

Chapter 1

by DomLuka

“Who is he?”

“Do you like him?”

“Sure. I mean...”

Laughter interrupted Oliver Martin’s response, and he frowned across one of the two full-sized beds that occupied the room at his amused brother, who was still looking through the pile of newly developed photographs between them, specifically the one Oliver had just been admiring.

“I guess he’s cute,” Oliver finished, deciding it was best not to lie. David always knew when he was lying.

“You think he’s hot,” David said, matter-of-factly, and then nodded towards the picture. “Here. Take it. I took it for you.”

Oliver smiled, lifting the photograph. The guy in it didn’t look much older than himself. His hair was wavy, maybe just a tad too long, but it gave him character. It was the color of sand; not really blond, but not so brown, either. He was sitting atop a bicycle with his shirt tucked into the back pocket of his jeans, and the shot exposed broad shoulders and a smooth back that tapered down to a narrow waist. He was smiling at something, and when he smiled, everything around him looked bright. But Oliver suspected that that was only an illusion, created by the photographer.

“It’s a good picture, David. Thanks.”

David always took great pictures. He was a natural at it. Their father had introduced them both to photography at a young age. They were home-schooled, for the most part isolated from kids their own age, and their parents thought that a hobby would be good for them. David had just taken to it better than Oliver. When Oliver took pictures, they always developed out of focus. Off center. No amount of practice seemed capable of correcting the flaws.

“His name’s Frank,” David said.

“Frank?” Oliver repeated. “Like a hotdog?”

David laughed. “Yeah, sure. Like a hotdog. He don’t look like one, though, huh?”

“No. He doesn’t,” Oliver agreed.

“He moved into the old cow’s place last week.”

Oliver frowned. He knew the house that David was talking about. It was across the lake from them. The last tenant who lived there had drowned just last year. Miss Odetta Grover had been a witch. She was always taking in stray cats and screaming at the crows that landed on her roof. An obese old woman with wild red hair, she’d been an intimidating creature to face, especially when she took to throwing stones at Oliver and David when she caught them picking blackberries near her property. The last time, she’d managed to hit Oliver square in the forehead. It had left a small scar. Oliver had fear

ed her as much as David had hated her. Neither of them missed her, but Oliver was the only one who felt sympathetic over her death.

The accident occurred during a bad summer storm. The crazy old woman had been out fishing in the little rowboat she usually kept in her storage shed.

It was a mystery why she'd brought it out in the first place, considering the thing was already falling apart. Her foot had fallen right through the splintering wood and she'd been trapped there when the boat tipped. Oliver hadn't been comfortable passing her house ever since. He felt like when he did, something was watching them. David thought that it was probably just the cats, since most of them had never left. Oliver thought that David was probably right. He usually was. But still, Oliver didn't like that the handsome guy in the photograph lived there now.

"You should try talking to him," David suggested. "He ain't got a lot of friends yet."

Oliver quickly shook his head. "No. No. I can't do that, David." He blushed at the very idea. The guy in the picture was one of those beautiful, unapproachable people. Frightening. "He wouldn't like me."

Oliver saw David frown at that. But, neither Oliver nor David could help that it was true. Oliver didn't have any friends. Just David. It wasn't that he hadn't tried. It was just, the people in town seemed almost afraid of him. Then, he couldn't really blame them, if he really did the things that people said he did. He knew that sometimes he had blackouts. They didn't usually last very long, but sometimes, he'd wake up doing something he didn't remember starting. More than once he'd ordered pizza twice in a row, leaving his family with an abundant amount of leftovers; and the reason why they weren't in a public school was because on Oliver's first day he was sent home after the teacher claimed he was talking to himself and frightening the other students. It wasn't the last time he'd been accused of that; only when people said it happened, it wasn't really a blackout. He simply couldn't remember doing it.

Oliver didn't like to be reminded of his personal oddities, and as he stared at his brother, he found himself doing something that he often tried to avoid.

Longing . There was no point in being jealous, but sometimes Oliver couldn't help wondering how things would be if he could be more like David. David's brain worked right. He was normal. Oliver wasn't stupid. He was even smarter at some things than David. But, Oliver was different. He wasn't like everyone else. He had the scar to remind him of it, too. The long, puckered stretch of skin could be felt on his scalp every time he ran his fingers through his dark hair. Some of it was from the surgery, the rest, from the fall. Oliver didn't remember the accident. His parents said it happened when he was three. They'd been visiting his grandmother, and he'd survived a fall out

t of a third-story window. He hadn't been the same since. Not like David. He still looked a lot like David, though, from the same hazel eyes to the same crooked smile and tall build. But, since they were identical, that was to be expected. There were a few differences, caused by Oliver's accident. After the surgery his nose had turned out a little shorter and broader, and his jaw a little squarer. He wished he still looked like David. The face he should have had. But, he doubted that any stranger on the street could tell them apart. He wondered if that was why David didn't have any friends, either. It made him sad for his brother. David was normal.

"He's stupid if he don't like you," David finally said. "You should talk to him. Tomorrow. I know where he's gonna be."

Oliver pouted, but didn't argue. David always got what he wanted.

"Come on," David said. "Let's get this mess cleaned up. Dinner will be ready soon."

As if on cue, the bedroom door swung open and a tall man with a receding hairline and a smile that always looked worried stepped in. Mr. Martin looked briefly around the room, and then at Oliver.

"Hey, kiddo," he said. "About ready for dinner?"

When Oliver nodded, Mr. Martin closed the door. David smiled at Oliver. "See. What did I tell ya?"

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Frank Seaberg sighed irritably to himself as he wiped himself clean with a tissue and pulled up his pants. Whoever said that masturbation was a cure for boredom had been full of shit if you asked him. But then, not even that was much fun when he was forced to resort to using his twelve-year-old sister's latest issue of Teen Beat for inspiration.

"Frank? Frank! Are you back there?"

"Just a sec, Ma!" he called back, rushing to flush the toilet and wash his hands. By the time he opened the bathroom door, his mother was waiting outside of it in the dark hallway with the low ceiling and holding out a white laundry basket mixed full of books and old records.

"Can you take these up to the attic for me?" she asked, shaking a few strands of curly black hair out of her tired eyes. "I've got two boxes left and I want to get them unpacked before I take your sister to camp."

"I could drive Rudy," Frank was quick to offer.

"You have another week to go before you get your driving privileges back," his mother informed him.

Frank rolled his eyes at that, but took the basket from his mother before following her down the hall and into the kitchen, stepping over empty boxes on the way. The entire house was in disarray. Over the last week, Frank, his mom, and his sister had been struggling to find places for all of their belongings. It wasn't a simple task since their new house was half the size of th

eir last one. Making things more difficult, was the bad plumbing, leaky roof and faulty floor boards, not to mention all the other repairs that the house needed. They'd had the windows open since they got there, trying to chase out the scent of cats. But, his mom swore that they'd be happy there. Eventually.

"Let me ask you something," Frank said. "Why is it that Rudy gets to go to a camp she doesn't even want to go to just to make friends, and I'm stuck here?"

"You can go to camp with Rudy if you want," his mom offered. "But I don't think you'll fit into one of their t-shirts."

Frank groaned. "Mom..."

"You're not trapped here," she cut him off. "You've got your bike. You're free to use it--after you take that up to the attic."

"And where am I gonna go on a bike? There's, like, no one around here."

"You could always go meet our neighbors."

"The old guy who keeps inviting himself over for dinner?"

"Mr. Dron is a very nice man," his mom said defensively. "He's offered to help us out with a lot of repairs around here, so you be nice."

"Fine. But I'm not going to go hang out with that weirdo."

"I'm sure there are other people around here your own age."

"No, they're all in all the places I'd have to drive to."

"Well, you should have thought of that before you missed your curfew."

"I wasn't that late."

"Four hours is plenty late. I'm not going to argue with you, Frank. Now please, take those to the attic, and if you want me to drop you off in town when I take your sister to camp, you're welcome to come with us."

"Fine. Crush any potential social life I might have out here in bum-frick-nowhere," Frank remarked as he carried the basket into the living room and towards the front door.

"Love you, too!" his mom called. And then she screamed.

Frank dropped the basket, allowing records and books to go flying as he turned and rushed back towards the kitchen, nearly knocking over his short, red-headed sister in the process. He put an arm around her to help her catch her balance.

"Mommy?" Rudy said, looking worriedly into the kitchen, where their mother was holding a hand to her heart and the other to her mouth as she peered at an open cabinet beneath the sink.

"What's wrong?" Frank asked as he moved past Rudy.

"Sorry," his mom said, calming herself. "Just a rat. It's already dead."

Frank sighed, and dutifully headed into the kitchen, stopping at the table to pull a few paper towels off a roll. "I'll take care of it," he said, urging his mother aside as she lovingly patted his shoulder. He knelt down in front of

the cabinet, where he could see the tail of something that most definitely looked like a rat, but as he reached for it with the towels, the shining black eyes in the shadows startled him enough to set him back on his haunches. "What is it?" his mom demanded as Rudy rushed to grab hold of her hand. Frank sighed, smirking at himself. "Just another stupid cat," he said, and then held a hand out for the hiding animal. "Here kitty, kitty..." just as his hand reached its head, the calico feline hissed and fled the cabinet and disappeared into the house. Rudy screamed, and Frank hissed in a breath when he was given a scratch up the arm for his troubles. "Oh, Frank!" his mom complained when she saw that their unwelcome guest had drawn blood.

Frank just frowned at her. "Did I mention I hate it here?"

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Frank looked out over the murky waters, wondering if it was going to rain soon. The sky had been overcast all day, the effect made even glummer by the tall pines towering over him. They weren't like the manicured trees that he'd seen in groomed backyards. Everything about this place seemed old and wild.

Nature at its best, his mother called it. Frank just called it fucked up. While he had to admit that it was kind of cool having a lake in his backyard, he'd turn in the ticks, feral cats and loud crickets for suburbia any day.

Frank walked his bike, following the rocky shoreline for a while until his new home disappeared behind the trees and he came to a makeshift bridge that crossed a creek flowing directly into the lake, and then climbed onto his bike to ride down the road that seemed to head uphill forever. It was narrow, hardly wide enough for one car, and while he'd seen tire tracks on it, he'd never seen any actual vehicles using it. It was dirt beneath his tires instead of smooth pavement, so the going was slower than he would have liked, but the bicycle seemed to move easier once he turned off onto the trail he'd discovered his first day there.

Frank didn't know why he kept going back to the same spot. It was pretty damn boring. A clearing with an empty shed missing half its roof. Maybe it was because from there he could see the town, and a dock where the real boats were. More than likely, though, it was because he figured it would be entirely too easy to get lost in the forest, and he was better off sticking to what he knew.

He'd been going to the spot every single day a few hours before dinnertime.

Before he'd moved his afternoons had been reserved for hanging out with his friends at the community pool, playing baseball at the park, or frequenting the malls when he wasn't too busy at someone's party. Without any of that, he felt more or less adrift as he entertained himself by skipping rocks in mud puddles, chasing squirrels up trees, and attempting to jump his bike over natural obstacles that had resulted in some mildly scraped knees. It

was still too early in the year to test the cool waters, so for the time being, he didn't even have the lake to occupy him. Frank could honestly say that he had never looked forward to going to school as much as he was now. Unfortunately, he had a good three months to go before that could happen, and in the meantime, he had an entire summer to get through with limited chances to make new friends.

He leaned his bike against the old shed, once again wondering what it was ever used for, and then circled it a few times, kicking at a few fallen boards. He thought about fixing it and showing Rudy where it was. She'd had a little clubhouse at their last home. Their father had built it for her, and Frank imagined she'd been missing it.

Frank spent some time looking longingly towards the town, wishing he could get there long enough to find out what it was all about, and then spent some time exploring the area some more. A bird's nest in one of the trees gave him a reasonable excuse to climb a tree, but when there were no eggs in it he lost interest and climbed down. His feet had just returned to the ground when the sound of movement behind him caused him to spin around, deciding that the rustling was a little too loud to be caused by an animal as small as a chipmunk. Mr. Dron had warned them about some of the local wildlife, and for a moment, Frank wondered if he should climb back up the tree to escape a rabid boar. But, curiosity kept him where he was as he looked towards a cluster of trees where the branches swayed as whatever moved through them came closer, and he took a cautious step forward when he saw what looked mysteriously like a black high-top shoe appear beneath the lower branches of a weather-beaten pine.

"Hello?" Frank called.

The shoe abruptly stopped, as did all movement from the trees. Frank stared for a few moments, slowly growing amused by the situation as he began to move closer.

"Hello?" he called again, and this time the shoe he saw took an obvious step back. Frank smiled. "You know, I can see you there... if I'm interrupting something just say so, and I'll..." Frank paused, listening. He swore he could hear whispers, but when the wind suddenly picked up they were lost to it.

"Hey, who's back there? Hello."

He began to take small steps towards the trees again, keeping a steady eye on the high top. From the size of it, he doubted some little kid was attached to it, and that was confirmed a moment later when the shoe moved, and Frank's eyes snapped up as the lurker finally showed himself.

It seemed that not everyone Frank's age found better things to do in town, if the boy standing in front of him was any indication. Frank hadn't expected this, but it wasn't an unwelcome surprise if it meant he wasn't stuck in the woods all by himself with no ride to get out. He took another step forward

, wondering if he'd just met a neighbor, all the while reminding himself that given the location, he was likely the one not keeping up with the current fashion as he took in a dusty wardrobe and honest-to-god cowboy hat that had likely seen better days. "Hi," he said, trying for another introduction. He politely held out his hand, but lowered it quickly enough when he observed the awkward behavior of his current company.

The boy's hands were clenching and unclenching at his sides, and his feet shifting in nervous gestures as he kicked the dust at his feet. Below the brim of the faded grey hat, eyes that shined almost green in color were pointedly avoiding Frank's while a normally glowing complexion flushed with stress.

Confused, but not entirely put off, Frank attempted a friendly smile. "Hi. I'm Frank. Seaberg... um..."

Frank didn't know what to say beyond that, but was rewarded for his effort when suddenly, the boy's entire mannerism changed as he removed his old hat, revealing a head of dark, short-cropped, messily combed hair and flashed one of the most genuine smiles Frank had ever seen. White teeth and a crooked curl to the full top lip made him appear oddly innocent for a seven-year-old.

"I know," he replied, his voice laced with the local accent. "Ya moved in last week."

"Oh, well I guess around here word gets..."

"I'm Oliver Martin," the boy interrupted, and then abruptly walked past Frank to point down the hill, across the lake. "That's my house. The one with the red roof."

"Okay," Frank replied, and when Oliver Martin continued to stare and smile at him, he made an effort to point towards his own home, although the view was mostly obstructed from where they were. "I live down there. In the dump."

"I know that, too," Oliver supplied. "A witch used to live there."

Frank's brows shot up. "Excuse me?"

"Gazoontite. Do you wanna come over to our place? We've gotta chicken that lays brown eggs. She's good luck."

"Um, sure. Maybe sometime," Frank replied awkwardly. It was beginning to occur to him that there was something... different, about Oliver Martin.

"How 'bout now?" Oliver asked, still smiling brightly. Innocently. Hopefully.

Frank released a nervous chuckle, not quite sure what to make of the situation. It wasn't like the kid freaked him out or anything. He actually seemed kinda... sweet. But something about the overly outgoing personality made Frank uncomfortable. "Man. Is everyone around here as friendly as you?" he remarked.

Frank wasn't expecting the sudden pout that crawled over Oliver's face as he quickly placed the hat back on his head, giving a firm, "No." And then he turned and walked away without another word.

Confused at the dismissal, but too bored with life in general not to be curious about Oliver Martin, he quickly grabbed his bike and peddled to catch up. Frank found the other boy already headed back down the trail, and coasted towards his back. "Hey, wait up, will ya?"

Oliver didn't glance back, but he slowed his pace and moved slightly off the trail so that Frank wouldn't have any trouble riding along beside him. For several moments the only sounds around them came from the wind blowing through the trees, the wheels of the bike turning against the path worn into the forest floor, and Oliver's soft footsteps.

"I totally told my mom that there was no one out here," Frank finally said in an effort to make conversation. "I figured everyone lived in town. Didn't think I'd see anyone up here."

"I'm up here," Oliver said, glancing in Frank's direction from beneath the rim of his hat.

Frank cracked a smile. "Yeah. I see that. So, what are you doing up here? Or, what do you do around here?"

"What do I do?" Oliver repeated, and more sincere confusion over his face reminded Frank that something about him seemed off. But, it wasn't like the guy looked strange, and Frank doubted that he was some sort of serial killer trying to lure him to his lair with the promise of a lucky chicken that laid brown eggs, so he did his best to be polite.

"Yeah. What do you do for fun?"

Oliver shrugged. "Don't know. What do you do for fun?"

"Me? Around here? I don't know yet."

"Well what did you do for fun where you used to live?" Oliver asked.

Frank sighed at the question. "Lots of stuff," he said, and then added ruefully, "probably nothing I'll ever be able to do around here."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I guess around here there's just... nothing."

"Oh." Oliver sounded disappointed rather than insulted. "So why don't you go back?"

"Go back?"

"Yeah. To where you came from. You like it there better, right?"

Despite himself, Frank laughed at the seriousness of the suggestion. "It doesn't work like that."

"David says that if you don't like where you are, you should go somewhere else."

"Who's David?"

Oliver grinned that crooked smile. "My brother. He took your picture yester

day.”

Frank hit the brakes on his bike so hard he nearly went over the handlebars, and once he caught himself, he reached out and caught Oliver’s shoulder to keep him from walking before he thought about it first. Luckily, Oliver didn’t seem to mind as he glanced down at the hand touching him, and then regarded Frank expectantly. “What do you mean he took my picture?” Frank demanded in the least demanding tone he could muster. For some reason, the idea disturbed him.

“With a camera,” Oliver explained.

“Yeah, I got that, but...”

“David takes good pictures. He said I should talk to you, ‘cause you’re nice. And you are, Frank.”

Oliver turned and continued to walk, and Frank allowed his hand to drop from the other boy’s shoulder as he stared after him, frowning. When he began to pedal again, it was slowly as he stared at Oliver’s hat as if he expected to see through it, right down to what was going on in the local’s head.

“Hey, Oliver?” Frank said after few long moments of wondering about the childlike personality of Oliver Martin. “Is David out here with you now?” Frank had a feeling that someone should be. Ahead of him, Oliver began to hum in an odd monotone, and Frank pedaled a little faster to catch up again.

“Oliver? Are you out here alone?”

Oliver looked at him sidelong with a suspicious look that would have seemed comical if Frank didn’t find this meeting so strange. “I can take walks by myself,” Oliver replied defensively. “I don’t get lost.”

“Okay.”

“My mom doesn’t like it,” Oliver admitted. “But I don’t get lost. I live in the house with the red roof.”

“Of course you don’t,” Frank replied in a tone that he hoped was soothing. It was obviously the wrong thing to say, and the wrong tone to use, because Oliver suddenly stopped, more or less scowling at him.

“I’m not stupid,” he said. “David says I’m not a retard.”

“Really, I don’t think you are...” Frank insisted.

“I just fell down,” Oliver said quickly. “People think I’m slow ‘cause I fell down. But I’m not. I could help you with your homework,” he added hopefully.

Frank smiled at that last thing. “I don’t have homework yet,” he replied.

“Oh.” Oliver hung his head, and then he was walking again, Frank trailing slightly behind him until they reached the narrow road off the trail.

Frank was almost sorry that he didn’t have any homework for Oliver to help him with. “Do you help your friends with their homework?” he tried.

“Don’t have any.”

“They don’t give out homework here?” Frank sounded half surprised, and hal

f hopeful.

Oliver looked at him and laughed. It was a pleasant sound. “No. we get tons of homework. Mom says it’s good for us. I just don’t have any friends.” That last thing was said so easily that Frank had to think on it for a moment, deciding that the whole admission made for an awkward moment. “Everyone has friends, Oliver.”

“Well, I’ve got David,” Oliver said as they came to the lake.

“But you really don’t hang out with anyone else?” Frank was disappointed, and not above admitting that it was for selfish reasons. When Oliver had come upon him near the shed, Frank had hoped that he’d be someone who could ease the boredom and serve as a guide to an actual social life. Instead, Oliver was... well, Frank didn’t know what he was, but he knew that he was n’t like one of the guys he’d normally occupy his time with. As it stood, he wasn’t even sure if Oliver was supposed to be walking around without supervision.

“Maybe you,” Oliver answered, snapping Frank out of his thoughts. “Do you wanna come to my house?”

Frank opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated when he realized how uncomfortable he was with the answer he preferred to give. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt this guy’s feelings by explaining that the idea itself weirded him out. He smiled instead. “You know, I’ve sorta got to get home soon, Oliver. We just moved here, you know? My mom will worry if I’m late. But hey, if you want me to walk you home first, I’ll hang out a little longer.”

Oliver shrugged. “I’m not walking, Frank.”

Frank followed Oliver’s eyes to the water, where a small motorboat was docked at what Frank had originally thought to be a bridge. “That’s yours?” he asked.

“It takes a long time to walk around the lake.”

“Okay. So are you going home now?”

“I guess so,” Oliver replied. He sounded undecided. “Do you wanna come over tomorrow, Frank?”

“Um... I don’t know what I’m doing tomorrow,” Frank replied. “We’ll see, okay?”

Oliver smiled as if Frank had just made him a promise.

“Okay. You can come over anytime, alright?”

“Sure, Oliver.”

“Okay. See you later, Frank!”

Frank gave a small wave as Oliver headed towards his boat and hopped in with no trouble. Starting the engine was another story, but eventually, Frank was watching the top of Oliver’s cowboy hat disappear across the water before he finally turned to head home, wondering what the hell made a chick

en that laid brown eggs lucky.

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Oliver held his hat in his hands, tracing the wide brim with his thumbs as he moved slowly up the wooden stairs of his front porch, ducking under the windchimes that rang softly against the wind. The sun had sunk lower in the sky, leaving it with a warm hue behind the hills, and the trees cast long shadows over the murky waters of the lake. The front door of his home had been left open, the screen closed, and through it he could feel the warm air from the kitchen as he took in the aroma of fried chicken, his father's favorite meal.

