully I didn’t have to wait long for John to return, the three days since our last visit were very uneventful.

“It’s not much but I think you’ll be happy. She’s been hanging around one of those low income complexes. Instead of multiple families living there it’s been converted to a drug house. Two nights ago I spotted her standing outside of the building. A couple minutes went by then some guy walked up to her and, after briefly talking, handed her a wad of cash and she led him

around the corner behind the building. About twenty minutes later the guy came running out and sped off, looked like he was scared shitless.”

He handed me a picture of an overweight man that appeared to be in his mid-40’s.

“I waited around for a couple minutes but she never came back out so I tried catching up to the guy. I followed him here.” He said flipping the picture over where he had written down the address.

“Suburbia?” I asked.

“Yeah you know these types of guys; they get bored with their mundane lives so they come to the slums to get their kicks. My guess she’s either dealing drugs or she’s a hooker.” John replied.

I refrained from splitting his lip for implying that you are a prostitute.

I’m sorry Sandra; I should have searched for you sooner. Perhaps then you wouldn’t be headed down the road you are on now.

“His name is David Moore and in case you were planning to pay him a visit, which I know from personal experience you will, he has no kids and his wife is currently out of town visiting family. You might want to be careful though, he’s the city attorney.”

I could visit David on my own, dress up as some official and get my answers that way, but I’m done playing games. I’ve wasted too much time searching for you.

As usual Skoll and I split up and planned to meet at David’s house. A few blocks from the warehouse I noticed a homeless man passed out against a dumpster. I can’t explain it but the man seemed oddly familiar. I didn’t try placing the man’s face in my memory; instead I hurried out of town.

The suburbs are quite different compared to our side of the city. Sure there is crime, but it’s acted out in a different manner. Instead of mugging and murder in broad daylight the criminals here wait until the cover of darkness. Besides home security systems the police patrol these neighborhoods unlike the abandoned buildings on our side of town. Skoll and I may have to use caution here.

He was already there when I arrived, blending with the foliage on the edge of David’s property.

“You go through the upstairs window.” I told him.

“And you?”

“I’m going to ring the doorbell.” I said smiling.

Skoll disappeared into the night as I made my way to the front of the house. I walked up and pushed the doorbell and stepped off to the side, just in case he looked through the peep hole. I could hear the annoying tones from the bell outside. The door cracked open slightly. With one swift kick to the door I knocked him down. I jumped through the open door onto my prey and held a knife to his throat.

“Pathetic.” I nearly yelled. “Is that all it really takes to make a grown man soil himself?”

He didn’t reply; he just stared up at me trembling.

“I have some questions for you and you have one chance to tell me the truth. I hope for your sake you don’t lie to me.”

Without getting off him I pulled out your picture and asked for any information he has about you.

“I don’t...” he started his lie already.

“Alright, string him up and use him as a fucking piñata!” I yelled as I got off his chest.

Without warning Skoll grabbed a hand full of his thinning hair and started dragging him down a hallway. I followed him and the screaming man to the attached garage where he tied David’s feet together and slung a rope over the rafters. He pulled until David lifted off the ground upside down and used the tow hitch of David’s truck as an anchor. Skoll ripped a two by four off the unfinished wall and turned toward David.

“Fuck! I’ll tell. I’ll talk! Anything you want to know!”

“Thank you.” I said.

As David hung precariously from the rafter, he recounted the entire sordid tale in detail. He said he’d offered you money for sex, and you’d taken it—just not for the reasons he expected. Instead of leading him to a night of pleasure, you guided him to a large, decaying duplex, where things took a different turn. He didn’t spare a single detail. He told me that, once inside, you’d revealed that the building was nothing more than a drug den cloaked in shadows and secrets. Including the ground floor, the place had three levels. He knew this because you led him all the way up to the top floor. That’s where you let him strip down to nothing before you struck, waiting until he was fully vulnerable, then attacking him with precision. David remembered every bruise and blow, each piece of clothing you stripped away from his dignity. I must admit, hearing it, I found myself almost admiring your ruthless efficiency. He mentioned, too, a small crew stationed on the first floor—a group of “thugs” who hung out, playing cards and keeping a close eye on the comings and goings of the place. A massive black-and-red banner with a demonic face covered one wall, a twisted emblem for the chaos they invited into their domain. And, of course, a lone guard stood vigil outside, a hulking brute tasked with keeping any unwanted visitors at bay. David might have found himself at your mercy that night, but in recounting the events, he unwittingly gave me something valuable. Although it may be too late to stop you from discovering your own problem, it's not too late to ensure that problem is removed from your life entirely.

Skoll and I departed from David's house, leaving him hanging from the garage. I felt that his wife finding him and having to explain himself would be worse than ending him.

"How long until we visit the house?" Skoll asked.

"An hour."

Skoll wasn't surprised I wanted us to make our visit so soon; in fact he seemed rather excited.

We met back at the warehouse to gather supplies before making our raid on the drug house. I finally swapped my blood-stained tank top for a fresh one before gathering my arm gauntlet as well as a variety of knives. If Skoll brought any form of weaponry, it wasn't obvious. He appeared the same as he did when we returned from visiting David.

"More questioning tonight?" he asked, obviously not interested in the mundane task.

"No, slaughter everyone."

Skoll's face...what's the phrase, lit up like a kid on Christmas morning.

We arrived at the dilapidated building within minutes of each other and as I gazed at the building that once housed families an odd sensation came over me. It wasn't that I had any concern about what we were about to do, not at all, I suddenly realized that it was very possible that you were still inside the building. I was torn on whether we should raid the building now or wait and see if you come out. In the end I decided to wait, despite Skoll's disappointment. I know he was as eager as I. It was roughly twenty minutes later that I was happy I decided to wait. I only caught a glimpse of you when you left the building. You looked different from your picture; apparently drug abuse has taken its toll on your body. You looked thinner and almost frail. I was certain it was your long auburn hair I saw.

We waited a few more minutes to ensure you were out of the area before making our move. The man stationed outside was no real guard; he didn't know I was there until I slammed my razor-covered forearm into the back of his head.

"Basement," I said, turning to Skoll. "We start at the bottom and work our way up. No one survives; no one gets out."

"When should I make my entrance?" he asked, a gleam of excitement in his eyes.

"Wait for my signal," I replied, flashing him a grin.

Without another word, Skoll began searching for an entrance. As I scanned the area for my own way in, my gaze landed on a rotting pickup truck across the street. I hefted the unconscious man and threw him over my shoulder, then deposited him in the truck's cab. Quickly, I got to work hot-wiring the engine. After a few false starts, the truck sputtered to life. I maneuvered it into position, aiming directly at the building's entrance.

With the engine running, I pulled the parking brake and wedged the man's foot against the gas pedal, forcing it down. The truck jerked against the brake but held steady. I flashed the lights and honked the horn several times before releasing the brake. The truck rocketed forward, crashing into the house just as a curious man swung open the door.

Seconds later, a cacophony of confused shouts and gunfire erupted—no doubt claiming the life of the driver. The dust and debris kicked up by the impact created the perfect distraction for me to slip inside unnoticed.

As I entered, I nearly collided with a massive man holding a 9mm in one hand, rubbing dust from his eyes with the other. Without hesitation, I drew a six-inch blade and plunged it repeatedly into his chest and stomach and finally his neck. His screams faded into the chaos around us, mingling with the shouts of other men.

"Marco! Where you at?" someone yelled from behind me.

"Marco was in the truck," I whispered back, a dark thrill coursing through me.

I slid my switchblade into the base of his skull; he never had a chance to see his killer. I heard movement behind me and swung around, blade extended. A .45 Magnum stared me down.

"Stupid punk-ass!" the man holding the gun sneered, chuckling.

I couldn't help but laugh too.

"What's the old saying? 'Never bring a knife to a gunfight'? Or is it 'never pull a gun on me, or I'll feed you your own fucking liver'?" I shouted.

He looked confused before I pressed a small button on the handle of my ballistics knife. The blade shot out, finding its mark in his jugular. He dropped the gun, instinctively grabbing at the steel lodged in his throat. Blood gushed from the wound, splattering against my chest as I watched him bleed out, reveling in his demise.

I took a quick inventory of the first floor, examining my handiwork. The truck distraction had exceeded my expectations; two mangled bodies lay under the front tires. I glanced around once more and smiled; the shouts and gunfire had quieted. This floor was clear.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, wondering how Skoll was faring. It had been too long since he'd been able to unleash his will completely. The second floor was a narrow hallway with four doors—two on each side. Without wasting a moment, I entered the first room, only to be confronted by two terrified prostitutes. They begged for their lives, offering sexual favors in exchange for mercy. I slit both of their throats in quick succession.