Oliver paused before going inside, taking a moment to look across the lake at a light coming from the window of what used to be old Ms. Grover's place. It was still creepy, he thought. He didn't like that Frank lived there. He smiled at the thought of Frank coming over tomorrow. Maybe, if Frank came over, Oliver could warn him about the mean cats that used to live in his house. Maybe they could watch a video. Oliver's parents rented one from the grocery store every weekend. Maybe Frank would like it if Oliver gave him some brown eggs from the chicken. Maybe, Frank would like coming to Oliver's house.

As he moved inside, Oliver was sure to be quiet. He smothered the squeak of the screen door as much as possible, and he made sure to step on the floorboards that made less of a fuss under his weight. He passed the low-sitting sofas in the living room, the colorful rug padding his footsteps, and as he came under the deer antlers hanging over the hallway below the stairs to his parents' loft, he ran into exactly what he wanted to avoid.

Voices carried in the Martin house. Even when they were whispered. Oliver could hear his mother and father in the kitchen. They weren't happy with him. He knew he probably should have told them where he was going. It's not like they didn't let him go out. But, they always had to know everything, and then sometimes his dad would follow him. David said that that was supposed to be a secret. He said it was better if Oliver didn't tell his dad he knew about it. Just like he said that Oliver should just leave to go see Frank. Don't tell Mom and Dad. They won't like it. Now, Oliver wondered how much trouble he was in.

His parents knew he was back, and when he heard their footsteps approaching he was quick to continue down the hall until he reached his bedroom. Everything was just like he left it. As always, David's bed was made, but Oliver's wasn't. Oliver closed the door, and wasn't startled at all when he found that David was behind it, waiting for him.

"I don't think Mom and Dad are happy I left, David," Oliver said.

"So? Who cares if they're happy about it. They treat you like a baby, Oliver. Don't you get sick of it?"

"I guess so," Oliver admitted.

"Did you at least have fun with Frank? He's nice, ain't he?"

Oliver grinned at that. "Yeah. He might come over tomorrow."

"Good," David said. "Mom and Dad will be gone most of the day. What're you gonna do if he comes?"

Oliver shrugged. "Don't know. I told him about the chicken."

David rolled his eyes. "He don't care about a stupid chicken, Oliver. You should take him out in the boat."

Oliver bit at his bottom lip. "It's supposed to rain tomorrow, David."

"Not hard. Besides, if you take him in the boat you'll be able to sit close. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Oliver blushed, and moved to sit on his bed. "Don't know if he'd wanna sit close. Maybe he doesn't even like boats."

"Everyone likes boats," David insisted. "Trust me, Oliver."

"Okay, David."

There was a soft tap on the door, and Oliver looked to David worriedly. David sighed. "Don't worry, Oliver. They can't get mad at you for having fun. I'll talk to 'em."

Oliver frowned. "You know they don't like it when you talk for me, David. You get too angry."

"Look," David said. "Just don't say anything, okay? I'll talk."

The door opened. Their father adjusted his glasses as he peered into the room. Their mother, a pretty blonde who looked hardly past her prime, took the lead and stepped past him.

"Oliver," she started.

"He won't talk to you right now," David interrupted. "Go cook dinner. We're hungry."

Mrs. Martin exchanged a worried glance with her husband, and didn't object when he gently pulled her back to his side.

"David," he said firmly, "we need to talk to Oliver. Right now. We just want to know where he was today."

"He didn't get in any trouble," David said, raising his voice. "Just leave him alone. You never let him do anything!"

"David, let us talk to Oliver," Mr. Martin said again. "If you don't go now, you know what we'll have to do."

The threat was a meaningful one, and David scowled. He knew. And for the time being, he left.

Chapter 2

by DomLuka

David Martin looked out his bedroom window. His face felt heavy, as if it weren't accustomed to the troubled scowl stretching over his face. It was late in the morning, and the day didn't look promising so far. Oliver was right.

It was going to rain today.

“What’re you gonna do, David?” Oliver asked quietly from somewhere behind him. He sounded worried.

“I’m going outside,” David announced.

“Dad said we have to stay in... you shouldn’t make him mad, David.”

“I hate him,” David whispered. “I hate them both.”

“And you shouldn’t say things like that,” Oliver scolded.

“Why not? They hate me, don’t they?”

Oliver didn’t respond to that. “Let’s play a game, David. It’s gonna rain soon, anyway.”

“No. I’m going out.”

“How? They’ll see you. You don’t want them to see you. I don’t want them to punish you again, David.”

David frowned. They would punish him. The fuckers. And why not? He was the unwanted one. They couldn’t get rid of him, so they liked to make him miserable. They wouldn’t get away with it forever. He swore that. And they’d learn. They’d learn that they couldn’t keep him trapped. Not like a caged animal. Like Oliver’s chicken, kept in the two-foot-wide cage in the garage. They trapped it, and stole its eggs.

David opened the window, lifting the glass as far as it would go.

“David?” Oliver asked, sounding uncertain.

In a quick effort, David pushed the screen out and watched it land in one of his mother’s flower boxes.

“David, please don’t go outside. Frank’s gonna come over.”

David smirked as he lifted himself and dropped one leg out the window. “Sorry, Oliver. But Frank won’t come.”

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Frank turned his flashlight onto a stack of crates in the storage shed behind his house. Like all the other junk in there, they were littered with cobwebs and he could see the dusty air floating in front of the light. His mom had asked him to clean it out today while she was in town with Rudy, and now he could see why. She hated spiders, and this place certainly had plenty of those, along with everything else the previous owner had left. The previous witch. He wondered what Oliver had meant by that as he went to explore the contents of a crate. A witch who obviously liked her preserves, he discovered, smiling to himself as he lifted out a few dusty bottles of jam. It looked like every crate was filled with stuff like that. His mother would definitely be happy. He made a mental note to bring in a few crates once the kitchen was more organized.

Everything else in the shed seemed worthy of a quick trip to the dump. There was an old bike separated into three different pieces that Frank had no motivation to do anything with, a few ugly lanterns among other appliances that

all had frayed electrical cords. If he had to guess, he'd say that cats had something to do with that. There were two green oars that belonged to a non-existent boat, folded rugs on the ground that had the small space smelling like a litter box, and a bag of cat food that had become waterlogged with every drop of moisture that had fallen through a leak in the ceiling.

Wanting to save the task of cleaning out the shed for later, but knowing that his mom was counting on him, and taking on a sense of responsibility because his family needed the space, he propped the door open, placed his flashlight in the corner, and went to work tossing all the junk into the bed of a Ford pickup truck on the dirt path his mom called a driveway. They'd borrowed it from Mr. Dron, and Frank had spent most of the morning filling it up with boxes and everything else left over from their move. The contents of the shed topped it off, and by the time he was through all that was left were the crates and the oars. He saw no sense in throwing away perfectly good jelly, or boat paddles. After all, his family ate, and they lived on a lake. There was no telling when either would come in handy.

Once his and his sister's bikes were stored in the shed and the door was closed, Frank took a few moments to take advantage of the fresh air outside. The sun had faded behind the clouds during the morning, leaving the sky gray and dark where a storm lurked in the distance. The wind blew through his hair to cool his scalp as he looked over the choppy waters. Rain was so close he could smell it, and he wondered if his mom and sister would be back soon. Rudy didn't have camp over the weekend, so they'd gone grocery shopping together. It was their absence that caused Frank his sudden anxiety. Maybe they had electricity out here, but their surroundings were, in Frank's opinion, about a million years behind civilization. The road off the highway that led to the lake was just as bad as the one he followed to his trail, and according to Mr. Dron, it was prone to flooding and other disasters during a bad storm. The fact that he had no way of getting hold of his family didn't exactly make him feel better, either. He tried to stay optimistic, though, busying himself with the task of closing the windows in the house and placing most of their kitchen pots under every known leak in the house. Christ, this place needed a lot of work. As he moved through the house, he ran into two cats that had found a way in to avoid the storm. Apparently, they didn't realize that they no longer lived there, but Frank didn't bother to chase them out this time. He was too busy pacing by the windows to care that the smallest one had taken to clawing at the furniture. Rain had started to fall in large, slow drops, cold air was seeping through the gap at the bottom of the front door, and a low rumble of thunder echoed somewhere from above as if to say that this was hardly the beginning. And his family still wasn't home. If they didn't get back soon, Frank thought, he'd use bad weather as another example of why they shouldn't have moved there. Or at the very least, into such a c

orpse of a house.

The small town he could deal with. The culture shock he could tolerate. But he couldn't understand why his mom had to choose a house that was so secluded. Actually, he could understand, he just didn't agree with all her reasoning. It was on the lake. It was better than a double-wide trailer. Well, as far as Frank was concerned, if they wanted to see a lake, they could have driven to it from town, and he'd bet that most of the available trailers didn't have leaky roofs. This house was supposed to be their fresh start, according to his mom. Clearly, the woman was out of her mind. Frank wondered how long it would take her to figure it out.

He turned away from the window, and in the moment it took him to blink, the skies seemed to crack open and the static-like sound of a downpour erupted outside, causing him to look again. The water was falling so hard and so fast that it rocketed off the surface of the front porch, and puddles appeared beneath and around Mr. Dron's pickup truck. The raindrops splashing off the lake created a soft mist that made it difficult to make out the surface, and the first sounds of dripping rang through the house as the pots collected the water. Frank forced himself away from the window long enough to relocate a few, but he was back again soon enough, hoping to hear the cranky old engine of his mom's run-down Subaru over the sound of the storm. He didn't like this. Not at all.

He went to the closet closest to the front door, and was momentarily distressed when there was nothing in front of him, until he realized that all of their coats were still packed away in a box on the closet floor. He dumped the entire contents, and picked out a blue raincoat that was a little too aqua to be a masculine color. His mother's. She sucked at picking out real estate, but apparently, she was the only one sensible enough to own a raincoat.

Frank shrugged on the waterproof garment and moved out the front door, onto the front porch and into the rain, as if his presence outside would will his family home sooner. He began to walk around the house to look up the road that doubled as their driveway. He felt stupid for not going with them now. After all his complaining over being stuck in the middle of nowhere, he'd blown off a chance to go into town with his family for an extra thirty minutes of sleep. He could have skipped the chores to take a look around something closer to civilization, and he could have been around if his mom ran into trouble on the way back. He hoped that they were still in town, somewhere dry, or at least close to pulling up the drive. Not knowing was driving him crazy.

He began to pace back and forth as the humidity began to build beneath his coat. His clothes stuck to him uncomfortably and his pants became soggy around his ankles where the rain penetrated them. And it kept coming. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen this kind of storm, where the water fe

It like a never-ending beat, no harder or softer from one moment to the next. More thunder cracked above, this time echoing through the valley. Frank looked up. No lightning yet, but the sky was getting dark. A lot darker than a sky should look at noon, Frank thought.

He thought about going back inside. That was the sensible thing to do. Maybe he could occupy himself by hooking up the DVD player, or finish unpacking his room. His mom and Rudy were fine, and as soon as they got home, he'd feel ridiculous for worrying. But, Frank couldn't help worrying. They were all he had left.

Another eruption of thunder sent a chill up his spine. Still no lightning, but he forced himself back towards the front of the house, anyway, but paused as he looked out over the lake. The other side was nothing more than a blurry image now, obstructed by fog, but he could see light, faintly shining through a distant window. He stared at it for several moments, wondering if the people inside the house it came from were more comfortable than he was. Above him, the sky suddenly lit up, the momentary brightness that Frank associated with fireworks. Streaks of bright white streaked across the sky and moved within the clouds. It was time to go back inside. He turned and ran towards his front door as if someone was behind him, unable to explain the sudden increase in his blood pressure. He reached the front porch, his right foot landing on the first step. And then, the attack came.

His heart leapt to his throat when he felt the pressure on his shoulder. It was like being lifted into the air, his feet flying above his body, and then there was pain as his back came into contact with the ground, even with his tailbone. The hood fell back from his head and sloshing mud splashed over him, the rain sloppily washing it away a moment later, and somewhere in his confusion, two confused, hazel eyes came into focus over his own.

"Are you okay, Frank?"

"Oliver?" Frank asked incredulously. Staring upwards, regaining his bearings, Frank found that Oliver was indeed leaning over him, garbed in jeans and a sweatshirt, both soaked through. Water dripped from his dark hair, down his face and off his eyelashes and nose, but he didn't behave as someone who noticed. Or cared.

"Sorry I scared you, Frank."

Frank reluctantly took the hand that was offered to him. Oliver's hand. And as the other boy helped him to his feet, he pieced together what had just happened. Oliver, who'd managed to sneak up on him, grabbed his shoulder, and Frank had simply slipped on the first stair. He supposed that it was good to know he wasn't facing a hungry bear with an appetite for teenagers.

"What are you doing here?" Frank demanded as he rubbed at his neck. It seemed a lot less embarrassing than rubbing at his sore bottom would be.

"You didn't come over," Oliver replied.

It didn't sound like Oliver was making an accusation, but Frank still found himself taking the defensive.

"Well, I've been kinda busy around here."

"Oh."

Oliver frowned, looking like a lost, wet puppy, and Frank sighed.

"Look, how'd you get here?"

Oliver pointed down the shoreline. "My boat was over there."

"You can't go back in this. Come on, let's go inside so I can change." Frank gave Oliver's shoulder a pat as he passed him and moved up the stairs, becoming irritated when he found that his fall had caused a limp in his step. He was definitely bruised. He just hoped that it wouldn't look as bad as it currently felt. "You can stay here until it stops raining," Frank continued as he reached the front door, but before walking through it, he paused, realizing that he was alone in his interest to get inside.

Oliver was still standing in the rain, looking at the house with a certain amount of trepidation.

"Oliver? What're you doing?" Frank asked. The only response he received was a negative shake of the head. Frank sighed. "Oliver, please don't make me limp back down those stairs. I promise you, there's no witch in here."

Oliver frowned. "She wasn't a real witch, Frank," he said, in a tone that suggested he was attempting to explain something to a small child. "But, she didn't like me. Wouldn't want me in her house."

"Well, it's not her house anymore, is it?" Frank replied. "I live here, so please just come inside. It's better than standing out in the rain, okay?"

Oliver seemed to consider it for a few seconds--a few seconds longer than Frank cared to wait. He decided to go inside without waiting for a response, and sure enough, Oliver was soon moving up the stairs to catch up. Frank held the door for him, and watched the other boy hesitate before stepping into the house, taking it all in slowly, from floor to roof. Frank momentarily placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, but decided not to comment further on Oliver's fears.

"Sorry about the mess," Frank said of the clutter filling the living room. "We haven't found enough room for all our stuff."

"You need a bigger house," Oliver agreed, and despite his frustration over being covered in mud, and the pain he was feeling, Frank laughed.

"Come on in," Frank insisted, closing the door. "I'll find you something dry, then I'm gonna hit the shower."

Oliver moved further into the living room, inching his way between a dresser and a coffee table, but stopped and noticeably tensed when one of the cats appeared in front of his feet.

"Don't worry about them," Frank insisted. "They're everywhere. Can't seem to get rid of them. I'll be right back."

After a quick trip to his room, Frank returned with a t-shirt and some running shorts. He found Oliver near the sofa. The kid had had enough sense not to sit down while he was dripping wet, but he'd had no trouble finding the one family photo that Frank would have liked to see burned. Taken two Christmases ago, he'd had a bad haircut and been forced to wear a hideous orange sweater with a polar bear print on it, courtesy of his grandmother. He was pretty sure that if it had been anyone else looking it over, he would have snatched it out of their hands. But with Oliver, he just watched.

If Frank was right, then Oliver wasn't noticing the ugly sweater at all. He was simply curious, taking in faces with a wide-eyed expression, like a little kid who'd just opened a new picture book. He held it up, and pointed to faces, one at a time, looking to Frank for answers.

"My mom," Frank obliged. "If you meet her, she doesn't like to be called ma'am. She thinks it makes her sound old. Her name's Jessica.... and that's my sister, Rudy. She's named after my grandpa, but don't tell her that. She wants a girl's name."

Oliver grinned over that, and then held the photograph in two hands, studying it again. "Frank, where's your dad's head?"

Frank rolled his eyes. "You ask a lot of questions."

"No I don't," Oliver replied, sounding confused over the accusation.

"We don't like to look at my dad's face," Frank explained. That's why his dad's head was carefully folded out of the frame. It was like that in most of their pictures. He tossed the clothes he'd brought onto the sofa. "There. Why don't you put those on. There's a box of towels on the kitchen table if you need one.... are you gonna be okay if I take a quick shower?"

Oliver looked down at the clothes as he carefully placed the framed photo on the table where he'd found it. "You won't be long?" he asked.

"I won't be long," Frank promised, and then did his best to keep it. He only stayed in the shower long enough to feel remotely clean, which proved to be a challenge when he had to stand in a cracked and stained bathtub. His mom had scrubbed and scrubbed until they finally decided that as soon as they could afford it, they'd replace the whole thing.

The mirror was okay. Clear and new. They'd purchased that, since the house didn't come with one. Frank just didn't like what he saw in it when he finished bathing and looked over the damage from his fall. His lower back looked welted and angry red, where he'd taken the brunt of his impact. It looked nearly as painful as it felt. His right shoulder was the same way, and he'd managed to scrape his elbows. He suddenly found himself hoping that someone remembered to refill the icetray. It wasn't likely. He was the last one to empty it.

He dressed, including his shoes in his wardrobe, just in case he found a reason to run back out into the rain, and then he went to rejoin Oliver. Frank ha

If expected him to be snooping around through their things while left to his own devices, but instead, Oliver appeared to be the perfect houseguest. Oliver was sitting in one of the more awkwardly placed chairs, likely because one of the cats had found its way to the back of the sofa. He'd changed into the clothes Frank had provided and seemed reasonably comfortable in them, even if they were a little snug on him. The shorts didn't quite cover the tan line just above his knees, and the shirt seemed just a little tight around his shoulders. He had long, toned muscles, a body as developed as any healthy youth who was exposed to a generous amount of physical activity, and suddenly didn't seem as scrawny and frail as Frank had imagined him. In fact, just looking at him reminded Frank of his age, even while the expressions on Oliver's face remained entirely too innocent.

Frank chased the cat off the furniture, mostly because he had a feeling it was bothering his guest, and then he offered Oliver something to drink. Only, instead of responding to Frank's question, Oliver asked a question that Frank hadn't been expecting at all.

"Are you angry, Frank?"

"What?"

Oliver lowered his eyes, folding his hands in his lap. "I didn't mean to make you fall, Frank."

"It's alright," Frank replied, even as he stiffly rolled himself onto the couch. It was no surprise that Oliver didn't look convinced. "Look, you didn't make me fall, okay? I... well, I'm sure it was my fault for some reason. I mean, I shouldn't have been out there for one thing. I just thought... I was waiting for my mom. She and my sister aren't home yet."

"Are they late?" Oliver asked.

Frank thought over the question. "Not exactly. They never said when they'd be home. I guess I'm just worried that they won't make it home in this weather."

Oliver smiled. "Oh, this is nothin'. My parents get home in this stuff all the time. Don't worry, Frank."

Frank smiled back, only because Oliver sounded so sincere that he was inclined to believe him. Then, a thought occurred to him as he looked over his unexpected guest.

"Hey, Oliver, your parents are worried about you, are they? I mean, would they be? We don't have a phone hooked up yet so you can't exactly call from here, unless you have a radio... there's one here in the attic. It was there when we moved in."

"We have one of those," Oliver cut in brightly. "It was my grandpa's. David likes to use it to listen to people."

"Well, maybe if we figure out how to work the one there, you can use it to tell your family where you are," Frank suggested.

Oliver responded negatively. "I can't tell my parents where I am."

"They're not home?"

"They are... but I can't tell them. David doesn't want me to tell them."

Frank raised an eyebrow, his curiosity stirred. "Why wouldn't David want you to tell your parents where you are?"

"Cause he's mad at 'em." Oliver suddenly stood up, dodging one of Frank's mother's standing lamps on his way around the chair, much like he looked like he wanted to dodge the question. "How come you didn't come over, Frank?"

"I told my mom I'd do some work around here," Frank replied, deciding to leave out the part where he'd entirely forgotten Oliver's invitation. "Why's David mad at your parents?"

Oliver fell silent as he drew something in the dust that had collected on a round mirror where Rudy had placed it on a lamp stand after finding it in her room. "Sometimes David doesn't like them," Oliver said quietly. "He says it's 'cause they don't like him. When he doesn't listen, they punish him."

Frank smirked. "Yeah, parents are annoying like that, huh?" he remarked, earning himself a frown from Oliver. "Look, Oliver, you shouldn't let your brother get you in trouble. If your parents don't know where you are, they're probably worried. I think when it stops raining you should go let them you're alright, okay?"

"But I wanna stay with you for a while, Frank."

Frank sighed. "Well, you're in luck, because it looks like it's going to be raining for a while... Look, Oliver, I haven't had lunch yet, and I don't skip meals. Are you hungry?"

Frank stood, trying not to wince when his back protested, and Oliver moved around the clutter in the room to get closer to him. "I like peanut butter and ham, but not together. Want me to make you a sandwich, Frank? I make good sandwiches."

"That would be great, Oliver, but we don't have anything for sandwiches until my mom gets back."

"Oh. Then what do you have?"

"Eggs, and preserves," Frank replied as Oliver followed him to the kitchen.

"Do you like eggs, Oliver?"

"Are they brown eggs?"

Frank didn't have any brown eggs stocked in the refrigerator, but as it turned out, Oliver didn't seem to notice the difference while he was eating them. They'd cleared enough room on the kitchen table to sit down and enjoy a quick meal, and Frank found that Oliver's company was distraction enough from the storm... and maybe, a little more enjoyable than he'd thought it would be.

Frank couldn't quite figure Oliver Martin out. He knew Oliver wasn't quite

like most kids his age. His mannerisms, the way he talked--all of it reminded Frank of the kids from the special ed classes that no one ever talked to. He supposed that if he had to describe Oliver, the term that came to mind was slow. Except, that didn't seem quite right. As they shared their meal, and Oliver talked about places he liked to go around the lake, and shared his knowledge of secret trails, good fishing spots and what snakes were okay to catch and which weren't, Frank completely forgot that he'd thought of Oliver as anything less than normal. Except for when Oliver offered to help Frank clean up afterwards. None of Frank's friends back home would have done that.