No one gets out.

The next room I entered was empty, clear evidence of drug use and prostitution strewn about. In the third room, I was surprised to find a naked man clutching a shard of glass from the broken window. I couldn't help but laugh; he hadn't even bothered to put on pants. He lunged at me with his makeshift knife, swinging wildly.

After dodging several erratic swings, I slammed my razor gauntlet across his face. He dropped the glass as he collapsed, clutching his bleeding visage. I picked up the shard and

plunged it into his neck, standing over him as I slammed the heel of my boot against the glass, shattering it deep inside his throat.

I turned from the room and saw Skoll emerging from the staircase I had just climbed moments before. I didn't need to know the details of how he navigated from the basement to the second level; all I knew was that if I'd left any stragglers in my wake, they were now dead. Without warning, the last door—closest to Skoll's left—burst open. I saw the flash of a gun before I even heard the shot.

Inside stood the cowardly bastard, brandishing the weapon. My jaw dropped. It was over; Skoll had taken one to the chest. Time slowed as I watched Skoll's torso twist from the impact. Adrenaline surged into pure rage, and I was about to spring forward when I noticed sparks fly from Skoll's hoodie, accompanied by the telltale sound of a ricochet.

Out of nowhere, a three foot retractable blade slid out of Skoll's right sleeve. I hadn't noticed it when we came here, but he must have had it with him all along. As Skoll rolled to the side, I watched him swipe wildly with his blade. It missed the man but struck the gun with enough force to dislodge it, sending the weapon clattering into the room behind him. Skoll was slowly rising to a full upright position when the man struck first.

That's when it happened: the attacking bastard lunged at Skoll's chest, near where the bullet had ricocheted. His clenched fist met the soft cotton weave of Skoll's hoodie, and all I heard was a loud metallic clank. The man started screaming and withdrew his hand. Right away I could see two fingers bent at odd angles and two more were nearly severed. Skoll tore his hoodie away and revealed the crudely made vest. It was solid steel with shards of metal welded to it creating shallow spikes. He must have crafted a new device in the confines of his workshop, and his tinkering had paid off.

Skoll was undoubtedly bruised and swollen, possibly nursing broken bones from the bullet's force, but he would live. I made my way toward them, every second feeling like an eternity. Time always slows in moments like this. The poor fool was on his knees holding his destroyed hand, still screaming and cursing. While he pathetically struggled, Skoll twisted his wrist and the blade retracted up his arm into a slid up an internal hidden sheath.

I stopped in my tracks, deciding to watch the moment unfold. Don't misunderstand me; I enjoyed what I did, but sometimes it's necessary to step back and appreciate the beauty of the chaos around you. And what I witnessed was nothing short of glorious. Skoll's eyes had a vacant intensity as he looked down at the man gripping his wrist. Tears streamed down the man's face, his gaze locked on Skoll as he held his other hand to his wounded arm. Skoll stood steady, twisting his grip with a merciless resolve. The crack echoed down the hallway as he forcefully dislocated the wrist, the ripping of skin sounding like tearing through water. The "tough guy" who wielded a gun just moments ago collapsed back to his knees, clutching the stump gushing blood.

His screams became grating, and Skoll seemed to agree; he thrust two fingers into the man's mouth, prying it open wider, followed by the rest of his hand. Gagging and convulsing, the man shook violently as Skoll plunged deeper into his throat. In an instant, he fell silent. There was a moment of eerie peace before Skoll yanked upward with ferocious strength. In his hand, he held what appeared to be the man's esophagus. The rest of the body crumpled to the floor, pooling blood beneath it.

It was time to see what awaited us on the third floor, as our quiet home invasion had long since turned into a symphony of chaos. I let Skoll “toy” with the body—whatever that entailed—and headed for the third floor, taking the steps two at a time.

The third floor mirrored the second, presenting me with four doors to choose from. I crept down the hallway and stopped in front of the first door to my right. Muffled whispers floated through the wood, so I decided to make my prey come to me.

“Yo, Marco, is that you in there?” I called loudly, pounding on the door three times.

“N-no. Marco’s not in here. It’s Joe. I’ve got Amy with me. Who’s out there?” came Joe’s trembling voice.

I quickly rifled through memories of my grand entrance, trying to recall one of the names shouted in confusion.

“It’s Kyle.”

“Oh, hey man. What the fuck is going on out there?”

“Just some gangbangers,” I replied, my tone casual. “Everything’s fine, but we’re regrouping downstairs.”

I heard the floorboards creak as someone approached the door. The lock clicked, and before Joe could open it, I rammed my shoulder into the door, knocking him backward. I charged in, swinging my knife, stabbing it into Joe’s chest. I withdrew the blade and swung again, tearing out his throat.

As his body slumped, I caught Amy before she could escape, grabbing her by the hair and yanking her back. With a swift motion, I carved a wide smile into her throat.

Just as I was about to leave the room, I heard a door creak open down the hall, followed by soft footsteps. I froze, torn between two choices: rush out and attack, hoping to catch whoever it was by surprise, or bide my time in the shadows. I chose the latter; it might be Skoll making his way to the third floor.

The footsteps continued but didn’t follow a steady rhythm, sounding as if the person was stumbling through the hallway. I tried to use my Bowie knife as a mirror to peer into the corridor, but the dim lighting obscured any details. I took a risk and poked my head outside.

A woman shuffled toward me, her ragged clothes hanging loosely from her frame. Long hair obscured her face as she stumbled and fell to her knees, vomiting a milky substance. I surmised an overdose.

“Where do you think you’re going, bitch?” a deep voice boomed.

Moments later, a hulking figure emerged from the room the woman had just exited. I quickly ducked back into the shadows.

“Leave me alone,” she slurred, followed by another round of heaving.

“You think you can just come here, use my shit, and leave? I need payment, bitch!”

“I don’t have any cash on me, Tony,” she cried.

“I’ll take a piece of that ass instead,” he growled, without a hint of hesitation.

From my concealed position, I heard the sickening sounds of a struggle. The impact of his large hands hitting her face echoed through the hallway. I risked another glance, peering around the corner to see the woman lying face down. The massive figure stood behind her, fumbling with his belt, clearly impaired.

“If you won’t give it up, I’ll just have to take it,” he sneered, bending down to grab a fistful of her hair.

He jerked her head back sharply, throwing the dark hair off her face, and in that moment, I lost all control. It was your face, our mother’s face. Without a second thought, I dropped my Bowie knife and charged at the giant. We collided, and I was knocked backward, my body bouncing off him like a pinball.

Desperately, I looked around and saw you struggling to get up. Before I could reach you, the large man lifted me effortlessly and slammed me against the wall, pinning me with his massive forearm against my throat. I stared into his bloodshot eyes and realized he was high on something, his dilated pupils betraying his aggression. My nerves tingled with excitement; he was much larger than me, obviously stronger, but I was quicker.

He swung at me with his free arm, and I ducked just in time. His fist smashed into the wall behind me. I made a mental note: don’t let him hit me in the face. As he struggled to free his arm, I seized the opportunity. I slammed my razor arm into his face and neck, tearing strips of flesh away with each strike. He finally released me with a howl of pain, and I sidestepped his next charge, using his momentum to force him into the wall.

He barely seemed fazed as he quickly got back to his feet. It was clear that he wouldn’t quit or be subdued; one of us was going to die. I leapt onto his back before he could fully turn to face me, wrapping my legs around his torso as I pummeled the back of his neck. He didn’t go down.

With a sudden movement, he grabbed my arm and flipped me forward, tossing me off him. I landed on my feet and quickly spun around, kicking him in the head. He dropped to one knee but stood back up almost immediately. He seemed to be tiring, and I hoped that if I could evade his attacks, I might outlast him.

He swung again but caught my wrist as I tried to block. His other hand landed a punch on my jaw, sending me crashing to the floor. Blood pooled in my mouth as I struggled to regain my bearings. In a flash of desperation, I pulled a silver butterfly knife from my boot, flicking my wrist to reveal the blade.

I lunged at him, but he caught my wrist and twisted the knife back on me. I fought against him, but he was too strong. No matter how hard I pushed, he could push harder. He forced my arm until my own blade pierced my right side, wedging itself between my ribs. I fell to my knees, staring at the silver hilt protruding from my side as he turned and walked away, assuming I was finished.

He assumed wrong.