"So why do you call the lady that used to live here a witch?" Frank asked as they stood over the sink, washing off their dishes.

"I didn't like her," Oliver said firmly, as if he wanted to leave no room for argument. "Said this side of the lake was hers, and to stay off. She threw a rock at my head once."

"What?"

"Yeah. Right here." Oliver rubbed at his forehead, and Frank leaned closer to see a tiny indentation marring otherwise clear skin that was indeed a scar.

"What a bitch," he decided, wondering why anyone would want to hurt someone as nice as Oliver.

As for Frank's choice of words, Oliver snorted. "That's what David calls her," he whispered. "Mom says he shouldn't talk like that."

Frank smiled. "That sounds like my mom. But it's true--she shouldn't have thrown a rock at you."

Oliver shrugged. "She doesn't live here anymore. She's dead."

For a moment, Frank looked around the house suspiciously. "She didn't die in here, did she?" He really hoped that that didn't explain the smell.

"No," Oliver assured him. "She drowned."

"Oh... that sucks."

"She wasn't careful," Oliver said. "But you'll be careful, won't you, Frank?"

"Um... sure."

"Good. I like that you live here now."

"Well, that makes one of us."

Oliver frowned and studied Frank searchingly. "Why don't you like it here?"

"It's not that I don't... I mean, I don't. I just think my family would be happier somewhere else."

"Oh. Then why do you live here?"

"I don't know," Frank said as he turned off the water and moved away from the sink. "We have to, I guess."

“Why?” Oliver asked as he followed Frank back to the living room. Frank frowned, half irritated by the line of questioning, and half inspired by it. It wasn’t like him to vent certain aspects of his life to people who were practically strangers, but he found that he was comfortable with Oliver. “My mom wanted to start over,” he explained. “I mean, I think we all did. And... this was sort of what we could afford. He turned to face Oliver just as they reached the hallway leading to the bedrooms. “About a year ago, my dad left. First he quit my mom. Then he quit me and my sister... and he took everything with him.” Frank momentarily glanced away from the hazel eyes studying him, feeling uncomfortable. The admission was harder than he expected. “I don’t know why he got tired of us, you know? I thought he was happy. My mom calls it temporary stupidity. She says one day he’ll come to his senses when it comes to me and Rudy and come back... I don’t know, Oliver. My dad left, and that’s why we’re here, because where I come from, that’s all there is. People look at us like we’re leftovers. What he didn’t want.” Oliver stared at Frank for a long moment, seemingly taking in this information, and unintentionally, making Frank feel like an idiot. It wasn’t necessarily anything that Oliver was doing. Frank simply didn’t like to feel vulnerable, and there he was, placing himself in that situation, and bringing up what he had sworn to forget, or at least not care about. This was supposed to be a new start. Parts of it definitely sucked, but it was still a second chance. Frank hadn’t meant to drop any of that on Oliver. He even thought he owed the kid an apology now. But Oliver didn’t seem to feel the same way as he did, something that had Frank questioning how normal he was all over again. Oliver hugged him. It wasn’t a loose arm over the shoulder accompanied by a pat on the back, or a gentle, quick embrace like Rudy gave Frank before she went to bed. It was more supportive than sympathetic, and it only tightened when Frank tensed, stunned by the gesture until he had no choice but to push Oliver away, or relax. He settled for the latter, the aches from his fall momentarily fading in the way Oliver had him wrapped so tight he could hardly move his arms. Oliver was warm, like he’d never been out in the rain at all, and he smelled like lemons. It wasn’t a sour smell, but a clean, almost refreshing scent that Frank suddenly wanted to lean into. But, even if he relaxed, he didn’t do that. And then it was over, and Frank was surprised to find himself blushing. Oliver, however, left no room for awkwardness as he grinned crookedly and then looked down the dark hallway behind Frank. “It looks scary,” Oliver observed. Frank laughed. “That’s what I said the first time I walked into this house,” he remarked, and then gestured over his shoulder. “My room’s back there... you wanna see it?” Oliver nodded, looking delighted over the idea. “It’s messy,” Frank warned, “and not just because I haven’t finished unpacki

ng yet.”

“That’s okay, Frank.”

Oliver didn’t have much to say over the disaster state that Frank’s room was in, other than suggesting that Frank should make some shelves for all his stuff. He even offered to help. He also asked why Frank didn’t have any fish in the old aquarium that he was currently using to store books in. Frank explained that the one goldfish he’d ever owned had died two days after he brought it home from a fair, and then found himself agreeing to allow Oliver to catch frogs to keep in it.

The afternoon went by quickly. More thunder was heard from above, a few more streaks of lightning passed through the sky, and for fifteen minutes the power went out, leading to a discussion where Frank had to convince Oliver that the old house wasn’t haunted and the creaking floor and movement in the other rooms were likely due to the cats.

Outside, the rain finally slowed to a drizzle, and when Frank discovered that Oliver had left his entire wardrobe outside because he didn’t want to leave wet clothes around Frank’s house, Frank hung them inside and gave Oliver something of his that was more suitable to wear home when the time came. Frank was surprised that he was no longer looking forward to that time, even when he heard his mom’s Subaru pulling up outside and Oliver said, “See Frank, they’re back. You didn’t have to worry about a little rain.”

Frank would have liked to argue that it was more than a little rain, but Oliver seemed so happy on his behalf that he thought it would be a better idea to take him outside and introduce him to his mother and sister. Their meeting went similar to what Frank and Oliver’s had been, as Oliver pointed out the house with the red roof to Frank’s mom, and told Rudy about his lucky chicken. The four of them helped to bring in the groceries, and another fifteen minutes later, Oliver was in the living room with Rudy, teaching her to play chess on the new board they’d picked up in town, and Frank helped his mom put away everything else she’d brought back with her. Which, turned out to be the whole store. It seemed that Mr. Dron had told her that it was smart to stock up on supplies, and Jessica Seaberg had taken it to heart. She’d been especially proud of everything she’d picked up with double coupons, and she couldn’t get over how fresh some of the vegetables were. Frank was more concerned with the aspects of her trip into town that didn’t include two-for-one specials.

“Did you have trouble getting back?” he asked her. “It was raining kinda hard here.”

“I saw that,” she replied. “That bare spot that we think is the driveway is flooded. It was pretty bad where we were, too, so I took Rudy to lunch while we waited for it to clear up.”

“Oh. Okay,” Frank replied, once again feeling foolish for his concerns as

he watched his mom stand on her toes to put some canned goods away in one of the higher cabinets. She suddenly glanced over her shoulder at him.

"You weren't worried, were you honey?"

"No," Frank said indignantly. "Just wondering where you were, that's all. I was hungry, and you had all the food."

Jessica rolled her eyes, and smiled at her son. "I promise, we'll get the phone hooked up soon, and I'm gonna get another cell phone."

"Mom..."

"The expense is worth it if it means we can all keep in touch," she said, before Frank could protest. "I already told you, let me worry about those things, okay? Tell me about what you've been up to. You made a new friend?" She gestured towards the living room, where Oliver and Rudy could be heard. It sounded like Oliver was making the girl laugh.

Frank sighed. "Yeah. I met him yesterday, and today he just showed up. It was raining, so..."

"He seems... nice."

Frank smiled at his mom's tone. "He's kind of different," he admitted. "But he is nice. I'm probably gonna go home with him in a while. He said his parents might not know where he is, and I want to make sure he gets there okay."

"Definitely. Do you want a ride? It might rain again."

"Nah. With the roads around here we'd be lucky if we found the one that got to the other side of the lake before tomorrow."

Jessica smiled. "Good point. Just be careful, alright? And come home right away. I don't want you getting stuck if this storm's not over."

"I'll be fine, mom," Frank promised as he began to gather up the grocery bags.

Jessica leaned against the counter behind her, and regarded her son thoughtfully. "You know, maybe we can rethink letting you drive the car again a little early," she said.

Frank was obviously surprised. "What changed your mind?"

"Well, I've been thinking on it. Your sister has camp, but it's not really fair that you're stuck around here, and I talked to a few people when we were in town today. They told me there are a lot of young people out during the weekends. You could go try to meet some of them.... and besides, you've been doing so much around here that I think you deserve a break. What do you think? Do you want to use the car tomorrow?"

Frank smiled, pleased with the offer, but then he shrugged and surprised himself with his own response. "Maybe. I told Oliver I might look for frogs with him tomorrow."

Now, it was Jessica who looked surprised. "Really? You know, Oliver lives pretty close. You could always visit with him another time." She sounded surprised.

keptical, and was obviously questioning her son's new choice of friend.
"I like him," Frank said. "He is different, but I like him."

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Frank watched Oliver stare down at his motor boat, where he had it docked at the low bridge down the shore from Frank's house. The air was humid from the rain, the scent lingering in the mulch, and the sky was still dark with the promise of a few more lingering showers.

"You don't have to come with me if you don't want to, Frank," Oliver said, even though on the way to the boat, he'd asked Frank if he wanted to come over.

"That's okay, Oliver. I'll just come back before it rains again."

"Are you going to walk, Frank? Maybe we can take the boat home, and then I can walk you back here."

Frank grinned. "I think that would defeat the purpose of me taking you home. Look, I'll be fine. There's room for my bike in that boat."

"Yeah," Oliver agreed, and then smiled again. "Do you like boats, Frank? David says everyone likes boats."

"I don't know," Frank admitted as he watched Oliver climb in. "The last time I was on one I was six."

"Really?"

"Yup."

"You'll like it," Oliver insisted. "Let's put your bike in first."

Frank complied as Oliver reached for the handlebars, and together they arranged the bike over the boat in a way that Oliver found satisfactory, leaving the seat open for the two of them. Frank waited for Oliver to start the motor and then climbed in, feeling a little overly doted upon when Oliver made a point to take his hand and help him. He told Frank to sit down first, and when Frank was seated, Oliver sat so close up against Frank's side that it eliminated any space that might have been between them, and looked pleased about it.

The trip across the lake probably would have been a quick one, if Oliver hadn't taken the long way. Frank didn't mind. He wasn't in a hurry to get it over with, and he was interested to discover just how large the lake was as Oliver took him past several hidden coves and pointed out other houses that were unoccupied and lucky to pass as rubble, and a few cabin-style homes that were occupied. According to Oliver, most of their neighbors were older couples, except for some kid named Jeremy Flaskis, who Frank got the feeling Oliver didn't like very much.

"We don't go to church anymore 'cause of him," Oliver explained. "He says I tried to hurt his dog and started a big fight between my parents and his."

"Did you try to hurt his dog?" Frank asked.

Oliver looked insulted. "I've never even seen it, Frank, honest. But Jeremy won't believe it." Oliver jerked, as if trying to control a sudden shiver up his spine. "Said if he ever saw me by his house, he'd light me on fire and watch me burn 'til I was where I'm supposed to be."

Frank looked at Oliver, appalled, and strongly stomping down the urge to find this Jeremy Flaskis and demand to know what kind of ass would want to make such an outrageous threat to someone like Oliver. But instead, Frank found himself squeezing Oliver in the most comforting gesture he could muster.

"Hey, Oliver, you shouldn't listen to that. Lots of guys are all talk. I bet in a real fight someone like him would piss his pants."

Oliver laughed, but then his expression turned rueful. "Jeremy's not the only one, you know. Around here, people think I'm not right. They'll tell you not to be my friend, Frank... you won't listen to them, will you?"

Frank nearly laughed out loud when something in Oliver's expression promised retribution for the wrong answer, but instead he just smiled and shook his head. "No, Oliver. I don't think anyone's gonna convince me that you're bad. Tell you what.... my mom said I could take the car tomorrow. I wanted to go into town for a while and look around. Why don't you come with me? Maybe after breakfast?"

Frank had expected Oliver to be thrilled over the idea, so the sudden nervousness in the boy's posture was unexpected. "I'm not supposed to go into town, Frank."

"Maybe I could talk to your parents..."

"No, Frank. I'm not supposed to go. Not ever. We used to go for church, but not no more."

"Never?" Frank was finding this a little hard to understand.

"No. Never."

"But what about school? Shopping... never?"

"My mom does the shopping, and me and David go to school at home."

Frank frowned, wondering what kind of horrible parents Oliver had. He couldn't imagine being stuck out at this lake every day with no end in sight. Hell, he'd had trouble with the last week. Really, there seemed to be no excuse to keep their son isolated just because he wasn't like everyone else.

"Well... maybe they don't have to know about it," Frank suggested. He definitely wasn't beyond rebelling if the circumstances seemed unfair enough, and when it came to Oliver Martin, this certainly seemed unfair.

Oliver's eyes went wide. "I can't do that, Frank! They'd get angry."

"Like they'll be angry how you left today without telling them?"

"But I wasn't going to today," Oliver protested. "But David..."

"So maybe you should ask your brother about this," Frank said. "Hey, he might even cover for you. It'll be fun, Oliver. We can look around together."

Frank admittedly felt a little bit like a bully on the less moral side of pee

pressure, but he couldn't quite seem to help himself as he continued to be outraged on Oliver's behalf. It was no wonder he'd snuck off. The kid had no freedom.

"I don't know, Frank," Oliver said uncertainly. "Maybe we can do something when you get back."

"You can think about it," Frank suggested. "And if you don't come... maybe tomorrow afternoon you can show me where to catch frogs."

Oliver was smiling again. "Okay, Frank."

They drifted along in silence for a few moments, getting closer to the house with the red roof. Frank shifted in his seat. The boat hadn't been completely dry when they climbed in, and his clothing was now sticking uncomfortably to his skin.

"Do you think David's home now?" he asked. "I'd like to meet him." David certainly sounded more reasonable than Oliver's parents, and Frank hoped that maybe he'd be able to explain a few things to him. Besides, Oliver seemed fond of his brother, so Frank was surprised when Oliver seemed uncertain over his questions.

"Sometimes David doesn't like to talk to people, Frank. He says he can't trust them."

"Okay... well, if he doesn't want to talk... maybe some other time."

Oliver seemed to consider that, and then grinned. "I think David likes you, Frank. He took your picture."

"Right. You mentioned that," Frank replied as he leaned over the edge of the boat far enough to drag his hand through the water. It was still cold, but it decidedly felt cleaner than it looked. He wondered when someone would have had the opportunity to take his picture. If anything, he thought the whole thing was a little weird, the fact that someone had been watching him without his knowledge. The hair on the back of his neck prickled, as if he could suddenly feel unknown, watching eyes in that very spot, and he smothered the urge to look over his shoulder as the open water and the trees on the shoreline around him made him feel crowded. He closed his eyes momentarily, wondering where a bout of nausea had come from. Maybe he got boatsick. It seemed like a strange concept to him. But, when Frank opened his eyes, it became exceptionally hard not to get sick when he spotted something floating in the water, just out of their path.

As the object got closer, Frank's back went stiff and he found himself leaning into Oliver, wanting to flee. "Jesus!" he muttered, his eyes becoming stuck on what looked like the severed head of a feline. Only as they got closer, did Frank realize that the body was still attached by a thin piece of skin and he realized the full horror of what he was seeing. The dark fur was waterlogged and the tail was no more than a bloody nub. The right front leg was missing and the belly was cut straight down the middle.

Frank was no coward, and he wasn't squeamish, but this... it was horrifying to realize that he couldn't tell if this had been done before or after the cat died, but he was certain of one thing. Someone was a sick fuck.

"Don't look, Frank," Oliver suddenly said, and when Frank glanced at Oliver he noticed that the other boy was carefully avoiding the sight as they passed it. "Don't look. Some things we shouldn't see. It's better that way."

"No shit," Frank responded indignantly. Like I'm ever gonna get that out of my head. Jesus! Who do you think did that?"

"There're lots of cats around here," Oliver said simply. "They all used to live at your house. Now they die all the time. I think I should get home now, Frank."

"Yeah," Frank replied. "I think that's a good idea." He was uneasy, not liking the water. He wanted off of it. Away from it. Maybe it wasn't Oliver, but something definitely didn't feel right.

.....
A red roof, a porch swing, fresh paint, flower boxes and a well-tended garden that was just beginning to produce was only Frank's first clue that Oliver's house was a lot nicer than his, not to mention the fact that Oliver's didn't seem to be falling apart. Frank supposed that's what happened when there was someone around to keep up on things. His dad had been around at one point to do that, and looking at Oliver's house moved him to remember that there was no reason why he couldn't fix up stuff at his own dump.

"The chicken's in here," Oliver said, dragging Frank away from his thoughts. There was a garage on the side of the house. It didn't look wide enough to fit a full-sized car in, especially with all the boxes and old furniture stored in it, but it was a garage, and Frank joined Oliver there as the other boy lifted the door and led the way into the dark space. It felt warm inside, musty like a place not often aired.

Frank heard the chicken before he saw it. It was the scratching, and some mild clucking that brought his attention to the back of the garage even before Oliver turned on a ceiling light. Frank followed him to the small cage on the floor and knelt down with Oliver to look over the plump brown hen inside.

"She lays her eggs in here," Oliver explained, pointing to a wooden box connected to the small space.

Frank watched as Oliver opened the door and reached in. It seemed clean, likely tended daily. But, chicken dropping wasn't what Frank would worry about as he watched the way the bird protested as Oliver grabbed it and pulled it out. Wings flapped and feet scratched violently, not that Oliver noticed. He pulled the hen right up against his chest and cuddled it like a teddy bear. Frank only found it strange that the bird then calmed down.

"Wanna hold her?" Oliver asked. "She's good luck."

“How’s a chicken good luck?” Frank asked as he tentatively reached out to touch one of the feathers on the bird’s wing.

“She just is,” Oliver replied.

“Better than a rabbit’s foot?”

Oliver’s eyes widened as he held his chicken protectively close. “I can’t cut off one of her feet, Frank!”

Frank laughed, deciding not to even try to figure out why Oliver thought he was suggesting that.

“I’d never ask you to, Oliver,” he promised, and then added sincerely, “she’s a very nice chicken. But, I’ll let you do the holding.”

Oliver smiled, snuggling the chicken for a few more moments before he put her back in her pen, and then he opened the top of the brown box to reach in and remove one egg that was in fact, brown. And, still warm, Frank discovered as Oliver passed it to him. He winced more than he smiled when Oliver looked to him for a reaction.

“You can have that one,” Oliver said.

“Um... thanks, Oliver,” Frank replied. Not wanting to risk offending Oliver by rejecting the gift, he slipped it into his pocket. Oliver looked pleased by this.

“Thanks for being my friend today, Frank. I had fun.”

“Yeah. Me too,” Frank replied. And he meant it... if he didn’t think about falling on his ass or seeing that decapitated cat. “So are you gonna think about tomorrow?”

“I’ll think about it, Frank, but I really don’t wanna make my parents mad.”

“That’s okay, Oliver,” Frank said as the two stood up and left the garage together. “I don’t want you to get in trouble, but if you want to come, I’d still like you to, okay?”

“Okay, Frank.”

“So do you want me to talk to your parents so they know you weren’t out in the rain for too long?” Frank asked.

“Nah. That’s okay.”

Frank frowned. It wasn’t that he honestly wanted to talk to Oliver’s parents, but he was curious about them. The whole family, actually. And, he couldn’t help thinking that it was strange how Oliver didn’t seem to want him to, when yesterday all he’d wanted was for Frank to come over to his house.

“Oliver... is everything alright? I mean...”

A screen door slammed, causing both boys to look up. Frank could only describe the woman coming down the steps in their direction as a washed-up prom queen, who happened to be wearing an almost pretty red dress. “Olivia!” she called in a cigarette-scratched voice and an accent not unlike Oliver’s. “Lord, where’ve you been? You’ve got your father out looking for you and me goin’ crazy!”

"I'm sorry," Oliver said quickly.

Frank frowned as the woman kept charging. He half expected her to stop in front of her son and slap him one across the face, so he was relieved when she embraced him instead, taking the time to do the motherly look-over, smoothing back his hair and sliding her thumb over an invisible smudge of dirt on his cheek. She glanced at Frank suspiciously, and then spoke to Oliver in a lower voice, as if she didn't want their guest to hear. But it was kind of hard not to, Frank thought, since he was standing two feet away. "David's been in trouble again, Oliver," she said meaningfully. "Now your father's gonna be home any minute. You go to your room and wait for us there. Do you understand me, Oliver?"

Frank frowned again, this time at the tone she used, as if she was trying to get a point across to a complete idiot, which Oliver was not.

"What did David do?" Oliver wanted to know. "He just wanted to go outside."

"Oliver, please just go inside," Mrs. Martin insisted, flashing another uneasy glance in Frank's direction.

Frank decided it was time to cut in. He didn't like the way that Oliver was beginning to look confused. And why shouldn't he be? He was obviously being treated like this for something his brother had done. Maybe Frank had just met the guy, but at the moment, he was feeling rather protective of him.

"Excuse me... Mrs. Martin? Oliver was with me today."

"And who are you?" she demanded, as if she was fed up with Frank's very presence.

"This is Frank, Mom," Oliver said excitedly. "He lives where the witch used to."

Mrs. Martin's eyes widened, and she unexpectedly raised her voice. "Oliver, you know you're never to mention that woman!"

"I'm sorry," Oliver said again.

"Hey," Frank interrupted, his voice growing harsher than he intended. "You shouldn't be mad at him, he was just..."

"Thank you for bringing him home," Mrs. Martin cut him off. "I'm sure you're expected home before it gets dark."

"Actually..." Frank started.

"Oliver, say goodbye to your friend," Mrs. Martin ordered.

Frank was surprised to see Oliver brighten, as if there was nothing out of the ordinary here, just before he launched himself at Frank for another tight hug that aggravated the soreness from Frank's earlier fall.

"Bye, Frank," Oliver said, and then whispered close to Frank's ear. "I'll think about tomorrow."

When Oliver released Frank to rush up the front steps and into his house, Mrs. Martin followed without so much as saying goodbye. Frank decided that w

as rude, and started after her.

“Mrs. Martin, could I talk to you for just a...”