I yanked the knife from my side, the pain igniting a rush of exhilaration—a wicked thrill. With a surge of adrenaline, I dashed up behind him and stabbed him in the kidneys. He howled

in agony, clutching the fresh wounds as blood seeped between his fingers. I followed up with several punches to his back, driving him to his knees. Seizing the moment, I kicked him twice in the face and drove my knee into his chin. Finally, I buried the butterfly knife deep in his chest, reveling in the overwhelming satisfaction that surged through me.

Turning away, I spotted you lying face down in the hallway a few feet away. But before I could reach your unmoving body, I heard the large man stirring behind me. Just as I pivoted to finish him off he wrapped his massive arms around me, lifting me off the ground in a bear hug.

“I don’t have time for this,” I gritted through clenched teeth.

He tightened his grip like a snake coiling around its prey. My breath became shallow as I struggled to break free. I slammed my forehead into his face, feeling his nose shatter beneath the impact, yet his hold remained unyielding. My vision blurred, and I began to feel lightheaded from the lack of oxygen.

In the haze, I spotted something at the end of the hallway, a blurred phantom. As it drew closer, the faint details of a black-and-white face became clear. The phantom charged behind the man holding me and kicked him behind the knee. He toppled like a felled tree, releasing me as I gasped for air.

The rush of oxygen restored my vision as the blurred figure solidified into Skoll. I regained my footing and retrieved my Bowie knife while Skoll cupped the man’s head between his hands, forcing him to stay still. I swung the knife like a hatchet, driving it into the man’s chest. Skoll twisted his head slowly, mercilessly, until I saw the horror on the man’s face, as if his head were on backwards. With a final, sickening thud, the giant’s body hit the floor when Skoll released his grip.

The wail of sirens grew closer as we made our exit. I scooped you up, carrying your unconscious body until we reached the outside. You needed medical attention, but my knowledge of drug overdoses was limited. I had to think fast; the sirens were almost upon us.

“Disappear,” I said to Skoll.

He raised an eyebrow at me.

“I’ll meet you at the factory.”

Without a word, he faded into the shadows. I hurried you down a nearby alley and hid behind a dumpster. Within minutes, a half-dozen squad cars pulled up, along with an ambulance. Officers and paramedics disappeared into the building. I quickly carried you to the back of the ambulance, opened the hatch, and laid you inside. I cast one last worried glance at your still form before slipping away.

When I arrived at the warehouse, I was surprised to find Skoll was not there. I did a quick search of the interior, but there was no sign of him. Assuming he must have taken an alternate route, I turned my attention to my still-bleeding wounds. With no medical supplies available in our factory, I resorted to a fishhook and thread ripped from my blood-stained tank top. Just as I finished the last stitch, a loud bang echoed through the building, sounding like a door being forced open.

I approached the source of the noise and saw Skoll walking toward me, dragging an unconscious man by the leg.

“Friend of yours?” I asked.

“I took the sewers back,” he said, letting the man’s leg drop to the ground. “Came out of the manhole right behind his parked car. He was watching the factory. Look familiar?” Skoll asked.

“He looks like a bum I saw earlier tonight on the way to the house.”

“The bar.” Skoll corrected.

It hit me then why he looked so familiar—he was the same man who had been staring at me in the club a few nights ago.

“He’s been following me,” I whispered.

Distracted by my search for you, I hadn’t recognized him before. He groaned slightly, rolling onto his back. Before he could open his eyes, Skoll was on him, lifting him effortlessly by the throat.

As the man slowly regained consciousness he was fixated on Skoll’s tattooed face, realizing too late that this monstrosity had been hunting him while he stalked me.

“Who are you, and why the fuck have you been following me?” I yelled.

He glanced between Skoll and me, his mind racing to grasp how he had been captured from his car and dragged into this dark place. I slammed my fist into his face, just hard enough to grab his attention without knocking him out.

“Answer!” Skoll bellowed.

“It doesn’t matter who I am. I’m just a pawn... like you. I was hired to follow you,” he said, his eyes darting to mine.

His implications ignited a simmering agitation within me.

“By whom? Give me a name.”

“He never told me his name. He only said where to find you.”

“Did your employer mention this would be a suicide mission?” I asked, a grin creeping onto my lips.

“You won’t kill me. He said I had valuable information, and you would keep me alive to get it.”

“Clearly, your boss doesn’t know me very well. Have fun, Skoll.”

Skoll must have tightened his grip, because the man’s face suddenly flushed purple.

“Eri,” he choked out. Skoll eased his hold just slightly.

“He knows your name is Erik.”

I stiffened, shock rippling through me. Only two people knew my name—Skoll and myself. Unless... I began connecting the dots in my head. I patted the man down and found a cell

phone tucked in his jacket pocket. Powering it on, I went right to the text messages and scrolled, nearly dropping the device when I stumbled upon an image of the drug house where Skoll and I found you. Suddenly, everything clicked into place.

Skoll must have sensed my intentions; he released his grip on the man's neck just as I dropped the phone and pulled a knife. I pressed the blade against his throat, the steel biting into his skin.

"Why did he hire you to follow me?" I demanded, teeth clenched.

"He told me you would lead me to her. He said if I followed you long enough, you would take me to her. Once I did, I was supposed to gather as much information as possible and report back. He also said to keep my distance—I guess he didn't know about your friend." He nodded toward Skoll.

I struggled to maintain my composure. Why, after all this time, would he suddenly be trying to track you down? Was it to finish what he started with our mother? Perhaps he wasn't monstrous enough to take a child's life. Using me as a mere pawn felt like a profound insult.

"Anything else?" I asked, my gaze dropping to the floor. "Have you contacted...him?"

He was silent for a few moments and his only response was a slow nod.

"When?" I snapped.

"Before everything that went down at the house. I called to tell him I tracked you and the girl there but once the guns started going off I was out of there."

"Where. Is. He." I demanded.

"He just gave me an address. He wanted me to grab her and bring her to him."

I looked at the address, not altogether shocked. I haven't thought about that place since my time in foster care. That's where all this started. And where it will end. Poetic I suppose.

"Skoll?" I said without looking at him.

He looked confused for a moment then realized the question. "No, wait..."

Skoll glanced over, a smile spreading across his face. I looked back up and smiled, too.

I seized the man's right arm and pressed it against the wall, holding the blade steady with my other hand. I drove the knife through his palm, pinning it against the wall. He screamed in agony, but Skoll silenced him with a brutal punch, shattering his jaw. I pulled another knife from the sheath at my belt and plunged it through his other hand. This time, he didn't scream; all he could do was moan and cough up his own blood.

I looked back at the man nailed to the wall and saw Skoll staring blankly at him. Skoll met my gaze and raised an eyebrow. I found a utility knife—like the one my father used on our mother—and tossed it to Skoll.

"Feed him." I said.

He grinned and quickly set to work on the man's stomach.

Watching Skoll was like observing an artist create a grotesque masterpiece. A wet smack echoed as the man's intestines fell to the ground. Skoll plunged his hands into the mess, grabbing one end of the bloody organ and forcing it down the man's gaping maw. He choked on his own insides moments later.

WHERE IT ENDS

I have come to two painful conclusions: my father was in the city, and he knew about you. He might not know where you are now, but he knew I would find you. I led him right to you. I could only imagine the consequences if that man had informed my father of your whereabouts. Thankfully, Skoll had ensured that didn't happen. The most he knew was your former location.

It was time to end this. My father knowing about you puts you at too much risk. I've seen my life through death, and I will not allow that to be yours. I said earlier that I wasn't sure if I would share this letter with you. I decided to do so to scare you, to show you what this life is like and to warn you that your life is in danger.

I picked up the dead man's phone and scrolled through the texts and photos again. Nothing new. Just the same words, the same images. He was close enough to touch, but he was slipping away. This was almost over. *He* was almost over.

When I started this journey, it was just about him. Hunting him down. Ridding the world of his evil. Nothing else mattered. Then something shifted. Something clicked into place. Keeping you safe became the only thing that mattered. My fate was sealed the night he took everything from me, but you still have a chance. I won't let him take that from you too.

I called John, asked him to dig up whatever he could on the house. The answer didn't surprise me. No one had ever bought it. It had sat empty and abandoned since that night. A husk of a place, just like me.

I knew this was a trap. Of course, it was a trap. He wanted me to walk into that house, back to where it all began. And I would. I had no choice. I was prepared for the inevitable. I assumed he had men waiting in the shadows.

Not wanting to waste another second, I ripped the old, tattered map of the city from the wall and spread it across the table. Skoll and I studied it in silence, tracing possible routes, planning our attack. According to the dead man, no one knew about Skoll. That made him my ace. My only advantage.

We had to move carefully, not tip him off, not lose the element of surprise. The house was across town, but the night was still on our side—for now.