The woman suddenly whirled at the top step, and stared down at Frank. “Listen... Frank, was it? Thank you, for being kind to my son. You have absolutely no idea how much that means to me, let alone him.”

“No problem, but...”

“But if you want to be any sort of friend to him--stay away. Don’t come back here again. Understand me?”

Frank didn’t understand anything, but before he could say so, he found the front door of the Martin house firmly slammed in his face.

Chapter 3

by DomLuka

Thanks to Jim for editing!

Frank dumped another bucket of water over his mom’s Subaru and wiped the sweat from his brow before he removed his shirt to use as a rag in his attempt to wash away the dust the storm had left on the vehicle. It was early Sunday morning, and already a lot warmer than it had been the day before. His mom and sister were still sleeping, both worn out from staying up late to tell each other silly ghost stories. Frank had thought it would be a good idea to wash the car after breakfast, but that was before he realized they didn’t have either a hose, or an outdoor spigot. He was still trying, though. Trying to keep busy.

He wiped down the car until it shined, and considered taking it into town. He had permission. It didn’t seem like a bad idea. But, looking across the lake towards the red roof had him wanting to wait a little longer. Another thirty minutes. Maybe Oliver would show up. Frank hoped that he would. Frank had done a lot of thinking about Oliver the night before. The one conclusion that he’d come to was that Oliver wasn’t strange at all. If anyone deserved that description, it seemed to be his family. At least it made sense now, why he didn’t have any friends. He wasn’t allowed to have any. Part of Frank wanted to mind his own business. Leave the situation alone. Move on to something else. But a bigger part of him wanted to tell Oliver’s mom to shove it.

Thirty-two minutes later, after a quick shower and another bagel, Oliver still hadn’t shown up and Frank was tired of waiting. Maybe later, he thought, Oliver would find a way to get out. Until then, Frank seemed to once again be on his own. He woke his mom, instead of leaving a note. She was still groggy when she asked him to return by noon, at least to check in, since they currently had no other way of doing it. He took the keys to the Subaru, and as soon as he was behind the wheel, Frank decided that he was definitely happy to be driving again.

He took the roads slowly, enjoying the breeze through the open windows and

the shadows the trees cast over the vehicle. He took the puddles from yesterday's storm carefully, not wanting all his work cleaning the car to go to waste. He passed Mr. Dron's house a few miles up from the lake, where the balding man with the white cowboy hat was working on an old jeep. Frank was polite enough to wave, but pretended that he was too busy to stop. The dirt road became narrow for a time after that, and then there was a stretch that didn't seem like a road at all, but two separate paths created by tire tracks through a field of mosquito-infected grass. Frank rolled his eyes, wondering how his mom had ever gotten past all this when looking for a house in the first place. Before they moved here, he'd been certain that the woman was fond of paved roads and Starbucks.

When Frank reached something that looked like a road again he figured that he was moving in the right direction, especially when he came to an old dusty stop sign that he drove right through. But, that was partly because the road he was on didn't cross another, and it was hard to imagine who'd thought to put it there in the first place.

He moved the Subaru up a steep hill as the lake faded in his rearview mirror, expecting to see paved road and potholes once he reached the bottom. But, it wasn't the street leading into town that caught his attention once he started down the hill.

Someone was in the road. From behind, he had dark hair, a gray t-shirt, and an almost slinky-like walk, relaxed and confident. When he turned and held out his thumb to hail Frank's vehicle, Frank hit the brakes so hard that the tires protested against the soggy gravel beneath, and he quickly rolled down the passenger window as he came alongside the guy on the side of the road.

"Oliver?" Frank asked incredulously.

Oliver leaned over the open window, smirking slyly in a way that caused a slow smile to grow across Frank's mouth. That is, until Oliver said something that Frank found rather unusual. "Oliver ain't here."

Frank raised an eyebrow, and then smiled like he would had he been told a funny joke. "Okay, then. You can be Bonnie and I'll be Clyde. Now get in here."

"Okay, Clyde," Oliver responded as he opened the door and dropped himself into the passenger seat. "But you ain't calling me Bonnie unless you want a punch in the mouth. I'll go with David, thanks."

The smile faded from Frank's face, and as he stared at the other boy relaxed and put a dirty foot up on the dashboard, he felt himself color. "David?"

he repeated. "Oh... hey, man. Sorry about that... uh... your brother... well, Oliver's mentioned you, he just never said..." Frank trailed off, blinking hard. The resemblance was uncanny. Twins. He'd met twins before. Even identical twins, but never two that looked completely identical. There was a

lways something. Some small difference... Perhaps David's hair was combed a little neater, and there was definitely a difference in his mannerisms... his facial expressions. There was something rougher about David. Noticeably. "Well, he's mentioned you a couple times, too. Frank. So where're we headed?"

Frank had to take a moment to collect his thoughts as he shook his head at himself. "I guess I was going into town."

"For?"

"To look around, I guess."

"I suppose it's as good a reason as any," David replied, and then turned his head to look at Frank. "So what're you waiting for? You know how to drive this thing, don't you?"

Frank found himself frowning at the impatient tone, but shifted into drive and turned onto the main road. It definitely wasn't Oliver sitting next to him.

The drive was silent for the next five minutes, as Frank stole quick glances at his new companion, feeling somewhat uncomfortable. He was normally an outgoing individual when it came to strangers, but there was something about David Martin that was just plain unapproachable.

"So where's Oliver?" Frank finally asked.

David glanced at Frank sidelong. "Miss him, do you?"

There was something a little too teasing about the remark for it to be considered friendly. Frank frowned. "I was just asking because your mom didn't seem too happy when I brought him home yesterday."

David released a tight, humorless laugh. "Don't worry about Oliver. Everyone loves Oliver." He sounded almost bitter.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Forget it. Turn left up here. I'll show you a shortcut."

Frank turned his attention back to the road again. There was a place to turn off up ahead, but it sure didn't look like a road to Frank. What it looked like was a narrow alley that turned off into the woods, and he didn't like the idea of turning onto a road when he couldn't see where it went. But, not wanting to appear as uneasy as he felt, Frank followed the instruction.

"Oliver says you guys don't go into town," Frank said. "Is it true, or did he mean just him?"

"We don't do a lot of things. But I do a lot of things no one else needs to know I do," David said cryptically.

Frank just shook his head, and did some more thinking, deciding that it was possible that David didn't want to say too much about his family. There was obviously something wrong there. From what Frank had gathered the day before, David got into trouble a lot, and for some reason, when that happened, Oliver was told to go to his room. Frank didn't think asking David wh

at he'd done would get him any answers he was looking for, so he tried a different approach.

"You know... I spent quite a bit of time with your brother yesterday... and it's none of my business, but..."

"But you're gonna butt in, anyway?" David remarked. "Alright then, go on ahead."

Frank sighed. "Look, I just think it's messed up, the way your parents treat him," he said. "He's actually a pretty cool guy, and it's not right he doesn't have any friends just because he's... different."

David must have found something amusing about what Frank was saying, because he laughed. "Different?"

"He's not like anyone I've ever met before," Frank said honestly, recalling the way that Oliver smiled so easily. He looked at David challengingly. "I happen to like him."

To Frank's surprise, David's expression turned serious, and he gave Frank a nod. "Good. So you're not gonna listen when my parents tell you to stay away from him?"

"Probably not," Frank admitted. "I told him we'd look for frogs together." David laughed at that, too. "Okay, Frank." And when David grinned a familiar crooked smile, Frank was finally able to relax.

"So can I ask you something?" Frank asked.

"Go ahead."

"What the hell do people do around here besides look for frogs and get rain on?"

"In town?"

"Sure."

"Wouldn't really know," David replied, and then answered one of Frank's earlier questions. "My parents hardly ever let us go there."

"Then what were you doing when I found you?"

"Trying to get away from my parents," David said, smirking.

"And if you never go to town, where are we going now?" Frank asked suspiciously as he watched the twisting road again.

"Just because I'm not supposed to go doesn't mean I don't know how to get there."

David was obviously telling the truth, because a few minutes later, the Subaru was driving right into a wide, dirt parking lot behind a small building, and as Frank realized what kind of building it was, something Oliver had said came back to him. No, Frank. I'm not supposed to go. Not ever. We used to go for church, but not no more. Frank supposed that if David knew how to get to town, it made sense that he'd know how to get to the one place where they had once been allowed to go. Frank found himself frowning again as he looked over at David, who was staring at the building with a cer

tain amount of loathing. Obviously, whatever memories he had here weren't exactly happy ones... or maybe he simply resented that he was now forbidden from being this close to it.

"What's with your parents?" Frank asked again, suddenly unable to keep the sympathy from his voice. "Why don't they let you guys come out here? Oliver said not even for school... it seems..."

David sat back in his seat and crossed his arms, but not before pointing past the church. "I think you can get out that way," he told Frank. "You should try it."

Frank was disappointed with the subject change, but decided not to push as he kept driving. He was curious about the town, too. He wasn't sure what he was hoping to find. He knew the population was practically non-existent, but anything, he thought, had to be better than a murky lake and a bunch of trees. He was setting himself up for disappointment.

Not sure of where he was going, and with no further direction from David, Frank toured a few neighborhoods where houses looked small, but in better shape than the ones near the lake. The trailer park he passed was crowded, but there he began to notice a few people were out. Some waved, and some looked on curiously as he passed. He nearly missed the school because it was so small, but there was a sign in the yard that said, "Have a happy summer." When he passed the two working cattle ranches and a slaughterhouse, David explained that most people in town who didn't collect social security worked there, including his own parents. His dad sold cattle and pigs, and his mom did accounting for the slaughterhouse.

Even the docks were empty. Frank hadn't seen many boats on the water in the last week, so it wasn't that strange, but he couldn't help thinking that this was as close as he'd ever been to a ghost town--until he reached the shops. There was one strip on the main street where people could purchase clothing at the same place they bought their groceries. The veterinarian's clinic was larger than the hospital. There was a fire truck parked in front of a residential home, and next door the sheriff's office was closed with a sign requesting volunteers. But, there were people out, some dropping their letters through the front door of the post office, and even more around the three restaurants. One sold pizzas and had free deliveries, one claimed to have the world's best chili burger, and the other sold fifteen flavors of ice cream.

Glancing over at David, Frank could see that he was as unimpressed as Frank. "You wanna get out and look around?" Frank asked. When David didn't respond, Frank glanced in his direction to see that he was still staring out the window, focused on a group of kids walking down something that could pass for a sidewalk. "Do you know them?"

"No," David said as Frank pulled over on the side of the road to park, as everyone else had done.

“Oh... so you wanna go say hi or something?”

David looked at Frank as if he'd lost his mind, and then shook his head. “Why would I want to do that?”

“I don't know,” Frank replied. “Cause that's how you meet new friends?”

“I don't need to meet them,” David replied in a reasonable tone. “I already met you.”

Frank stared after David as he left the vehicle, feeling bemused. For a moment there, he'd sounded like Oliver. But, Frank doubted that Oliver would send the two boys and three girls coming their way such a dismissing look. David was practically staring them down. He definitely wasn't out to make new friends. As for Frank, he felt compelled to do some damage control as he left the car and exchanged smiles with a few of the locals before he started down the sidewalk to catch up to David. “Hey, David... you won't get in trouble for coming here with me, will you?” Frank asked.

“If you cared, you would've asked before we came,” David pointed out. Frank frowned at himself more than he did the comment. Mostly because it was true.

“Look, I don't want you to get in trouble,” Frank insisted. “It's just... this rule thing your parents have going on seems kinda fucked up. And yesterday, with your mom....”

“She can be a bitch, can't she?” David remarked.

Frank paused, startled by his choice of words. Not in a million years would he ever think to say something like that about his own mother. “Well, she was... I mean... she acted like she didn't want Oliver to have any friends. It seemed weird, that's all.”

“Makes perfect sense, though. He's her baby. The perfect son. Never complains and always does what he's told.” David didn't sound resentful or bitter this time. Just like a guy stating the facts.

“Is that why you do your best to get him in trouble?” Frank remarked.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Yesterday, Oliver said he left because you told him to, then when I brought him home, your mom was trying to lock him up for something you did.”

David laughed at that. “I'm always in trouble. Can't open my mouth without it happening. But that's none of your business, Frank. So how do you like your new house?”

Frank glanced sidelong at David, wanting to redirect the questioning to his dysfunctional family, but thought better of it. “There're a lot of cats,” he replied, “and Oliver thinks a witch used to live there, but the walls are still standing, so that's something.”

“She was a witch,” David replied, seeming to reminisce. “A dead one now.” He seemed pleased about that last thing, and it struck Frank as cold. “She died, you know. Right out there in front of your house.”

That was a detail that Frank could have gone without knowing, and his expression must have said so, because David laughed at that, too. "Believe in ghosts, Frank?"

"No," Frank said shortly.

"Just kidding. She drowned, but it wasn't that close to your place. They say she was crazy enough to take her boat out in the middle of the storm. She was too heavy for it, got stuck like a pig and drowned."

"And you think this is a good thing?" Frank wanted to know.

David just shrugged. Frank was not comforted. "Hey, um... you know, I can't stay that long," he said. It was half true. His mom wanted him to check in at noon. He just didn't care to mention to his current company that he could leave again after that. But then, he didn't have to.

"Whatever. I don't have to go back with you. You don't even have to wait around with me now," David replied, and then flashed Frank a pointed look that said he knew exactly what Frank was thinking. "If you wanna go, then go."

It didn't take much to make Frank feel guilty. David only looked half dejected. But, Frank told himself, he couldn't really help wanting to flee David Martin. There was something about him that Frank simply didn't want to get to know--like, the fact that the kid just wasn't nice. It was difficult to see how Oliver and David had shared the same genes, let alone the same womb. But then again, maybe Oliver was part of the reason why David was the way he was. From what Frank understood, David lived in Oliver's shadow at home, instead of the other way around, and while he couldn't imagine how it felt to be banned from social contact outside of his family because he had a sibling who was different, he could guess that it would make anyone a little crazy. Frank pitied David, and that played a part in the way he passed up the opportunity to get out of there.

"I don't have to go yet. I wanna look around for a while."

David just nodded, but over the next half hour, his mood seemed to improve as they explored the small strip and discovered a few more buildings behind what was visible from the road. Frank was ecstatic to discover that one of those buildings was a movie theater. It only played one film a week, but going was a pastime he'd thought would be non-existent for a long time to come. When David said that he couldn't remember if he'd ever even been in a theater before, it only added to his enthusiasm, and he even said that they should come back sometime before he began to describe scenes from some of his favorites. David laughed a few times, and even added to the detailed descriptions whenever Frank mentioned a movie David's parents had rented. And for a while, Frank felt like he was back in Nebraska with his friends, talking about nothing like it was the most important thing in the world. He didn't feel like that when he was with Oliver. Not that he didn't like Oliver'

s company. With Oliver, everything felt new. Unfamiliar, but pleasant. With David... well, Frank would be the first to admit things with David were a little creepy at first, but as David relaxed, he reminded Frank a lot of his friends back home... or, what they'd be like if they were society-phobic. As they explored, it became even more obvious that David didn't venture into town much when hardly anyone looked at him with recognition, and in such a small town, someone should have. Those who might have made a point to move to the other side of the street. Oliver had mentioned that the people who'd met him didn't like him, and at first, Frank wondered if people were mistaking David for Oliver. After all, he had. But, the reluctance of the townspeople to greet David could have also had a lot to do with David. Maybe he'd warmed up to Frank, but he certainly didn't seem to find anything he liked about anyone else. He'd walk straight down the middle of a sidewalk, running anyone in his path off; he narrowed his eyes at a group of girls and he'd spit a little too close to an older man's shoe as they passed him by. Frank was embarrassed by some of this behavior. Or, maybe all of it. He wanted to meet people, not scare them away. It didn't seem possible around David Martin. But still, Frank stayed with him because he didn't see David's bad behavior as that of a bully's. He saw it as something closer to a defense.

About thirty minutes before Frank was supposed to be at home checking in, he started to wish that they had a phone hooked up. That way, he could just call. It had only become even more humid as the day wore on, and he wasn't fond of the idea of getting back in a hot car where the air conditioner wouldn't kick on until he was practically home. What he preferred, was to sit in the cool shop that sold ice cream until he was properly cooled down. At least he could still take ice cream to go, which is what he intended to do when he walked into the store. David wouldn't come inside with him. In fact, he downright refused and left Frank wondering if he'd even still be there when he came back out.

Frank decided not to worry about it. He was too distracted to, anyway. The store was crowded, and waiting in line, he finally had the chance to talk to a few people. One woman his mother's age already knew who he was, and asked if his family would be coming to their barbeque this weekend. It was the first time Frank had heard of the get-together, and assumed that his mom had been invited. He also assumed that since she hadn't mentioned it, she didn't like this woman for one reason or another and they wouldn't be going. So, he left his response vague, hinting that they might be busy next weekend. He did take the woman's phone number, though, when her daughter, who was a year younger than he was, said she'd be happy to introduce him around. Someone else said they expected to see him in church on Sunday, which was also news to Frank, since the last time he'd set foot in a church

was for his aunt's wedding. When he was five.

As he reached the counter, a man in his late twenties with a thick mustache was smiling at him, holding his hand out over the counter to shake Frank's, as if they were old friends. "It's nice to meet you," he said. "How's your mom? Any trouble settling in at the new place?"

"Uh... she's fine. And no," Frank replied.

"That's good to hear," the man said. "And you just tell her that if she's still interested in that job, she can come see me."

Frank raised an eyebrow at that. "Job?"

"Yeah, turns out I've got some work for her."

"Oh. That's nice... Jeff," Frank read off the man's colorful name tag. "But, she's already got one... she's gonna teach at the school."

Jeff looked as confused as Frank felt. "Well, as I understood it, she was looking for a little something extra."

Frank wanted to frown, but forced himself to smile instead. There were people watching. "Um... I'll let her know, then. Thanks."

"Alright then," Jeff said, looking satisfied, and then he took Frank's order, while Frank did his best to look like wasn't bothered by the fact his mom had been in the same store, looking for a job he wasn't aware she needed. When he had his ice cream, Frank felt like he had to excuse himself from a few older people, and he felt relief once he was back outside in the humidity, but disappointed when David appeared to be gone. Frank was holding more than one ice-cream cone, and no longer knew what to do with the second. He started by licking the melting substance from his knuckles on the way back to his car. It wasn't that far, and he no longer had time to look for David. He'd promised his mom he'd come back, and there was no way that Frank was going to lose his driving privileges again. But as it turned out, when Frank reached his car he discovered that he didn't have to look for David at all.

"Hey," Frank called, before he even reached the hood of the Subaru, where David had decided to sit. "I thought you disappeared on me."

David's crooked smile seemed forced. "You've gotta go, don't you?"

"Yeah," Frank replied. "Are you ready?"

David nodded, looking thoughtful. "Don't know if I like it out here too much."

Frank shrugged. "It's not that bad. Here. I got this for you." He presented the least melted cone. But David didn't take it. Instead, he regarded the dessert suspiciously.

"What did you do that for?"

"Thought you'd want one," Frank replied. "You don't have something against ice cream, do you?"

"No."

“So do you want it?” Frank asked. “It’s kind of melting all over my hand.”

“What do you want for it?” David asked. Frank frowned, deciding that was a strange question.

“Nothing.”

David considered for a moment before taking the cone, and as soon as Frank was clean enough to drive, they headed back to the other side of the lake in silence, Frank stealing curious glances towards his new friend. “Why don’t you trust anyone, David?” he finally asked. He wasn’t really expecting an answer. It was just a question that he felt should be voiced. But, David’s response seemed to come easily.

“I’ve never had a reason to.”

Frank was once again curious, but didn’t push the subject as they talked about other things for a while. Conversation seemed strained again, but David did tell Frank about a few of his hobbies. While Oliver liked to catch frogs and insects, David liked to explore. He swore he could find something new every day if he looked hard enough. And he liked to take pictures of the things he found. Frank didn’t have to ask David about the picture he took of him. David openly explained that he’d seen Frank riding his bike. It was when Frank had stopped to stare back at a squirrel that seemed to find him interesting. When Frank asked David why he hadn’t said hello, David told him plain and simple that he hadn’t felt like it.

Frank wasn’t expecting David to ask him to let him out of the car in the exact same place that Frank had met him. He practically refused to let Frank drive him all the way home, and while Frank didn’t like it, he dropped David off on the side of the road and had to settle for a noncommittal response when Frank asked David if he wanted to hang out again sometime; with Oliver, too. By the time he was on his way home all by himself, he couldn’t figure out which of the brothers confused him more.

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“I think something’s wrong in that house,” Frank said. He sat across from his mom at the kitchen table, forcing down the late lunch she’d put together for him. He hadn’t bothered to tell her that he’d spoiled his appetite with ice cream.

“Like what?” Jessica Seaberg asked.

“I don’t know,” Frank replied. “They’re all just kind of weird, that’s all.”

“Well, it is a little strange that Oliver didn’t mention he and his brother were twins,” she said.

“I don’t think he thought to.”

Jessica sighed. “So, you didn’t meet anyone new in town today?” she asked. “It’s nice that the Martins are close by, but it wouldn’t hurt you to meet a few other people who aren’t so...”

“Don’t call them weird, mom.”

Jessica laughed. "Like you just did?"

"I didn't mean it like that," Frank insisted, feeling guilty. Oliver would have taken offense, and even without him there, Frank felt oddly protective of his feelings. "I think it's their parents. I mean, they don't even let them go into town, and when I took Oliver home yesterday..." Frank paused, not sure if he wanted his mom to know he'd been told to stay away.

"What?" she asked expectantly.

"His mom wasn't very nice, that's all."

"She was probably worried. Parents get like that, you know," Jessica replied playfully. "And I promise, it's not just to inconvenience our offspring. That's just an added bonus." Frank smiled slightly, but it faded quickly. Jessica noticed and reached out to place her hand over his. "Frank, I'm sure everything's fine. It just sounds like Oliver's mom has her hands full, that's all. You shouldn't be letting it bother you. You should be out there meeting more friends. Did that go well today? Did you meet anyone new?"

"You mean other than David?"

"Yeah. You were gone for a while."

Frank considered his mother for a moment as he sipped his glass of milk. "Now that you mention it, I did talk to a few people. If I didn't know any better, I'd think we're expected to go to church, Mom."

Jessica laughed. "With all those old women and their clubs? No thank you."

"I'm not sure the people around here are gonna like that. They might think something's wrong with us."

"If you have to leave your own home just to pray you've got issues," Jessica stated. "If there's something wrong with someone, it's certainly not us."

Frank grinned at his mom's imitation of his grandmother. She'd passed away a few years before, but he'd always liked her. Like his own mother, Frank's grandmother had been raised in a home where organized religion had no appeal. He had no objections to being raised the same way. But, how the people around here would react to it really wasn't his concern at the moment.

"Mom?" Frank asked as he watched her spread some of the preserves he'd found in the shed onto a piece of toast.

"Yes?"

"I went to get ice cream today."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. The guy working there--Jeff--he said I should let you know he has a job for you if you want it."

There was something akin to disappointment in Frank's tone, which is what had Jessica putting down the butter knife to face her son. "Well, that's great," she replied.

“Great?”

“Yeah,” she said. Jessica wasn’t a fan of lying to her children. Perhaps there were times she left out a few details when she didn’t think they needed to know them, but she didn’t lie. She wouldn’t start now. “There are a lot of repairs around here that need taking care of. It’ll be easier to hire someone, so I thought I should find a job so I can do that.”

“You’re a teacher, Mom.”

“Not for a few more months I’m not, and in the meantime...well, I do like ice cream. You didn’t happen to see if they had butter pecan, did you?”

Sometimes Jessica’s optimism worked Frank’s nerves.

“You shouldn’t have to take that job,” he said sternly. She did her best not to laugh.

“And why not? If Jeff’s willing to hire me for a while, we should all be grateful.”

“Mom...”

“Frank, we’ve talked about this. You knew things would be different when we got here, and I don’t want you to worry about it, but we need the money.”

“Then I’ll get a job,” he stated. “You need to be here with Rudy, anyway.”

“Not all moms stay home with their kids all summer, Frank. You can watch Rudy when I’m gone.”

“You’re not one of those moms.”

“Well I am now,” she responded, her voice turning firm before it softened. “Frank... you’re not your dad.”

“I know that,” he snapped. “But...”

“You don’t get to pay for his mistakes. If you want a job, fine, but anything you make is yours, got it?”

“Mom...”

“In another year, you’ll have plenty of time to be an adult.” She smiled, reaching for his hand. “You’re already growing up too fast as it is. Give me another year to just be your mom, okay? And, we really will be okay out here. I promise. Stop worrying, or you’re grounded, got it?”

Frank let out a breath, staring at his mom for a long while as he tried to figure out if her threat was valid. Knowing her, it was. It’s not like she hadn’t grounded him for stupider reasons in the past.

“I love you, Mom.”

Jessica smiled. “I knew there was a reason why you kept me around.”

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David leaned against the rough bark of a tree, the lake practically at his feet, and stared ahead at the shadow his house cast in the sunset. The lights were on, the windows glowing. Shadows moved inside. His family was in the living room, likely wondering where he was. It was most definitely too late t

o keep them from knowing he was gone at all, but he really didn't care. For a while today, he'd felt free. The feeling was a rarity for him. But he'd gotten away, if only for a little while. He'd had ice cream. Frank. David liked Frank. He wasn't sure if he trusted him enough just yet, but Frank definitely had potential.

David pushed himself off the tree, and looked down towards his feet, where the frog was still lying on its belly. He'd intended to bring it back for Oliver, since he never got the chance to go looking for frogs with Frank today. But, that wasn't going to work out now. Oliver wouldn't want this frog. In fact, David thought that it would be best if Oliver didn't even see it.

David knelt down to lift the amphibian's corpse, which he cradled in his hands for several moments. He was disappointed that it hadn't made it home alive. It was a big one. Oliver might have liked it more than that stupid chicken. Not anymore. David dropped the body into the lake, watching until only a long leg was visible on the surface.

After another twenty minutes of watching, it was dark enough. There was still movement behind the lights glowing from the living room. He felt he was safe when he found his bedroom window still unlocked, and he climbed through it silently. It was dark inside. Seemed like nothing was in front of him when he shoved the curtains out of his face. That's why he gasped when his hand touched flesh. An arm. Hands grabbed him by the shoulders as the light flicked on, blinding him, and the way his body was suddenly lifted and pulled through the small space he became disoriented. But, not so much that he couldn't hear his mother's voice.

"Be careful, Brian!" she scolded from behind her husband, whose grip on David was much too tight for David's liking.

David met his father's eyes and tried to shove him off. "Let go!" he demanded.

The little push was all it took for Brian Martin's eyes to narrow on his son, and David was soon greeted with an openhanded, but stinging strike to the face. "I warned you, ya little bastard!" Mr. Martin bellowed.

David clung to his cheek as the sting faded from it, faced his father as his mother screamed, and then narrowed his eyes as he spat in the old man's face. David knew it would only make things worse, but he did find it momentarily satisfying, the shock on his father's face. It only lasted for an instant before strong fingers were gripping his hair, dragging him from the room. David struggled, but not so much that it would allow his hair to rip from his scalp. He planned to get even for this, and he didn't plan to be bald for it. Down the stairs he went, his dad dragging him and his mother following him. He cursed the whole way.

"Get your hands off me you fucked-up son of a bitch!"

"Brian, please don't hurt him!" his mother shouted. But David didn't care. He

didn't see the point. She only pretended to care if he got hurt. If she cared, she'd stop it.

"Shut up, you whore!" David screamed back at her, and spit in her direction. For that, his dad shoved him up against the wall as they reached the bottom of the basement stairs. He let go of David long enough to reach for the key to the locked door. That was when David panicked. Not the dark. He hated the dark. "No!" he screamed, his voice growing hoarse with stress, and he made a break for it. He lunged past his mother in an attempt to get to the stairs, nearly knocking her over. Nearly wasn't good enough. Her small body grabbed him from behind and she held on with all her might, pleading with him to stop. "You stop!" he retorted. "Get off me! I ain't goin' in there! No!"

David's screams were lost when his father's much larger, stronger hands took over for his mother. He was pulled back towards the door. It was open now, and David was desperate as he saw darkness nearing. He took a swing at his dad and missed. The man was too big, swinging David around like a rag doll. He was winning much too fast, but it didn't stop David from trying one more time to get away. He used his feet this time. His father hollered when David's right foot connected with a bad knee. Momentarily victorious, David never saw the next blow coming, but he felt it in his face. Hurt so bad he thought the skin on his cheek had split open and exploded, but never had time to cry out as he lost balance and the air was knocked from his lungs upon falling roughly to a cold floor. He looked up, reaching out desperately in time to see his father's shadow slam the thick door, and the light disappeared. Not even a crack from beneath the door remained, and it took a few moments of heavy breathing and gazing around in terror before David remembered that his eyes would never adjust to this. So he closed them. He swallowed against his dry throat, and started to count. Sometimes counting helped.

He could count forever, and if he lost his place, he could start over. One...two...three...four...

"David?" it was a whisper, but Oliver's voice. Oliver there with him, in the dark.

David sat up to look around, even though it would do him no good. "Oliver?"

"David... you see, David? I told you you shouldn't make them angry."

Chapter 4

by DomLuka

Thanks to jim for editing!

"Here," Frank said, pressing a stone into the palm of Rudy's small hand. "The flat ones work best. Try it." Her small face scrunched up in concentration as she took the stone and tossed it like Frank had just shown her, and grinned when it skipped twice over the lake. Frank smiled at her success. "N

ice one, Rudy. Wanna try again?"

"No. Throwing rocks isn't that fun. My stomach hurts."

"That's because you're hungry," Frank informed her. "We should have had lunch by now."

With their mother working during the day, Frank found that he wasn't the best babysitter on the planet. He didn't mind his sister, but she was odd when it came to basic necessities. She was one of those kids that needed to be reminded of everything between eating a meal and going to the bathroom before they left the house. Frank had enough trouble remembering those things on his own, let alone for someone else.

"Can we go inside now?" Rudy asked.

Frank nodded, looking towards the sky. It was overcast again, and he was beginning to feel claustrophobic. The clouds kept getting closer to the ground, as if they intended to crush him. "Yeah. What do you want to eat?"

"Soup." That wasn't a surprise. She always wanted soup. She liked soup.

"Okay, go get it out," Frank said, and then as she headed towards the house, he added, "Don't touch that stove."

"I'm old enough to use the stove!" Rudy called back, rolling her eyes.

Frank sighed. He was right behind his sister, but not before his eyes drifted to where they'd been going for days now. The red roof across the lake looked farther every time he set eyes on it. The day he'd gone to town with David Martin, Frank had come home hoping to receive another visit from Oliver, but it hadn't happened. Oliver hadn't come the next day, either. Or any day, for nearly a week now. Frank hoped that he wasn't in trouble. He hoped that David wasn't in trouble, either. He'd been tempted to go across the lake to find out, but hadn't had much of an opportunity to over the last few days. His mom had taken up employment at the ice cream parlor rather quickly--less than twenty-four hours after Frank had given her the message--and he'd been stuck watching his sister, and would be until her day camp reopened after a minor insect infestation. He didn't mind watching Rudy, exactly.

They got along well enough, and they'd made a lot of progress in the house as far as organization went. But having to be responsible for Rudy did prevent him from some things, especially paying a visit to the Martins. After Mrs. Martin blatantly told him to stay away, he didn't want to risk a confrontation with his little sister in tow.

He shook his head at the situation and went to help Rudy make her lunch. It was fairly easy now that the kitchen was clean, and everything they didn't use on a daily basis had been moved to either the attic or the storage shed outside, and there was room to walk just about anywhere inside. There was even space on the floor for a bowl of cat food. When David's mom had started setting it out for the strays they couldn't seem to get out of the house, he'd been opposed to the idea. But more recently, he'd found himself shooing the

four cats he saw regularly in the house away from the door when they tried to go outside. He'd seen just how safe strays were on the other side of his door, and didn't care for it.

After lunch he worked with Rudy in the garden she'd planted behind the house, if staring at the ground counted as work. His sister had planted a few seeds the day after they moved in, but wasn't having much luck with growing them. She was becoming less optimistic about the success of her garden, and to cheer her up, Frank suggested that they go for a walk. He wanted to take her on the trail that led to the place where he met Oliver. He'd rethought the idea of turning the old building into a clubhouse for her. He no longer liked the idea of Rudy out there alone. But, at least they could do some exploring and pass the time before their mother got home.

To Frank, it seemed like a longer trip without his bike, but he was distracted from most of it as he talked with his sister about their new home. Rudy had seemed to adjust so quickly that it was surprising for Frank to learn that his sister was having as difficult a time with things as he was. She claimed that she couldn't understand half the girls at camp because they talked funny, so some didn't like her, and she missed how things used to be. She wanted to call her friends like their mom said she could when they got phone service. But, it seemed that she still had two more days to wait. Frank suggested that she write to her friends as he had done his second day there, but Rudy insisted a phone call was better. She was probably right, Frank thought, since he hadn't heard back from anyone yet.

"Do you think Dad will call when we have a phone?" Rudy asked.

Why would we want him to? Frank wanted to know, but he didn't dare say it out loud. He figured his sister was delusional when it came to their father. She was still caught up in the fantasy that he'd come back. Frank was always tempted to tell her that in reality, the man was the biggest ass who'd ever lived, but his mom had asked that he not say anything mean about their dad in front of Rudy. Frank had chosen to respect that for the time being. But he wasn't willing to encourage the fantasy, either.

"I don't know, Rudy. He won't even have our number."

"Mom says I can call and give it to him."

"If you can get a hold of him." Frank had gone through months of calling after their father had first left. He'd finally grown tired of constantly being told his father was too busy to talk, and the promises that were never kept. Now, he liked to think that he was over it.

"Maybe he'll come visit. Do you think he'll go in the lake with us? Mom says it's going to warm up really soon, so maybe we can go swimming."

"Let's go this way, Rudy," Frank said when he noticed his sister moving off the trail. Besides, he was ready for a subject change. "It's starting to smell like rain. I don't want to get lost out here if it does."

Rudy turned up her nose to sniff at the humid air. "I don't smell anything."
"Let's not get lost, anyway," Frank insisted.

Frank led his sister to the shed, which seemed to be in worse shape after the most recent storm. She wasn't very impressed with it, so they continued on, following another trail that Frank hadn't explored yet. There wasn't much there, either, except a curious raccoon that Frank had to chase off before it decided to follow them home. Nothing really interesting happened until they headed back home. Even before they reached the low bridge, Frank spotted a familiar motorboat near it and urged Rudy to pick up the pace.

"Is Oliver here?" Rudy asked when she saw the boat.

Frank hoped so. He would have settled for seeing either of the brothers. But Frank hoped that if it was David who'd brought the boat over, he'd see Oliver with him. But there was only one boy standing outside of Frank and Rudy's house, and Frank was annoyed that from the distance, he couldn't tell which one it was. As they got closer, however, Frank smiled to himself as he looked over the boy's nervous stance as he fisted the bottom of his t-shirt and regarded the house anxiously like he wasn't sure he wanted to approach it. Body language alone told him that he was dealing with Oliver Martin. The way the boy finally noticed them coming and grinned widely told Frank the same thing all over again.

"Frank!" Oliver waved, but as he went to meet Frank and Rudy, he seemed less animated than Frank remembered from their previous visits.

"Hi, Oliver," Rudy said politely as they reached each other. "I saw your boat, do you think we can ride in it if it doesn't rain?"

Oliver looked pleased. "That would be fun, Rudy. D'you like frogs?"

Rudy made a face. "They're slimy."

Oliver frowned. "There's nothing wrong with being slimy."

Rudy giggled. "Yeah, it's gross."

"Oh... well I've got a lucky chicken."

Rudy made another face.

"What makes a chicken lucky?"

Oliver told her it just was, and Rudy began to ask him another whole list about the bird, but Frank wasn't really paying attention to their conversation. He was looking Oliver over, not sure what to make of what he saw. There was something different. Like, Oliver seemed tired. Looked it. The circles under his eyes weren't exactly dark, but noticeable because his complexion seemed pale today, even beneath the shadows of the clouds. His face seemed dirty at first, but upon closer inspection, Frank realized that it was as smooth as always, shining from the humidity, and the dark spots he could just barely make out looked like faded bruises.

"I'm glad you came over, Oliver," Frank interrupted the conversation between his sister and their guest. He wasn't really sure who he'd cut off, but

no one seemed to mind. "I've been wondering where you were."

"I was at home, Frank. I wanted to see you. So now I'm here."

"Since Oliver's here, can we play cards, Frank?" Rudy asked. "Last time he told me he'd show me how to play poker."

Frank raised an eyebrow at that, but shrugged and gave his sister a nod. "Sure, if you can find the cards."

"Come on, Oliver!" Rudy called as she moved ahead of them into the house.

Frank watched as Oliver watched Rudy, looking bemused. He patted Oliver's shoulder to get his attention. "Come on, let's go inside, okay? It's a lot cleaner this time, I promise."

Oliver smiled as he walked up the stairs alongside Frank. "That's okay, Frank. I don't care if it's not clean," he insisted, but when they walked into the cleared-out and organized living room, his eyes widened. "Wow!"

Frank laughed as he pulled Oliver into the house. "My mom's working in town," Frank explained. "I wanted to go see you, but I've had to watch my sister... are you alright, Oliver?"

"Sure, Frank."

"Are you sure?" Frank asked, getting a little closer to provide himself with a better inspection. "Were you sick or something?"

Oliver cocked his head, like it might help him understand the question better. The corner of his mouth turned up in amusement. "I don't remember, Frank. Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"You don't remember?"

Oliver shrugged as his gaze shifted from Frank's. He moved further into the room, and for a moment, Frank worried that he was going to avoid the question. But Oliver didn't seem to have that problem today. "Sometimes I don't remember stuff," Oliver explained, and then added defensively, "but my mom says it doesn't make me wrong, just different. I'm not wrong, Frank."

"I know you're not," Frank replied seriously. "It's just... well, you look kind of..."

Oliver frowned, and turned his head down to look himself over the best he could. "What's wrong with the way I look, Frank?"

"Nothing," Frank said quickly. "You look... you're... there's nothing wrong with the way you look, Oliver. It's just, well, you seem tired. Or something. Do you feel tired?"

"A little," Oliver admitted. "And my eyes have been hurting." He suddenly looked concerned. "Do you think I'm sick, Frank?"

"I don't know. I don't think so, Oliver. Look... did someone hurt you?" Frank had been afraid to ask the question, but managed to get it out, anyway.

"The witch that used to live here threw a rock at my head once."

Frank sighed, and gently grabbed Oliver's arm to lead him over to the sofa

. “That’s not what I meant, Oliver. I meant... since the last time I saw you. Your mom seemed kind of angry when I took you home, remember? Did she.”

.. “My mom wouldn’t hurt me, Frank,” Oliver said somewhat angrily, and Frank was immediately reminded that while Oliver could seem childlike, it was best not to approach him like one. He seemed to understand more than he was given credit for. Maybe he didn’t yet understand the reason for Frank’s questioning, but he could obviously see where it was leading. It seemed safe to conclude that he didn’t like it.

“I’m sorry, it’s just... I’ve been worried about you. And, you look like something happened. You know if your parents did do something to you, you could tell me, Oliver. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you.”

Oliver studied Frank for a long moment as he leaned further back into the sofa, and then smiled. “I know that, Frank. That’s why I like you.”

“So do you trust me then?” Frank asked. “Can you at least tell me where you’ve been all week... you said you were going to come back but never did.”

“I couldn’t,” Oliver said, looking sheepish as he lowered his voice to a whisper. “My mom and dad said I shouldn’t visit you anymore.”

“Why not?” Frank asked, even though what Oliver was saying didn’t surprise him.

“Don’t know... they don’t like me talking to people sometimes because people are mean... but you’re not, Frank. That’s why I wanted to see you. They wouldn’t let me, so I went out the window like David,” he explained, looking pleased with himself. “David showed me how to break their lock. They don’t know I’m here, Frank... I’m gonna be in trouble when I go home.”

Frank frowned at that. No he wouldn’t, he decided. Frank wasn’t sure what exactly was wrong with Oliver’s parents, but at this point he was positive that it was something. He had a sickening feeling that getting into trouble in the Martin house involved more than a time out and a missed dessert. He didn’t want Oliver to go back there. And, while that might not have been possible, Frank would do his best to keep Oliver with him for as long as possible. At least, until his mom came home. He could talk to her. She might think he was overreacting again, but at least Frank knew she would listen.

“Don’t worry about that, okay? My mom will be home in a few hours. I’ll ask her to talk to your parents and find out... we’ll see if they’ll let you visit.”

Oliver looked thoughtful. “Do you think your mom would do that, Frank?”

Frank smiled. “Sure she will... I’ll ask her to see if David can visit, too.

Did he tell you I met him?” When Oliver shook his head, Frank explained how he’d met David the same day that he’d wanted Oliver to go into town with him. But as he told Oliver about the time he’d spent with his brother, Frank c

ouldn't help noticing that Oliver appeared troubled by it, more than anything. Frank almost felt guilty for that, deciding that Oliver felt left out because he hadn't been included in the outing, but instead of apologizing for it, Frank finished by asking Oliver another question that he felt was more important at the moment. "Oliver? Where's David now? He's not in trouble, is he?"

Frank didn't get his answer. Rudy appeared in the living room, excited over the deck of cards she'd found. It seemed to distract Oliver from the conversation, and Frank didn't want to bring it up again until they were alone. In the meantime, Frank and Rudy enjoyed Oliver's company, and playing a game of cards with him was a nice change from the isolation from anyone other than their own company, and the work they'd been doing to help their mom while she was gone.

Oliver managed to surprise Frank again as they played poker for chocolate chip cookies. Apparently, he was rather fond of the game, and had no problem explaining it to Rudy as they played in a team against Frank. Oliver, whose expression often said everything for him, turned out to have such a great poker face that Frank never stood a chance. But, he had fun, and laughed when both Rudy and Oliver complained of stomach aches when they ate too many of their winnings.

It started to rain, just as Frank had thought it would, but this time the storm wasn't nearly as nerve-racking. It was only a light sprinkle, but the clouds turned the sky dark and the three of them set out around the house to turn on lights as a result. Oliver still seemed nervous every time he ran into a cat, and did his best to avoid them, which is why Frank made sure to chase the one hiding under the bed out of his room when Oliver took an interest in his computer.

Rudy was downstairs painting her paint-by-numbers, listening to boy-band music, and to avoid his sister's off-key voice singing along with it, Frank hid in his room, stretched out on his bed and watched Oliver. Oliver was at an old card table, converted into a desk, and appeared fascinated with a game on the computer that allowed him to build cities, only to destroy them with natural disasters, or sometimes more unnatural disasters. Like Godzilla.

"Are places with this many buildings really that busy?" Oliver asked as he looked over the city he'd constructed over the last hour. "My mom says the stuff we see on TV is just Hollywood."

"Sometimes," Frank replied. "Haven't you ever been away from here, Oliver? I mean, not just to town, but to... somewhere else?"

Oliver glanced over his shoulder to meet Frank's eyes. "One time. I was too little to remember. We went to see my grandma in New Mexico when she died. That's when I fell."

Frank sat up. "How did you fall?"

Oliver ran his fingers through his hair, but they lingered there on his head, as if searching for something. "My dad said he couldn't catch me in time. He feels real bad about that. It's not his fault, though. I wanted to see the bird outside the window... I don't remember it. But it wasn't a lucky chicken, Frank."

"You fell out a window?"

Oliver nodded. "Broke my head right open. Don't remember what happened after. I didn't wake up for a long time. But the doctors fixed me. Wanna feel it?"

Frank nodded curiously as Oliver continued to rub at his head when he left the chair to sit next to Frank on the bed.

"You can feel it everywhere," Oliver said quietly as he tilted his head towards Frank.

"Does it hurt?" Frank asked.

"No," Oliver replied. "But it's like... I can always feel that the scars are there."