My pulse pounded harder than usual. Was it anticipation? The knowledge that this would soon be over? That by sunrise, he would be dead? It didn't matter.

A mile from the house, the dead man's phone buzzed. I pulled it from my pocket and felt my stomach drop.

A picture.

You—unconscious, sprawled on the floor.

I didn't have to guess where he'd taken you. That filthy hardwood floor was burned into my memory. No message, just the image. A taunt. A warning. Someone had been watching, waiting. They had grabbed you before the EMTs could take you to safety.

The phone shattered against the pavement, fragments scattering in the moonlight. Chances were, he knew about Skoll now—or at least that I wasn't alone.

We moved faster.

A block away, we stopped. Watching. Waiting. The house was smaller than I remembered, a rotting corpse of its former self. Its windows stared back, hollow and dark—except for one. A faint glow flickered behind the glass.

He was inside.

“There’s a basement window in the back,” I murmured. “It leads to a landing that connects to the kitchen, then to the living room. No one gets out. No one lives—except for her.” I met Skoll’s eyes.

“He’s mine.”

He nodded once and we moved.

Skoll disappeared into the shadows, circling toward the back. I stepped forward, toward the front door, toward the end of everything.

The stairs groaned under my weight as I climbed toward the door. The wood felt brittle, fragile, like it could give way beneath me. When I reached for the knob, I wasn’t surprised to find it unlocked. He wanted me to walk in.

So I did.

The silence pressed around me as I stepped inside. The air was thick with rot and dust, with the ghosts of what had been. My eyes drifted down to the floor.

Here.

This spot.

This was where she died.

I could almost see it—the dark outline of the blood, the way it pooled around us as I held you next to her. The memory gripped me, as vivid as the night it happened. A scar on the house. A scar on me.

I forced myself to look up. The walls were covered in graffiti, windows shattered, jagged glass catching the faint glow of streetlights. Squatters. Kids with nothing better to do. They had defaced this place, but they hadn’t ruined it. No one could ruin something that was already dead.

A flicker of light caught my eye. To my right.

I moved toward it without thinking.

And then I saw you.

You lay slumped on a rotting couch, unconscious, unmoving. Alone. My breath caught as I closed the distance, kneeling beside you. My fingers found your neck—slow, but steady. A pulse.

Relief swelled inside me, sharp and painful. I brushed the hair from your face, my lips tugging into a small, fleeting smile. You looked so much like her. And for a moment, I let myself wonder—what could have been? What if things had been different? What if—

A shift in the air.

I felt it before I heard it.

I wasn't alone.

He was behind me.

Waiting.

"My son..." he started.

"Don't." I whispered.

He smiled. "Look at you. Relentless. Brutal. You have killed more people than I have."

I turned to face him for the first time since that day.

"I am nothing!" I yelled. "I feel God. Damn. Nothing!" I punctuate each word with a fist to my head.

I stared at him and a slipped a hand to my sheath and pulled out the silver utility knife that was used to take our mothers life. He appraised it and smiled again.

"What's your plan? Use the same blade I used on your whore mother?"

I started toward him, ready to end this, but then I hesitated. Really looking at him for the first time in the dim, flickering light, I saw it.

The deep hollows beneath his eyes. The sagging skin. He looked... old. Frail. Sick.

This wasn't the monster I had been chasing all these years. This was a man already rotting from the inside out.

Behind him, Skoll's massive frame emerged from the shadows. He caught my eye and shook his head.

There was no trap. No ambush.

He was alone. He wanted me to kill him.

My father didn't even flinch at Skoll's sudden presence. He had expected him, too. Maybe he had expected everything. I nodded to Skoll, and without a word, he stepped past us, moving to your unconscious form on the couch.

The utility knife slipped from my fingers, clattering to the floor.

"Come on, boy!" My father's voice cracked, raw and desperate. "Do what you came to do!"

I stared at him, then shook my head.

"No." My voice was quiet. Final. "You're weak. Pathetic."

I turned my back on him.

That was when he broke.

"Pick it up!" he bellowed, his voice unraveling.

I ignored him, kneeling at your side, carefully lifting you into my arms, just as I had the night everything was taken from me.

Then pain.

A white-hot sting in my side.

I gasped, stumbling, nearly dropping you. Skoll was there in an instant, catching you before you could hit the ground.

Before I could react, he was on me.