Frank lifted his hand, convinced he wasn't going to hurt anything, and hesitated only a moment before placing his palm over the top of Oliver's head. The hair was thick, surprisingly soft. Frank found himself pushing it back before he remembered what he was supposed to be doing and found Oliver's scalp with gentle fingers. It didn't take him long to find what Oliver was talking about. In fact, it was difficult to miss, and Frank was surprised by the extent of the rough patches of skin beneath his fingers as he traced the lines. One was crooked, jagged and rough. Others were more precise, and if a doctor had been responsible for them, Frank was certain that it had been from more than one surgery.

"I'm sorry, Oliver," Frank said, before he could stop himself. He heard pity in his own voice, and was almost afraid to meet Oliver's eyes to find out what he thought of that. But, Oliver only seemed unexpectedly amused as he leaned his head heavier into Frank's palm, much like those cats liked to do when they got his attention, Frank thought. Instead of finding it unusual, however, Frank continued moving his fingers over Oliver's scalp, nearly expecting the other boy to start purring. It was when Frank's eyes fell to some of the shadows over Oliver's face and brushed his thumb over one, that Oliver suddenly flinched and pulled back. Frank lowered his hand slowly, not willing to let go of the other boy's eyes as they faced him somewhat accusingly. "I don't know what you remember, Oliver," Frank said, "but I think something happened to you."

Oliver frowned, and for a moment, Frank thought he was going to say something defensive. But instead, it was a look of extreme concentration that crossed his face as he lifted his hand to his face, gingerly touching at sore places.

“Oliver, what’s the last thing you remember before...” Frank paused when the sound of slowly falling raindrops outside was interrupted by a purring engine and tires moving over wet gravel. He stood, moving to his window long enough to look out to the driveway. There was a yellow truck pulling up against the side of the house, and having never seen it before, Frank watched curiously, wondering who was visiting. But, as his eyes focused on the image through the glass of the front windshield, it became all too apparent that this visitor wasn’t one he currently wanted to welcome into his home, if Oliver’s mother sitting in the passenger side of the bench seat was any indication. It wasn’t her that worried Frank, though. It was the large man behind the steering wheel, currently unfastening his seat belt. It didn’t occur to Frank to think through his next actions as he spun away from the window and approached Oliver hurriedly. “We have to go,” he stated.

“Where are we going, Frank?” Oliver asked, obviously startled by his host’s abruptness.

“For a walk, I could use some fresh air,” Frank said as he grabbed Oliver’s hand and practically yanked him off the bed and out the bedroom door. “Couldn’t you?”

“It’s raining, Frank.”

“That’s okay. Come on, I’ve got a jacket you can borrow.” Frank rushed Oliver down the narrow hallway and to the back door, where he was quick about grabbing his only hooded jacket out of the closet and shoving it at Oliver.

“Put it on, I’ll be right back.”

“But what’re you gonna wear?” Oliver wanted to know.

Frank smiled as reassuring of a smile as he could. “I’ll be fine,” he insisted, but didn’t feel that way when the sound of someone rapping on the door echoed through the house, over Rudy’s music.

“I think someone’s knocking on your door, Frank,” Oliver observed as he pulled on the jacket.

“It’s probably just the wind,” Frank said, earning himself a strange look from Oliver as he headed towards the living room. “I’ll be right back.”

Frank reached the front door just in time to keep his sister from answering it. He grabbed her tiny wrist and yanked her back, provoking a startled gasp from the girl that he simply didn’t have time to pay attention to. “Don’t answer that!” he hissed.

Rudy pulled her arm away from him, looking irritated. “Why not--hey! Frank!” He’d wrapped an arm around her waist, and with no explanation Frank had lifted Rudy’s feet right off the ground to rush her to the back door.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Oliver’s parents are here,” he said hastily. He was better off simply telling her. If she started asking questions, Frank didn’t see how that would help

anyone.

“Then shouldn’t we tell Oliver...”

“No!” Frank stated, and put her down before they reached the kitchen to place his hands on her shoulders and look her in the eye. “Rudy, we’ve got to keep them away from him until Mom gets home, okay?”

Rudy looked confused, but not one to argue when her young mind sensed a serious situation, she simply nodded, and they both looked towards the front door when the knocking only got louder. Frank frowned. He was certain that Oliver’s parents could hear Rudy’s music, and they likely suspected that someone was home. He didn’t know if they’d have the nerve to let themselves in, and he didn’t want to stick around to find out. He ushered Rudy into the kitchen, where Oliver was still waiting by the door, having trouble with the zipper on Frank’s jacket.

“Get your coat on, Rudy,” Frank ordered, even as he lifted his sister’s coat for her and wrapped it around her shoulders. As Rudy pushed her arms through the sleeves, Frank turned to Oliver and zipped up the coat for him after a few good tugs. Oliver’s brows raised in response. He didn’t seem to understand what the big hurry was supposed to be about, but he didn’t really complain when Frank practically pushed him and Rudy through the door.

“I really think someone’s knocking,” Oliver said, looking back as Frank closed up the house.

“So they’ll come back, later,” Frank said, ducking his head, as if it would defend him from the raindrops now wetting his face and hair. “Let’s go this way. I haven’t been this way before.”

Rudy looked disgruntled as she held her jacket closed, but rushed to hold onto Frank’s hand as he led the way away from the house, making sure to avoid the yellow truck parked alongside the house, and Oliver followed behind them, seeming alright with the entire situation.

That was good, Frank decided. All he wanted to do was get Oliver out of sight. Maybe it was unjustified. Maybe he was overreacting in the stupidest way possible, but he wasn’t going to feel better until his mom arrived home and figured out what was going on for him. Until then, he simply didn’t trust Oliver’s parents. But, Frank was so focused on getting Oliver out of sight as they headed straight into the woods and up the hill that he’d completely forgotten that he was also attempting to prevent Oliver from seeing the elder Martins. Which incidentally, didn’t work out so well.

Rudy had slipped in the mud, and after catching her, Frank had decided to carry her on his back. She was still small for her age, but recently she’d grown past the point of being able to ride on his shoulders. Either way, he didn’t mind since she gave him a little extra cover. He felt like he was getting rained on twice, first from the water falling from the sky, and then the drops falling from the trees. He stared at his feet as he trekked uphill, unable to

wipe the water running down his forehead and into his eyes while he carried his sister. He was so focused on distancing them all from the house and the road that he didn't notice that Oliver was no longer on his heels until Rudy insistently patted his shoulder.

"Frank! Frank, look."

Frank stopped, turned around, and froze when he realized that straight through the trees back behind him, the entire side of his house, along with the yellow truck, was visible. Oliver's parents had come around the corner, and were talking in front of the vehicle, and not far off but still hidden, Oliver stood watching them. Frank put Rudy down and took a step forward, wanting to call out to Oliver, but was afraid he'd be heard. And then he didn't have to call out.

Oliver suddenly looked in Frank's direction, and their eyes met, but for Frank, he was facing something unreadable. There was no crooked smile on Oliver's face, but there was no sign of confusion or anger, either. Frank felt like he was being watched like someone who'd been caught in a lie. Perhaps that's exactly what he was. Oliver was insistent that his parents would never harm him, so Frank worried how he'd react when he figured out what Frank was doing. But when realization did seem to come over Oliver, he didn't seem displeased at all. Just understanding. And better yet, he didn't call out to his parents.

Frank released a breath when Oliver slowly backed away from where he stood, and when he reached Frank and Rudy, all three of them moved out of sight together. They continued on silently for a while. Frank didn't know where they were going once he couldn't see his house anymore, but Oliver picked up the lead then, and Frank trusted that he knew the area well enough not to get them lost. At least, he hoped that was the case, since he was beginning to regret not wearing a jacket. The rain slowed to a drizzle, and then died completely, but his clothes were wet now, and he was cold. Rudy at least seemed comfortable as she moved ahead of them every time she saw a squirrel.

With Oliver, Frank couldn't tell how comfortable he was. It was hard to, when he suddenly felt like he needed to avoid Oliver's eyes. It felt to Frank as if something uncomfortable was passing between them. He didn't know if Oliver felt it, too, but Frank could definitely feel the other boy's eyes glancing in his direction every so often. And they kept moving closer together, side by side, step for step. Frank didn't know if it happened naturally, or intentionally, but the closer Oliver got, the more difficult the continuing silence became to Frank. Even Rudy was silent as she walked on her own.

"I'm sorry, Oliver," Frank finally said. "I didn't want them to take you home yet. I should have told you."

Oliver didn't initially respond, causing Frank to look worriedly in his dir

ection, but it was only to find that Oliver was removing the borrowed jacket, and before Frank could ask him what he was doing, he was placing the warm material over Frank's shoulders.

"I didn't want to go with them, Frank."

Frank sighed. "Listen, Oliver, no matter what happens, I won't let you get in trouble. I'll say it's my fault, and I'll ask my mom to talk to them. She'll..

"They don't like to listen, Frank. They say it's bad for me to leave. I don't want to make them angry... but my mom always says, going out is getting in trouble."

"That's not right, though," Frank insisted. "It's not fair that you can't do things just because... it's not right, Oliver."

"David says that," Oliver replied. "David's always in trouble. He makes my mom and dad angry."

"Why? Because he likes to go outside?" Frank asked, feeling disgusted.

"No, Frank. I think he likes it."

"What? You mean, getting in trouble?"

Oliver nodded. "David gets angry, too. He's always angry, Frank."

"With you?"

Oliver considered the question, and then shook his head. "No. He's my brother, Frank. But he doesn't like my mom or my dad. He likes to make them angry."

"Oliver... is David in trouble now?"

"He's always in trouble," Oliver said again, and then asked Frank a question he never expected. "Do you like David more than me, Frank?"

"What?"

"I know he's better," Oliver said, sliding his hands into his pockets as he continued to walk. "David's like me. But better."

Frank nearly laughed at the notion, but caught himself.

"That's not true, Oliver. The two of you are just different, that's all. Besides, isn't David the one always getting into trouble?" Maybe Frank was suspicious that some of that trouble was bullshit, but after meeting David, he did have to leave room that there was probably a reason for at least some of it.

"That doesn't make David bad," Oliver said defensively, obviously misunderstanding what Frank meant.

"No," Frank agreed. "Look, I only meant that he's not any better than you, alright?" Frank attempted a friendly smile, and playfully punched Oliver's arm to get his attention. "You shouldn't think things like that."

Oliver's smile was a slow, small one as they returned to walking in silence, and as Frank focused ahead on Rudy, he decided that maybe it was time for their conversation to lighten up a little. It was true he had questions, and he was concerned over many things regarding Oliver and his family, espec

ially the current well-being of David. Oliver wasn't looking great as it was, and Frank couldn't help wondering if David was in the same condition. But, unless he wanted to turn back and deal with the Martin parents on his own, there wasn't much he could do about it for the time being, except to enjoy the unexpected nature walk, despite the cold. Besides, Oliver's curious questions had Frank wanting to reassure the other boy that he really did enjoy his company. But then, that became difficult to do when Oliver suddenly began to shout at Frank's sister.

"No! Don't go down there!"

Frank jumped at the harsh tone, and didn't appreciate the way his heart froze in his chest when ahead of them, Rudy nearly lost her footing because of it where the land had been eroded to a steep drop. Rudy hardly had time to recover before Oliver had rushed her, grabbing one of her wrists with both hands to pull her back. She made a shrill, startled sound and tried to pull her arm back, but Oliver refused to release her.

"You can't go down there!" he shouted. "Never do that!"

"Okay! Oliver, let go!" Rudy demanded.

"It's a very bad place, Rudy!" Oliver persisted, and Frank had enough when his sister's eyes turned to him, seeming panicked.

"Hey! Knock it off!" Frank rushed forward, separating Oliver from his sister by moving between them where he placed two hands on Oliver's chest and shoved him back, an action he didn't put much thought into as he turned to face Rudy. "Are you alright?" he asked her.

Rudy nodded, seeming flushed and confused as she glanced past Frank at Oliver accusingly, and then down the drop, which Frank followed her gaze to. It was easy to see what had managed to grab his sister's attention. Another cat.

But, this one didn't look like the wild felines that snuck through the cracks and into their house. It was more like someone's pampered pet Persian, and was lazily watching them, its thick white coat practically glowing against its dark surroundings as it finally turned and disappeared into the brush.

Frank frowned, not sure what was going on. The drop was steep but not that far, and he doubted it led to anything horrible, except for maybe the lake.

He could see water, likely another hidden cove. Not sure what was going on, Frank turned back to Oliver, intending to seek an explanation.

But Oliver had backed away from the siblings, and practically cowering where he stood, he avoided Frank's eyes while Frank struggled to make something of the outburst, and then felt guilty for reacting the way he did. "Oliver ..." he started, but was met with something akin to a wall when Oliver suddenly covered his face with his hands and turned his back.

"I'm sorry. Didn't mean to."

Frank exchanged a glance with his sister, each of them bewildered, but symp

athletic.

"I didn't mean to yell at him," Rudy whispered. "He's not gonna cry, is he Frank?" She sounded horrified. In Rudy's world, boys were not supposed to cry.

Frank shook his head at his sister, gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and then moved towards Oliver to approach him on his own. "Oliver, are you alright?" Frank asked. He didn't get an initial response, and found himself reaching out to touch the other boy's shoulder. Oliver didn't flinch, but turned slowly to peek at Frank through his raised fingers.

"Are you angry, Frank?"

Frank considered the question, and then shook his head. "We're okay," he said, glancing back at his sister. "Why'd you get upset, Oliver?"

Oliver lowered his hands and shook his head. "We're not supposed to go down there."

"Why not?" Frank asked, looking back towards the drop. "It's just water, Oliver." He took a step forward, as if he were headed right for it, when Oliver suddenly grabbed his wrist the same way he had Rudy's.

"Frank, no!"

Frank frowned as he looked back at Oliver, who was obviously disturbed by something.

"Oliver," he said, becoming impatient. "If there's something down there..."

"I just don't like it, Frank. Please don't go down there."

Frank stared at Oliver for a long moment, trying to read him. His curiosity was definitely piqued. But, when Rudy came to claim his free hand he found that his sister suddenly looked as nervous as Oliver did.

"Frank, don't do it," she insisted. "I wanna go home now. Can we just go home?"

Frank sighed, and glancing between the two of them, he gave in. "Fine. Let's go back. But slowly, okay? I don't know if Mom's back yet."

Rudy nodded, and Oliver smiled as the three turned and walked back in the direction they'd come from. None of them saw the tall figure watching from a careful distance through a clear lens, and they didn't hear the click of the camera as it recorded their every step until they were completely out of sight.

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Jessica Seaberg did her best to stay composed, feeling way too much like the dozens of parents she herself had called into her classroom over the years to tell them of their offspring's wrongdoings. Reactions were never quite the same when it came to parents, but from experience she knew that the majority usually experienced enough disappointment to never want to experience such a situation again. And unfortunately when it came to Jessica's oldest

t child, she was not an amateur when it came to wondering what on earth he could have been thinking.

It wasn't that he was a bad kid. In her extremely biased opinion, Frank was the greatest boy who'd ever graced the earth. Rudy might have been her baby, but then, so was he. When he was young, he'd been curious, rambunctious, and most definitely loving towards his family. And of course, at seventeen he still had a few of those qualities. But, at seventeen, he was also argumentative, too cool for his britches, and on some occasions, impossible. Jessica considered taking off with his sister and a neighbor's kid just to hide him from the kid's parents, impossible. Not to mention, misguided and foolish. He hadn't been thinking, obviously. And, he was most definitely in trouble. She'd just have to deal with it later since at the moment, she had her own trouble sitting right in her living room, and it was in the form of Oliver Martin's worried parents.

This, is what she'd come home to. Not the hot bath and family dinner she'd counted on. No, Frank was definitely out to frustrate her. But, at least the house was presentable for visitors. She put on the best smile she could manage when she rejoined the Martins in the living room with the sugar-free iced tea they'd requested. Instant tea, the powdered kind. From what she'd already gathered from the locals, it was practically unacceptable, but it's what she had, so they'd have to deal.

"I'm really sorry about this," she said. "I'm sure the kids will be back soon."

The Martins took their drinks. Mrs. Martin, who'd insisted that Jessica call her Mary, took one look at her glass and politely set it aside. Brian Martin, with his friendly face but standoffish attitude, took a sip and had the nerve to flinch. "They'd better be," he said. "And I hope your boy doesn't get Oliver into any trouble. Our son already has enough troubles without him adding to them."

"Brian," Mary said, in a scolding tone before she smiled at Jessica. "We're sure they're fine... it's just, Oliver is a special-needs boy. He was never supposed to leave the house. We'd just die if anything happened to him, you see."

"I know they were here," Brian added. "Your boy must've snuck him out the back."

Jessica had no doubt. "Look, Frank might have his faults, but he's a good kid. There's still a chance he didn't even know you were here. I think we should wait and see what he has to say. Are you sure I can't offer you anything to eat? It's getting close to dinnertime, and..."

"We'll have our supper at home," Mary insisted. "I've got a roast waiting."

"We'll be telling Oliver not to come around here, anymore," Mr. Martin said

. “He won’t be bothering you. We’d appreciate it if you’d tell your boy to do the same.”

Jessica tried not to frown as she studied the two adults sitting on her sofa as subtly as possible. They seemed nice enough, she supposed, except that they seemed to be under the impression that her own son was a hooligan, and she didn’t like that at all. She considered them both for a long moment, wondering if she even liked these people. It was already obvious that Frank didn’t, and as she recalled what he’d happened to mention to her, she wondered if he was justified there. He certainly hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d mentioned that the Martins liked to keep a tight leash on their children.

“You know,” Jessica said conversationally, “I’ll be teaching at the high school this fall. Can I expect to see your boys?” Sometimes disgruntled parents simply responded better when they realized they were talking to a teacher. Sometimes. Not always.

The Martins exchanged a meaningful glance that seemed somewhat troubled to Jessica. But then, they’d seemed troubled since she’d arrived home and found them waiting outside of the house.

“We homeschool ours,” Mary Martin replied. “Like I said, Oliver is a special-needs child.”

“But he’s smart,” Brian cut in. “A real smart boy.”

Jessica smiled, happy to hear him at least mention pride in his son. “Well, what about David? Is he in school?”

Mary and Brian Martin sat across from Jessica, looking fearful of their answer, as if it would be the wrong one. “No,” Brian answered.

“Is he special needs, too?” Jessica asked curiously. “Frank says they’re twins.”

“No,” Mary replied. “Oliver and David... they’re not the same. David is...”

“They’re very close,” Brian cut his wife off. “David wouldn’t want to be away from his brother.”

“I see.” Jessica faked a smile. She was beginning to see what Frank had a problem with. Although, while she suspected her son simply felt that the Martins were overly strict, the teacher in her had concerns for the well-being of two boys who were being brought up in a questionable manner. She’d met Oliver, and while he wasn’t the kind of friend Frank usually brought home, he didn’t seem to be in need of constant supervision. As for David, she suspected that it had to be difficult for a boy his age to be kept away from other kids like himself. Not to mention, she doubted that either of them could be getting a proper education at home. “So, do you have a tutor for your boys?”

“I teach them,” Mary supplied.

“And she does a fine job,” Brian said defensively.

Jessica nodded, and addressed Mary again. Mrs. Martin seemed a little easier

to talk to than her husband. "I'm sure you do. Oliver seems like a great kid. You know, if you ever need help putting lessons together... or any advice, well, I'd be happy to help you out."

Mary actually looked pleased. It was the reaction Jessica was aiming for, so she made a point to ignore the suspicious look on Brian's face.

"I really would like that," Mary said. "I've been working with a few teachers from the school, but to have one so close by..."

"We'll see, Mrs. Seaberg," Brian interrupted, flashing a warning look at Mary, who grew silent quickly.

Jessica frowned. "It's Ms." she corrected him.

"You're not married?" Mary asked.

"In the process of a divorce, Mrs. Martin," Jessica replied. "My kids and I are here to make a fresh start."

"Oh, then," Mary replied. "I'm sorry."

Jessica opened her mouth to say that there was nothing to be sorry for, but suddenly stopped herself. Perhaps playing the sympathy card would work the best on these people. "Well, it has been hard," she said, which wasn't a complete lie. "Especially on Frank, you know. There aren't very many people around here his age. I think he was really happy to meet your boys. He's only mentioned David, but I know he enjoys seeing Oliver."

"I'm sure he'll make plenty of friends," Brian Martin insisted. "Other than Oliver."

Jessica frowned, not bothering to hide it this time. "Mr. Martin, I promise you that Frank is a good kid. If he did purposely run off today--and I'm not saying he did. But, if he did, I believe that he at least thinks he has a good reason for it..." Jessica paused, sighing as she looked between the Martins. "It's possible that Frank was concerned for Oliver. And I mean no offense, but, you have to admit that it's kind of... unusual, for you to keep your children completely isolated from everyone else their age, and I'm not one to lecture, but I have to tell you that it's not only strange, it's also unhealthy. You can't expect either of your boys to ever grow up if..."

"Excuse me," Mary Martin interrupted, sounding as offended as Jessica had expected her to. "We are protecting... Oliver has special needs."

"Yes, you keep saying that," Jessica remarked. "And, I'm sure some of his needs aren't those of other boys his age, but if your children were getting everything they needed, Mrs. Martin, then they probably wouldn't be running off on you every time the opportunity presented itself."

"That's enough." Brian Martin looked about ready to come out of his chair, he was glaring at Jessica so hard. But, she refused to be intimidated. "I'm sure you mean well, Ms. Seaberg, but my wife and I handle ours just fine on our own."

"Of course you do," Jessica replied. "And I'm sure it must be very hard with

two teenagers. But let's face it, kids will rebel, even those with special needs. Wouldn't it be possible to arrange something for our children? At least that way when they see each other you'll know about it. Surely, between the three of us we can work something out."

Once again, the Martins looked to each other, sending silent messages. Still nervous, Jessica observed. Good. She wasn't sure that she liked them very much. In fact, she was beginning to wonder if Frank was onto something when he'd voiced concerns over the Martin children. And she most definitely had concerns. Most parents wouldn't react the way these two had when their child made a new friend. And, while she hadn't yet met David, she questioned his well-being. From her personal standpoint, she felt that even Oliver could be in a public school, but could understand at least in his case, why he wasn't. David, however, seemed to lead a bleak existence. There was no excuse whatsoever when it came to why he was as isolated as his brother, and at the moment, she blamed their parents for it. But, Jessica Seaberg had learned not to judge people on first impressions alone. She was certain that she didn't have all the information. Whether that was because the Martins were hiding something, or simply hadn't confided in her yet, she didn't know.