The weight of him, pressing me down. A second stab, then another—jagged, sloppy, desperate. His breath, hot and sour against my ear.

"I guess I'll have to do what I should've done the night I killed her." he whispered.

The world tilted. Blood dripped onto the floor, mixing with ghosts of the past.

But I wasn't that boy anymore.

Skoll set you back onto the couch before turning to face us on the floor. My father was on top of me, his blade driving into my side. Pain flared, sharp and hot, but I forced myself to stay focused. Skoll's face twisted into a snarl, his hands twitching, ready to intervene.

I raised a hand. Wait.

He hesitated, his eyes dark with worry. I gave him a small, bloodied smile—right before I slammed my forehead into my father's mouth. Bone cracked beneath my skull, his teeth shattering like brittle glass. He howled in pain, jerking back just enough for me to act.

His arms flew up, the blade poised to carve into my throat. I caught his wrist with my forearm, forcing the blade away. Then I drove my elbow into his ribs—once, twice, again—until his grip faltered and I tore myself free.

I was faster.

Before he could rise, I surged to my feet and brought my knee up, slamming it into his face. Blood splattered the floor.

"You are nothing!" I roared, my voice raw with fury.

Warm blood trickled from the dozen or so wounds carved into my skin, but I barely felt it. My father's response was a blur of silver—his blade slashed across my thigh. A searing pain erupted as I collapsed, my hands instinctively pressing against the wound. Thick, dark blood oozed between my fingers. Femoral.

Then I saw him move. He wasn't looking at me anymore—he was going for you.

No.

I let go of the wound, knowing it sealed my fate and let the blood spill. I grabbed him, spinning him back toward me. He slashed wildly, but I sidestepped the blade and hammered a fist into his temple. He staggered, dazed, but still he swung again. The blade kissed my arm, splitting flesh.

He lifted the knife for one final strike. I caught his wrist midair and twisted and with my other arm, the one still wearing the gauntlet covered in razors, grated the strips of metal across his face. He screamed as the knife tumbled from his fingers, clattering uselessly to the floor.

I drove my foot into his knee, forcing him to collapse with a choked grunt. As he dropped, I smeared my blood across his face—a mark, a warning—before seizing the back of his head.

Then I let go.

My fist crashed into his chin, then his nose, then his eye. Over and over, knuckles meeting flesh, bone, cartilage. His skin split, blood spilling in thick rivulets, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

I didn't stop. Not until his face was swollen, unrecognizable—a pulped mess of red and bruised flesh.

Only then did I let go, watching him crumple to the floor.

I staggered, lightheaded to Skoll and exhaled slowly, my fingers curling into fists. "I know how this ends...and... I want to thank you. For taking this journey with me, brother."

For a moment, something shifted in Skoll's expression. His hand landed firmly on my shoulder. "Brother."

"Take her somewhere safe."

He nodded in reply.

When you recover from your injuries and leave the hospital, you will find this letter with a large sum of money alongside your personal belongings. Consider it a gift from your previous—and deceased—employers. Use it wisely and seek help. I hope you can find solace now that Skoll and I have erased your past. The slate is clean; create anew, leave this city.

I wish I had known you—perhaps in another life, I will.

I picked up the blade—*his* blade. The one that had stolen our mother's life. The one that had stolen mine.

I turned to him, his smile was blood stained.

And with it, I opened his throat.

There was no anger, no satisfaction. Just the quiet finality of it. His shadow, the one that had loomed over me for so long, was gone. You are safe now.

The edges of my vision blurred, darkness creeping in like ink spreading through water. My steps wavered as I stumbled toward the front of the house.

Then I saw it.

The faint outline she had left behind, the place where she had bled out. It was clearer now to me now.

I lowered myself down into that space, the floor cool against my skin.
Just for a little while, I told myself. I just need to rest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.D. Lawler resides in northern Wisconsin with his wife and cats. They enjoys the outdoors and are always looking for a good horror book or movie.

His notable works include "The Hollow Gaze," a haunting short story that examines the profound effects of loss and the terror of confronting death. In "Shadows Left Behind," Lawler presents a gripping tale of a man battling the lingering shadows of a traumatic past, highlighting the complexities of forgiveness and the arduous path to redemption. "Super Beast '96" offers readers a visceral thriller where a celebratory weekend spirals into a nostalgia fueled fight for survival against an unknown menace.