But, she was willing to listen. Especially, when Mrs. Marin's next words managed to catch her attention.

"Ms. Seaberg--Jessica, please... We love Oliver, our boys. We know that most people would never understand..."

"What my wife is trying to say," Brian Martin interrupted again, this time reaching for Mary's hand in a supportive gesture, "is that we know what's best for them. But what you need to understand, is that we're not just doing this for Oliver. I assure you, keeping our children apart is what's best for your son, too."

.....

"I don't know, Oliver. Are you sure you want to go that way?" Frank asked, his voice thick with amusement. Frank could feel the other boy's lashes flicking against the palm of his hands, which gently covered Oliver's eyes. Oliver nodded at the question, and Frank could practically feel the smile on his face. "Alright then."

Oliver proceeded ahead slowly, but not without Frank literally on his heels, acting as a human blindfold. Rudy followed behind both of them, not understanding why the two guys in her company thought any of this was very funny.

After Oliver's outburst, Frank had sought to lighten the mood. Oliver had provided the opportunity when Rudy didn't recognize where they were and asked if they were lost. He'd commented that he could get back to Frank's house with his eyes closed, and Frank had decided to challenge him to do just that. So far, Oliver wasn't doing too bad. He was at least going in the right

direction, and seemed to be enjoying the game. On occasion he'd lift his hands to Frank's, as if he wanted to uncover his eyes. Each time, Frank gladly removed his hands, but only so he could tickle Oliver with them, discovering that the dark-haired boy was most sensitive to such attacks beneath the ribs, and often burst into fits of laughter before Frank even touched him. "Is it the right way, Frank?" Oliver asked as he brought his hands over Frank's again, but this time held them closer to his face. "I can't see."

Frank laughed, guiding Oliver away from some bushes. "I know," he replied, and then dropped his hands from Oliver's eyes, even as Oliver continued to hold the left.

Oliver looked around for a moment, and then turned to Frank, grinning. "I know where we are."

"I know where we are, too," Rudy said impatiently, and walked off past both of them.

"Hey!" Frank called after her. "Get back here!"

"That's okay, Frank," Oliver said. "Your house is right over there."

Frank looked in the direction Oliver had nodded in, and supposed that he was right. But, he still would have been a little worried about what his sister was walking into if a moment later, she hadn't called out that their mother was home. Frank released a sigh of relief, but still hoped that Oliver's parents were gone by now.

Frank turned back to Oliver and found that he was watching him silently. His hair was still damp from the rain and had fallen into his eyes, sticking to his lashes, and his mouth was quirked into an unsure smile, which faded when Frank lowered his eyes to where Oliver still held his hand. For a brief moment, instinct told Frank to pull away from the contact, but when Oliver seemed to pick up on it and began to let go, Frank only tightened his grip until Oliver met his eyes.

Frank felt something. He wasn't sure exactly what it was, but he didn't like the unsettling feeling that it brought to his gut. It was like feeling anxious for no apparent reason. He didn't necessarily care if he was in trouble at the moment. He could handle being grounded. With his mom close by, the prospect of facing the Martin parents didn't necessarily frighten him. It was something else. This place, he decided. The lake, the forest, the town, even the room where he slept at night--it was all wrong. He did his best to be helpful to his mother and in return she tolerated his complaints, because sometimes, complaining just plain made him feel better. He was adjusting to the changes his life had taken the best he could. But Frank wasn't happy. He wasn't really happy with anything. But then, Oliver was like the opposite of Frank's troubles. Most of the time.

Frank didn't want Oliver to go home. He didn't want to be told that he couldn't see him anymore. He wanted this friendship. It perplexed him, really, be

cause Frank knew he could make other friends. But he wanted this one, and suddenly, Frank felt like letting go of Oliver's hand would be like letting go of the few moments of peace that he'd had since his arrival. Even if there were aspects of Oliver that were anything but peaceful.

Perhaps, he was feeling anxious for Oliver. "It's okay to tell me if your parents don't treat you and David right. My dad didn't treat me right... it was wrong of him to leave. He was wrong to me. It's hard to say it, Oliver. But I do, because it's true."

Oliver frowned. "My dad's not going anywhere, Frank."

"Okay, but if he... or your mom, if they're doing something else..." Frank paused, sighing when Oliver's expression only registered confusion. It was what Frank found most frustrating about him. Oliver wasn't an idiot. And yet, there were some things he didn't seem to understand. Or, didn't want to.

Or didn't remember enough to understand, Frank thought. He had the sudden desire to find out more about why Oliver forgot things. Why he couldn't remember. He had a feeling that until he did, he'd run into this kind of difficulty every time he tried to reach Oliver. "Never mind... maybe we'll talk about it later. Come on." Frank gave Oliver's hand a gentle tug, and together they headed towards Frank's house. It was a good thing his mom was home.

He needed to convince her to help him get around the Martins. And not just because Frank wanted to keep seeing Oliver. Now, Frank decided, he needed to see David again. If Oliver was truly missing important details concerning his own life, then it was possible that David was Frank's only chance to find out what was going on. Besides, after seeing Oliver looking so poor, he wanted to see that David was alright for himself. Unfortunately, Frank had a feeling that dealing with David might prove to be more of a challenge than he wanted to admit, no matter what condition he found him in.

.....
"I don't understand why you're so upset, Frank. I just spent a very miserable hour talking to the Martins on your behalf, and I don't think it's too much for them to ask that you let them know when you and Oliver are visiting. You still get to see him--you're welcome, by the way."

Frank had been home for less than fifteen minutes, but things weren't going exactly as he'd hoped they would. It was true that he'd been pleased to find that the Martins were gone, and his mother was waiting for him--surprisingly, decidedly not ready to ground him on the spot. Although, she did have plenty to say to him about being rude to the neighbors. And even better, one of the first things she'd told both Frank and Oliver was that Oliver was allowed to stay for dinner. The trouble had started, when she mentioned that Mr. Martin would arrive afterwards to take Oliver home. Frank had been quick to voice his disapproval, which resulted in Rudy being told to go fold her laundry, and Oliver sent to Frank's room to once again, borrow some dr

y clothes, even though Frank could have used them more than him.

“Mom, you can’t let them take him!” Frank insisted, pacing the living room. It was an unreasonable demand and he knew it. “Didn’t you even see him? He looks...something’s wrong. I mean, it’s not as bad as earlier. I swear, he looked like he hadn’t slept in days.”

“Well, maybe he hasn’t.”

“And it looks like someone’s been pushing him around.”

“Frank...”

“Something’s not right. I don’t trust those people.”

“Well, you can’t just go around making accusations like that,” Mrs. Seaberg replied. “Listen, Frank, I spoke to the Martins. Sweetheart, they might be a little strange, but I promise you, they love their kids very much. And, if Oliver says that they haven’t done anything to harm him than we have to take his word for it.”

“But Oliver doesn’t get it, Mom. I tried talking to him. He either doesn’t want to talk or he says he can’t even remember.”

Jessica sighed, and sat down, even though she felt like she should be standing just to keep up with Frank. “Frank, did you know Oliver had an accident when he was younger? It’s the reason why he’s the way he is.”

Frank frowned. He felt like he was going backwards. “Yes. I know. He told me about it today, alright? Just because he’s different doesn’t mean anyone has the right to push him around.”

Jessica smiled patiently. “Of course not. But, his parents told me a little more about that today, and if you’d let me finish, I think you might find some of it interesting.”

Frank flopped down into an arm chair and crossed his arms. “Fine. I’m listening.”

And he was. He was curious over what new information his mom might have regarding the situation. But since whatever it was came from Oliver’s parents, Frank found himself skeptical, and perhaps a little hesitant to accept it for fact, no matter how much it might make sense. He still listened, though. Waited for his mom to start talking, telling himself that he wouldn’t interrupt. She didn’t like it when he interrupted her. But, she never started talking. Instead, Jessica shot to her feet, the same way Frank did when they heard Rudy’s shrill scream coming from her room.

They exchanged glances. Frank was the first to roll his eyes. “Probably another rat,” he insisted.

Jessica still seemed concerned, and rushed to Rudy’s room, just in time to catch the petite redhead at the door. “What’s wrong?” Jessica demanded as Frank caught up to them.

Rudy’s eyes were wide as she pointed into her room accusingly.

“Rat?” Frank asked.

“No!” Rudy suddenly snapped, finding her voice as she looked at her mother. “There was someone outside my window!”

“What?” Jessica demanded.

“I was getting dressed!” Rudy continued. “Mom, he had a camera!”

Frank looked at his sister, feeling disturbed and outraged all at once before he headed towards the bedroom window.

“He what?” Jessica demanded, pulling Rudy into the hall, as if to shield her.

“Son of a bitch,” Frank muttered, looking out the window for any sign of the intruder that Rudy claimed was there.

“Now hold on a minute,” Jessica said. “Rudy, could it have been Oliver? Maybe he went outside...”

“Oliver doesn’t have a camera,” Frank cut her off, and as if on cue, Oliver came hesitantly down the hallway from Frank’s room.

“Frank?”

Frank didn’t answer him. Something near the storage shed caught his eye. Too distinct to be a shadow, too tall to be an animal. Someone was lurking, and as every protective instinct Frank had took over he bolted out of the room, past his family and Oliver, and towards the front door.

“Frank! Wait a minute!” Jessica called. “Don’t go out there!” She had protective instincts of her own, and there was no way she wanted her child on his own for this one, with no way to call for help.

But Frank either didn’t hear her, or didn’t want to. He was already out the door and rushing towards the shed. He paused when he reached it, finding no one in sight. He heard his mother calling him from outside now, but movement to his left caught his attention and he spun just in time to see the end of a black coat disappear into the trees. “Hey!” he shouted. His angry shout only alerted the lurker to Frank’s presence, and he moved faster. Frank gave chase, thinking about the only person he knew who liked to take pictures of people while they weren’t looking.

Chapter 5

by DomLuka

Thanks to jim for editing!

The clouds were dispersing above, leaving the woods full of long shadows while the wind rattled the trees and made it nearly impossible for Frank to hear anything else around him. He inhaled the earthy scent left by the rain while his eyes watered and his lungs began to burn from exhaustion.

Frank didn’t know how long he’d been running. He was certain that not much time had passed, but he’d run so hard that he could feel the heels of his feet all the way to his knees, and the aches from his fall earlier in the week were beginning to aggravate him. But he was too close to stop, he told himself. He had yet to discover who the assailant was. Small glimpses when F

Frank got close only gave away that he was dealing with a male who was very good at keeping the hood of his jacket up at all costs, and he knew the area. So well, in fact, that nothing had managed to slow him down.

Frank wasn't sure why it was so important that he catch the guy. It likely had a lot to do with the fact that he felt like his family had somehow been violated. He wanted to protect them. Protect Rudy. They were his. All he had.

And he was furious. He had his suspicions over who it was, and if he was right, a certain member of the Martin family had a lot of explaining to do. He hadn't minded it when David took his picture without him knowing about it, but to think of a picture of Rudy which should have never been taken in the first place, wrecked his nerves.

The fact that Frank eventually had to stop, accepting defeat, wrecked his nerves, too. He'd come to a fork where two trails crossed paths, and there was no longer any sign of what he'd been chasing. No more glimpses, and as he strained to listen for more clues all he could hear was the wind, blowing like a whisper in his ear, that prickled the nape of his neck. He released the breath he'd been holding when he heard nothing of significance, and then couldn't seem to catch it as his lungs worked to slow down. His head ached, his throat was dry, and his face felt hot against the cool air as he absorbed it, wishing he would have slowed down sooner. For long moments he rested his hands on his knees until he caught his breath, but as he focused on his surroundings again, he found that he was not relieved at all.

Frank didn't know where he was. The shadows crossing over him were nearly suffocating, and he was disoriented as he realized that the brush surrounding him was so thick that nothing was visible, not even the lake. There was too much he couldn't see, and if he'd been the hunter only moments ago, he now had the uneasy feeling of being watched. He spun around to the sound of nothingness, his pupils dilating as his blue eyes took in too many dark places. When the possibility that he hadn't lost the stranger at all came to mind, Frank was no longer pleased by it. He was afraid of it.

He told himself that it was unwarranted, this fear. But it wouldn't cease. His skin itched and prickled, and the sensation caused him to feel trapped inside of it. Frozen to the point that he was too afraid to look behind him, as if the action itself could cause some unseen force to strike, like a little boy afraid of the shadows on his bedroom wall at night.

When Frank was a child, he'd gone through a phase of nightmares. It wasn't long after his first sleepovers, where a friend's older brother had told horror stories that no six-year-old had any business hearing. For weeks afterwards, he'd wake up with a dry throat, his small body frozen under the covers as the moving shadows in his room threatened disaster until the fear took over entirely. He wet his bed, and he'd cried. Back then, it had been his father who would rescue him from the terror. He remembered gentle hands cl

eaning him up, big arms holding him, supplying enough comfort to take it all away. Reassuring whispers in his ear until he could fall asleep again. He'd never felt more at ease. But his father wasn't here to chase these night mares away. Likely never would be again. Despite Rudy's hopeful delusions the man was gone, and at the moment, Frank was alone.

He took in a steadying breath and attempted to appear unbothered by the uncomfortable sensations flooding his senses for any watching eyes, or perhaps his own mental well-being. His hands shaking at his sides were only one sign of his failure as he looked straight ahead to a thick span of trees, his vision narrowing down to a tunnel as he directed his attention to a shadow moving within the space. Instinct told him to run, but still he moved closer, his feet feeling like dead weight as he urged them to take small steps.

And then he heard something. Breathing. It came in short, harsh breaths along with hard, fast-paced footsteps nearing him at a dead run. Only, it wasn't coming from in front of Frank at all. Frank spun around and braced himself.

His hands flew up in natural defense, and as a body nearly collided with his own from out of nowhere he gripped at its shoulders, holding the heavy force at bay as he prepared himself to strike back if necessary.

"Frank!"

Frank stared into familiar hazel eyes and a flushed face. But still, he wasn't satisfied until he took notice of his own clothes below the other boy's neck and allowed himself a relieved breath.

"Jesus, Oliver," Frank whispered in a hoarse voice. He let go of Oliver, but stood next to him so that they were shoulder to shoulder as he redirected his attention to the suspicious shadows. He wanted the contact. Any contact. Any comfort. At the moment, Oliver provided it.

"I don't know where he went," Frank said quietly. "Did you see him?"

Oliver shook his head, seeming uneasy. "We should go back, Frank. Your mom said to come back."

Frank narrowed his eyes, shaking his head. "Some asshole took pictures of my sister. Oliver, you've gotta tell me. Was it David?"

Oliver lowered his head. "David gets in trouble, Frank. I don't want him to get in trouble anymore."

Frank frowned, and his guard faltered as he turned to face the other boy. "Look, if it's David, you have to tell me, okay? What he did isn't right, Oliver. He can't... what he did was wrong. Very wrong. Do you get that? Oliver, please..."

Frank paused in mid-sentence as shadows moved around him. As he turned, all he could see was a flash of pale skin and a black jacket covering a tall figure that held a threat in his hand that promised an act of violence Frank could only begin to comprehend. The thick branch was swung with purpose, but not at Frank. It's target was Oliver, he realized as they were rushed fr

om the side.

“Look out!” Frank shouted.

Oliver’s eyes widened as he dodged to his right, gasping in shock when he didn’t move quickly enough and the harsh wood cracked against his upper arm, just below his shoulder. It was the beginning and the end of the attack, but it was enough. Oliver fell as his attacker dropped the branch to flee.

This time, Frank was close enough. He dived and tackled, latching onto dark clothing as he wrestled the perpetrator to the ground. He grabbed a thick shoulder, intent on rolling over the body beneath him, but took a sharp elbow to the face for his troubles.

Blood flooded Frank’s mouth as his top lip split against his teeth and the pain subdued him long enough for his captive to struggle his way to freedom, and then he was gone. Frank was left in a state no less than shock as he dabbed at his bloody lip with the back of his wrist, wondering if he should pursue another chase. It was Oliver’s presence that decided for him.

“Are you alright?” Frank demanded as he crawled towards his friend, who was now sitting on the ground, clutching at his injured arm with a red face and gritted teeth. “Oliver?” Frank lifted his hand, but stopped himself from placing it on Oliver’s shoulder, for fear of worsening the pain. Instead, he carefully pried Oliver’s hand away from the injury and rolled up the sleeve. The welt was visible already, swelling and bruising with every second that passed. Frank cursed. “Did you see him?”

Oliver shook his head, and winced when Frank touched his tender injury, even with gentle fingers. Frank stood, and held his hand out for Oliver to take.

“Come on,” Frank insisted. “Let’s get back.”

Oliver lifted his eyes to Frank’s face, where they suddenly widened. “You’re bleeding, Frank!” Oliver said, as if it were his only concern in the world.

“I’m okay,” Frank insisted. “Come on, Oliver. I wanna make sure my sister’s alright, and we need to get some ice on your arm. I don’t think it’s broken, but someone should look.”

“It’s not broken,” Oliver replied. “Just hurts real bad.”

Frank helped him to his feet, and while he was concerned over Oliver’s injury, he was happy to have him there. Oliver knew the way back, and with his guidance, they reached the house rather quickly where Jessica Seaberg was waiting at the front door with Rudy. She took one look at her son’s bloody face---which Frank insisted looked worse than it was---and went into a full-on motherly assault unit as she dragged him to the kitchen, forced him down at the table and forced a wet rag and bag of ice upon him.

“I can’t believe you!” she said angrily. “And look at you, Frank!”

Frank glanced towards Oliver as he sat nervously in a seat next to him, still holding his arm while his mother turned her back and continued her tirade. H

e tried to offer a reassuring smile to his guest, but it came out as a grimace when Frank realized that that particular expression hurt. But, Oliver seemed relieved when Frank handed over his ice pack, sliding it beneath the other boy's sleeve.

"Do you have any idea how stupid that was?" Jessica demanded, rounding on her son.

Frank only sighed, and looked towards the kitchen entrance, where Rudy looked shaken, standing by the door. "You alright, Rudy?" he asked her. The question seemed to instantly calm his mother, who went to hug his sister.

"Of course we're not alright," Jessica said angrily, but when she faced Frank, she was calm again. "Did you see who it was?"

Frank frowned as he glanced at Oliver for a moment, but then shook his head. "No."

Jessica looked between the boys at her kitchen table as Frank used the wash cloth to clean the blood from his mouth, but her eyes ultimately settled on Oliver as she noticed the ice had switched hands. "What happened?" she asked, going to the boy that was not her son.

"We cornered him and he attacked us," Frank said simply.

Jessica lifted a worried looking Oliver's sleeve, and gasped at the knot she found there. "Oh, Oliver... you hold that there," she ordered, moving to the freezer for more ice. "And no one saw him?"

"I couldn't say who he was," Frank replied. "Not for sure."

Jessica frowned as she took a long moment to look around the kitchen at her children, and one that wasn't hers. "I want everyone in the car," she decided.

"What?" Frank demanded. "What for?"

"We're going to file a police report," Jessica stated. "And we're going to see about getting some better locks... Oliver, I'm going to have to take you home first..."

"What? No," Frank stated. "Mom..."

"Frank, he can't come with us. His parents wouldn't like it. And we are going."

"I'm not going anywhere," Frank stated, and when he saw a warning look grow over his mom's face, he changed his tone. "Look, you take Rudy and go... someone should stay here, anyway."

"Frank, I don't want..."

"Mom, please," Frank said, his words becoming muffled as he held the rag closer to his sore lip. "I'll lock the doors. And the windows... just... I want to stay here."

"I wanna stay with Frank," Oliver chimed in.

Angela turned her attention to Oliver. She was beginning to look exasperated, and Frank knew they were pushing it, but still jumped in before she could

d say anything. "Take Rudy and go report this to someone, alright? I don't want to leave the house, in case the guy comes back."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Jessica stated.

"Mom, I don't want to go, either," Rudy suddenly said, and that was what did it for Jessica, and unexpectedly, gave Frank what he wanted.

"No--Rudy, you are going with me," Ms. Seaberg stated. "Get in the car. Now. Let's go. Frank, you don't leave the house, keep the doors locked. Unless the Martins come over to pick up Oliver. You'll have to tell them what happened."

"I can't do that!" Frank objected. Although, it was unclear which part he didn't like.

"You have to," Jessica stated. "And I'm stopping at Mr. Dron's on the way out to ask him to check on you. Open the door for him."

"But..." Frank started.

"I shouldn't be gone any longer than an hour or so... Frank..."

She was giving him her worried look, and Frank could understand why. He felt a little shaken himself. It hadn't been as bad since he'd made it home, and he was still numb with adrenaline, but he was disturbed over the afternoon's events. But he didn't want to leave the house. Someone had been sneaking around their windows. If he left, Frank wasn't sure how safe he'd feel when he came back.

"We'll be fine, Mom," he finally said. "I'll let Mr. Dron in."

Jessica stared at him for a long moment, and then let out a breath. "Keep ice on your face," she ordered, and then looked at Oliver. "Oliver, does your arm hurt really bad?"

"It's not broken, Mom," Frank answered for him. "We'll be fine."

Frank wished that he felt fine, too. But, even after he'd locked the door behind his mom and his sister, he had trouble sitting still. He'd washed off his face and checked the damage. The split lip wasn't pretty, but it wasn't that bad, either. At least, not physically. It was unclear if it was his ego doing the thinking for him, but Frank felt like he'd just lost something more than a fight. He wished that he knew what it was.

He didn't feel safe. Since he'd moved, he'd always thought of his family's new home as a little...uncomfortable. But, this was the first time he didn't feel safe in it. He went through the trouble of making sure every single window was locked, drawing the curtains for good measure. Oliver followed silently, holding ice to his arm. In the kitchen, Frank swallowed down three full glasses of water. Oliver sipped one. And in the living room, Frank paced, repeatedly checking the front window for visitors, and Oliver waited patiently on the sofa.

Frank was happy Oliver was there. It would be worse, he thought, if he'd been completely alone. He suddenly stopped, allowed his breathing to slow, and

looked over his friend. Oliver's ice had melted, and he was regarding the bag as if it had betrayed him. Frank found himself smiling at that, and feeling guilty. He opened his mouth to ask Oliver if he was alright, but suddenly Oliver's eyes lifted to meet his.

"You didn't tell your mom it was David," he said, as if he'd sensed that Frank was finally calm enough to talk.

Frank frowned. "Was it him?"

Oliver lowered his head, his brow knitted, and after a long moment of consideration, Frank decided that he simply didn't know. He sighed, and joined the other boy on the sofa where he rested his head back against the thick cushions and closed his eyes. He could hear the natural creaks in the house, and somewhere in the distance, the purring of a cat and the hum of the dishwasher. They didn't strike him as comforting sounds. "Some freak has a picture of my sister," he said quietly. It was wondering over the content of that picture that had him worried, but he was afraid to even think about it, let alone say it out loud. It was all too frustrating. There was too much going on. He'd been worried about Oliver. Now, he was worried about his own family. He didn't get this place. He didn't know if he wanted to. "I hate it here."

Frank felt the cushions beneath him shift, and didn't react when he felt his companion's head rest slowly and gently on his shoulder, but when he felt Oliver's hand climb over his own, Frank opened his eyes and watched the other boy's fingers play over his palm. "Don't say that, Frank," Oliver insisted. "You're my only friend."

Frank looked down at the top of Oliver's head at the messy dark hair and inhaled the scent of fresh lemons. He swallowed tightly, and without thought, found himself snuggling in closer to the warm body at his side as his hand closed over Oliver's. "Right now I think you're mine, too," he admitted, suddenly resenting everyone that used to be in his life. He blamed his father for the situation that he found himself in with his mother and his sister. It was his fault that they had to move away from all their friends. It was his fault that they had to live in a run-down dump that smelled like cat urine. And it was his fault that the dump they had to live in didn't feel safe. Because it certainly wasn't Frank's fault that he felt so out of sorts. He'd been uprooted, and now more than ever, he was feeling it. Between his mom working and having to help out around the house, making new friends, building a new life--it had all become a difficult task. A lonely task, since he hadn't even heard back from any of the friends he'd written to, another thing that Frank resented. At the moment, besides his mom and his sister, Frank truly felt that Oliver was his only friend, and that small detail did a lot of explaining as to why Frank was feeling protective of that friendship... and of Oliver.

Oliver suddenly lifted his head, turning so that he and Frank were face to face, with no apparent regard for personal space. Frank didn't seem to notice,

but when Oliver smiled at what he'd said, taking it as a compliment, he wasn't able to return it this time. Frank's eyes fell to Oliver's arm, to the place where the other boy was now holding a bag of water.

"Does it hurt really bad?" Frank asked.

"It just hurts."

Frank met Oliver's eyes, frowning. "Why'd you follow me?"

Oliver looked at Frank as if he didn't understand why that particular question was being asked, not as if he didn't understand the question. Frank sighed.

"I'm sorry you got hurt, Oliver."

"I'm sorry you got hurt, too, Frank," Oliver replied in all sincerity as he put down the bag and lifted his hand, bringing his fingers close to Frank's face.

Instinctively, Frank flinched at the sudden gesture, but somehow managed to keep his own hands from interfering as Oliver's fingers hovered over his sore mouth for a moment, and then ultimately came to rest alongside it at his cheek.

Frank self-consciously wanted to look away, the close proximity beginning to affect him, but instead, his eyes remained on Oliver's, a task easily achieved only because Oliver wasn't meeting Frank's eyes directly, but looking at his injured lip instead. His gentle fingers and concerned expression seemed sweet to Frank, and as ridiculous as it seemed to Frank, he was touched by the indiscreet attention. Oliver moved his thumb, gingerly touching Frank's top lip near the cut before pulling his hand away. Frank could hear his own breathing, his vision blurring as he continued to watch Oliver at close proximity; and when his tongue moved from his mouth to touch his injury he could taste his own blood and salty flavor left from Oliver's fingers. When he suddenly realized that Oliver's eyes were once again meeting his, Frank pulled his head back enough to bring the hazel rings into focus. It was just in time to take in a surprised breath as Oliver leaned forward, and as the other boy's lips came to rest at the corner of Frank's mouth he counted off the three delicate seconds that the kiss lasted.

When Frank looked at Oliver again, he was sitting back on the sofa, still watching Frank in the calm manner that Oliver seemed capable of pulling off no matter what the circumstances, causing Frank to believe that he was the only one experiencing any amount of awkwardness. He told himself that he would have let the moment pass, accept the gesture of comfort for what it was. Innocent. Sweet like Oliver. And he would have. But then the corner of Oliver's mouth quirked up in a shy smile as he regarded Frank sidelong, and suddenly Frank wondered if Oliver was innocent at all. Innocent, perhaps. But something in the dark-haired boy's expression gave him away, told Frank that he'd known exactly what he was doing. There was something the

re. There had to have been, or Frank never would have lifted his hand to brush a strand of soft hair behind Oliver's hair, or slide his hand to the back of Oliver's head to pull him forward.

Frank's approach wasn't nearly as gentle as Oliver's, and he paid for it when a sting rose from his injured lip, but his aim was more intimate as his mouth collided with Oliver's. He heard the other boy's breath hitch, and then felt Oliver's lips parting beneath his, feeling soft and careful. Their tongues lightly touched, Frank acting first, but then Oliver startled him as he deepened the kiss in a way that suggested that the experience wasn't at all new to him. It was Frank who pulled back first.

Frank could feel the color rising in his face, but it had nothing to do with embarrassment. Staring at Oliver, he felt depleted. Perhaps it was the earlier adrenaline leaving him, and the excitement of the day, but that kiss had unexplainably drained him and he discouraged himself from wanting to do it again. Not only because he was afraid that to continue would exhaust himself, and perhaps Oliver, too, completely.

Frank rubbed at his mouth, and gently touched the wound there as he glanced at Oliver. "I'm sorry, Oliver," he said, feeling that an apology was necessary, even though he didn't sound sorry. Maybe he wasn't. Caught in the moment, Frank had felt closer to Oliver, and as much as he wanted to convince himself that there had been an underlying meaning in Oliver's kiss, he still saw it as a gesture of comfort that he'd promptly taken advantage of, and Oliver's naivete on other matters had Frank questioning whether or not Oliver had kissed him because he wanted to, or because he was trying to do what Frank wanted.

Oliver, on the other hand, changed Frank's mind again when he appeared to be irritated over the interruption. "Why, Frank?"

Frank shrugged. "Don't know. Maybe I shouldn't have done that."

Oliver frowned. "Well can I do it, then?"

Frank outright laughed, while Oliver continued to study him with a faint, but detectable amount of annoyance until Frank leaned forward again. Oliver's frown faded, and for the moment, so did any doubts Frank might have had.

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It sounded like someone was scratching on the ceiling. Scraping over old wooden boards. The creak of a door opening, and the thud of something falling. Perhaps a box, spilling small objects which rolled across the attic floor. Frank was standing with his back firmly against the living room wall, right where he could see the entrance to the kitchen, the dark hall leading to the bedrooms, and the stairs leading upwards. His eyes darted from place to place, each moving shadow causing another knot in his throat, but nothing was going to get by him.

Cats , he told himself, it's just the cats. In fact, he believed himself to be correct in that regard. But it still did nothing to rest his mind. Frank was tired of being on edge. He was tired of every sound making him jump, and the stiff sensation in his neck and back, caused by uncontrollable anxiety.

An hour ago he'd been fine. Stretched out on the sofa with Oliver, watching a funny movie to calm both of their nerves, and a few shared kisses had made it easier for Frank not to think about the strange occurrences he didn't understand. The physical intimacy with Oliver had been a comfort, and a challenge, when Frank realized that if their innocent affection escalated, he'd likely cross an invisible line he'd set for himself as far as Oliver was concerned. And he didn't think Oliver would have minded, which only made the dilemma worse. But, he still felt like hiding Oliver away when Mr. Martin had pulled up alongside the house in his yellow truck just after seven o'clock. Oliver seemed happy to see his dad, though. And, his dad treated Oliver in the same respect, confusing Frank. His gut still told him that something was wrong, but whatever it was, he couldn't seem to see it, even if Mr. Martin seemed more than a little standoffish towards Frank when he discovered that Jessica had left them alone at the house. Frank had done nothing to smooth over the situation. He didn't like Mr. Martin as it was, and despite his mother's orders, he feared the truth would cause the Martins to reconsider their decision to allow Frank to see Oliver. So, he only mentioned that she had to take his sister to town, and planned to be back shortly. Oliver had seemed to understand what Frank was doing, and even added that he'd had a fun time and thanked his dad for letting him stay. He'd smiled at Frank through the truck window as they drove away, and Frank was sorry to see him go. Everything seemed to have gone downhill since. Being alone was just plain creepy in that house, and Oliver's absence had managed to alert Frank to the fact that his mom and sister had been gone for much longer than an hour. When he'd become even more aware of the sounds in the house and the darkening sky outside, he'd grown so uncomfortable that it felt nearly impossible to sit still for anything, and he even wished that Mr. Dron would stop by to check on him.

Frank was so tense that when the sound of a key unlocking the front door clicked in his ears before it opened, allowing in a burst of humid air, he jumped even as he saw his mother standing there with Rudy just behind her.

"What good is a sheriff's office with no officers in it?" Jessica demanded irritably, seeming unaware of Frank's strong sigh of relief.

"You said an hour," he said accusingly as he moved to meet them at the door.

Jessica frowned. "I'm sorry, but I was sent all over town looking for some man who supposedly would be able to help me," she explained as she ushered Rudy into the house and closed the door. "I finally found his wife, who

said he's out catching their dinner--can you believe that? Catching their dinner? Anyway, she told me that she'd send him to us when he came home. I have no idea when that will be, and in the meantime, it looks like we're on our own."

"My stomach hurts," Rudy said from behind her mother.

"Go pull out something for dinner, Rudy," Jessica replied, "and we'll get started." She looked at Frank seriously. "Was everything okay here? Where's Oliver?"

"His dad picked him up."

"How did that go?" Jessica asked as Frank followed her towards the kitchen.

"Fine, I guess."

"Meaning you didn't mention what happened today? Frank, Oliver got hurt. His parents have a right to know..."

"So they can change their minds about letting him out?" Frank cut her off.

"Mom, you know how they treat him's messed up, and if you tell..."

"I don't know that, Frank," Jessica stated. "The Martins have their reasons for wanting to keep a close eye on Oliver, and I'm sorry, but given their situation. I can't blame them for it."

"Their situation with Oliver?"

Jessica stopped walking and turned to Frank with an expression that begged him to remain calm. She'd just realized that they'd never managed to finish their earlier conversation about Oliver. "Frank, I honestly believe that the Martins are doing the best they can. Listen... I know Oliver seems like a nice boy, and he is, but I think he has a few problems that might be a little over your head."

"Like what?" Frank demanded, naturally taking offense.

Jessica sighed. "As the Martins explained it... there are times when Oliver has a few lapses. Sometimes he just... doesn't understand why he's doing something, or he'll forget why he's doing it in the first place. He..."

"He forgets," Frank finished for her. "Sometimes he wakes up and doesn't remember. He told me, Mom--and it sounds fishy."

"It's not fishy, Frank. That boy went through a lot when he was younger. Before his surgery, Mrs. Martin said that he couldn't even feed himself. He's come a long way, and it probably has a lot to do with his parents."

Frank frowned. His mom was obviously going to be stubborn about this. "That still doesn't explain the bruises... I know they're hard to see, but they were on his face this morning. He looked like hell. He can't even remember what happened to him, but Mom, there is definitely something going on over there that..."

"Maybe you're right," Jessica admitted. "But have you considered that his parents have nothing to do with it at all?"

“What do you mean?”

“They talked to me a little bit about David, too,” Jessica replied, wiping her wrist tiredly over her forehead. “I’ll admit I did think it was unreasonable for them to keep him as tightly leashed as they do Oliver after what you told me, but according to the Martins, David wants to stay home with his brother. Mrs. Martin thinks they’re very close, but...”

“But what?” Frank asked.

“Well... it seems to me that they might be focusing on taking care of the boys so much that they can’t really see that something might be wrong. It seems David has a temper. You know, that’s why they didn’t want you coming around, Frank. They were afraid David might try to cause trouble for you and I guess I can’t help but wonder if that’s because David’s jealous of Oliver more than David and Oliver being close to one another.”

“Jealous?” Frank repeated.

“Think about it for a second, Frank. Oliver’s parents are completely focused on him and what he needs. They’re bending over backwards trying to support his needs and keep him educated, and while I’m sure they care about David ... he probably doesn’t get as much attention as his brother, so he acts out. The Martins are probably so overwhelmed already that their way to deal with David is to ground him. They try to control him rather than try to help him, and I wouldn’t be surprised to find out David is taking some of his frustration and anger out on Oliver.”

“You think David hurt him?” Frank asked, more thoughtfully than skeptically.

Jessica shrugged. “It wouldn’t be unheard of, one sibling picking on another. But, the Martins probably don’t see it because Oliver looks up to David.

I suppose the only one who would know the answer to that is Oliver. Maybe you should try talking to him. The Martins think he likes you.”

“They do?” Frank asked, surprised.

“That’s why they’ve decided to let him keep coming over here... and, I convinced them that you’re worth spending time with.” She suddenly narrowed her eyes, albeit playfully. “Don’t you dare make me eat my words, young man. Come on. Let’s get something to eat...” Jessica suddenly lowered her voice and spoke to her son seriously. “And Frank, let’s talk about happy things, okay? Your sister’s pretty shaken up about what happened today.”

Frank sighed, nodding in agreement. Happy topics sounded good to him, and he could hardly blame his sister for being upset. He only hoped that they’d find out who’d been snooping around their house, and none of them would have to be upset for much longer.

.....

Howard Crook wasn’t happy about having to leave the comfort of his bed an hour earlier than usual before heading to his job at the taxidermist’s. At six

ty-two, he considered himself a reasonable old man entitled to his leisure time, even if it cut into things like regular bathing and brushing his teeth, which he hadn't done in a while he thought as he picked a piece of last night's supper out of his two front teeth--or what was left of them--and then promptly popped it right back into his mouth. His wife, Brenda, was a good cook, and he had the gut to prove it. But Brenda could also be a pushy little banshee, like she was that morning when she threatened to withhold breakfast if he didn't get on up to the lake to check out a complaint from the new teacher in town.

So, not being one to give up a meal so easily, Howard had strapped on his boots, clipped the sheriff's badge he shared with two other men in town to his shirt front, and headed to the other side of the lake. He never really liked it there, up in the hills. His whole life he'd lived in this town, and the residents in the hills had always seemed separate. It didn't really matter that their area code was all the same. Most of them were older residents who'd been there for years. Hardly any of them showed up for Sunday service, and they stared out at the boats that drifted into their territory like invading enemies. Someone probably should have told these Seaberg people they would have been better off in town, Crook mused. Least of all, they shouldn't have moved into Odetta Grover's old place. He was surprised that the town hadn't had the house condemned after the woman's death.

That was the last time Howard had been in the area, a year ago when they'd fished Odetta's waterlogged corpse out of the lake. He'd been the volunteer deputy on call that morning, and had been the first to arrive. He wasn't sure how the word got out on the accident, but before he was able to clean up the scene where the boat and Odetta's body had apparently washed ashore, the entire town had shown up to see what all the excitement was about. He hadn't seen so much traffic in the area... well, ever. There'd been people everywhere, all curious about one cranky old woman who'd been crazy enough to take her boat out in the storm. Odetta had been a real reclusive woman. She was someone people liked to tell crazy stories about, and during all the craziness of that day, people had invaded her home, taking souvenirs. A dish. A bowl. Little knickknacks that looked as wicked as the old house did, and a few people even took cats. Odetta hadn't had any relatives that anyone knew of, so the town had taken ownership of the house until recently, when they'd sold it to Crook's most recent assignment.

He hoped that this Seaberg woman wasn't about to waste his time. Many of the few complaints dealt with by Crook and the other volunteers involved silly things, like Mrs. Sander's missing gloves. The last time he'd shown up to help the senile old bat find them, she'd been wearing both. His wife had mentioned that the Seaberg woman had sounded upset, but Howard still had a hard time imagining what it could be about, other than her choice in h

ousing. Apart from the occasional prankster, the town wasn't prone to a lot of crime, which is why Crook once again felt disgruntled that he was making this trip in the first place. His tune changed, however, as he pulled up to the Seaberg house and caught sight of a young-looking woman with curly brown hair down by the water with bare feet and cutoff shorts. She was splashing in the lake, just along the shoreline with her redheaded daughter, while an adolescent male who Crook thought could use a haircut sat on an old tire nearby watching. Mrs. Seaberg was a pretty little thing, Howard thought as he grinned to himself. Back in her day, his Brenda had been quite the catch herself, but somewhere over the past ten years the woman had stopped shaving her legs and grown something of a mustache. Crook never complained, but he also never turned down the opportunity to talk to a pretty lady. Turning the key and shutting down the engine, Crook wet his fingers with his tongue and straightened his bushy eyebrows in the rearview mirror. When he got out of the car and waved to the Seabergs, his smile was just about as greasy as the balding patches of gray hair on his head, and the family regarded him warily as the boy went to stand near his mother and sister in such a territorial manner that Crook nearly laughed. Instead, he pointed to his badge and walked towards them.

"Someone call for a sheriff?" he asked.

Mrs. Martin noticeably relaxed, and came to introduce herself and her two children. Crook, now less eager to leave, did his best to be polite as he asked the family how they liked the area, and did the neighborly thing by inviting them to church. The little girl was so timid she hid behind her brother the whole time, and the brother was more than a little standoffish as he continued to watch Crook's every move, but it didn't matter, since he was more interested in dealing with their mother. But as Jessica Seaberg explained the problem, Crook was a little confused over the whole thing.

"You say he took a picture?" Crook asked when Jessica had finished.

"Yes," she replied. "Through my daughter's bedroom window. Would you like to write any of this down, Mr. Crook."

"No need, no need," Crook said animatedly and then tapped at his temple. "I keep it all in here, sweetheart, all in here." He laughed, but the family didn't join him in it so he cleared his throat and looked at the redheaded little girl. "He didn't take a picture of anything indecent, did he?"

Rudy turned as red as her hair, and Frank moved protectively in front of her, appalled by the man's blackening teeth and total lack of finesse while handling the situation.

"She'd been changing," Jessica intervened. "She thinks the picture was taken while she was dressed, but this boy was still outside of her bedroom window."

"I see, I see," Howard said, although Frank looked skeptical over that. "An

d you say your boy and his friend chased him off?"

"They fought," Jessica said, and Howard looked at the young man's split lip and grinned.

"He gotcha a good one, didn't he?" Crook remarked.

"He took us by surprise," Frank said tersely. "He hit Oliver, too."

"With a big stick," Jessica added, wanting the sheriff to have all the details, despite the fact that his competence concerned her. "If you'd like to talk to him, too, he's..."

"No, that'll be alright," Crook said as he waved her concern away with his plump hand. He coughed, tasting last night's cigar, and wiped some of the sweat from his brow as he looked over the family, and then at Jessica, his eyes moving straight up her body from her legs to her face. She was frowning at him. "I'll do my best to ask around and see if anyone knows anything," Howard offered. "But I gotta tell you, Miss, this is probably nothing. You know how kids are, anything to entertain themselves through the summer." Jessica's frown deepened. "Mr. Crook..."

"There's even a picture-taking club back in town. A bunch of kids who get together every week and... take pictures."

"You think it might have been someone from a photography club?" Jessica asked.

"Could be. Maybe they came up here to find something more interesting, and one of them thought it would be funny. Like I said, I'll ask around. In the meantime, you and the kids try not to worry. I'll get in touch if I find anything."

"That's it?" Frank demanded.

"Sorry, son. It's all I can do for right now. Unless you saw who it was?" Howard watched the boy closely for a moment, but only because he looked away, as if to hide something; but then their eyes met again and Frank shook his head.

"Nope."

"Well then," Crook said as he reached to shake Mrs. Seaberg's hand again. "If you think of anything else, you be sure to let me know about it."

"We will," Jessica said. She sounded disappointed, but it was unclear whether or not Howard Crook noticed it as his big body slowly moved back to his vehicle and he drove away while the family watched.

The truth was, he didn't really care about the way Jessica Seaberg seemed to be overreacting over the situation. But, she was a woman, so he really expected nothing less. But as far as Crook was concerned, some kid had gotten curious, and a few boys had exchanged blows. Not really a big deal. Still, nearly half a mile down the road, the dark figure of a man in a hooded jacket filled Howard Crook's rearview mirror, and he hit the brakes before he looked again to make sure it wasn't a shadow. Seeing that the figure hadn't

moved, he struggled in his seat to look out the back window. He saw a shadow move, and then whoever it was was gone.

Howard shook his head and hit the gas. He hated it up here in the hills. He wanted to get back to town. He needed to get to his real job, anyway, and didn't have time for the new teacher's silly complaints. Besides, the object in the figure's hands could have been anything besides a camera.

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Oliver Martin sat up in his bed, yawning and stretching before he rubbed at his eyes, adjusting to the morning light coming through his bedroom window. He could smell cinnamon oatmeal and pancakes, and hear his parents talking about their plans for the day somewhere on the other side of the door.

He adjusted his boxer shorts as he climbed out of bed, smiling to himself as he moved to look out the window. It was going to be a good day, he just

knew it. Any day he saw Frank would be a good day as far as he was concerned. Not even the large, painful bruise on his arm was enough to dampen his spirits. It was a small price to pay for the afternoon he'd had yesterday.

Being with Frank was wonderful. Everything about Frank was wonderful.

Oliver stared at his reflection in the window glass, noticing that it seemed to be coming closer and closer to him until it stopped and he realized that it wasn't smiling back. Sighing, he opened the window and spoke through it at his twin.

"What're you doing out there, David?"

"You're waking up kinda late, Oliver," David replied. "I thought you wanted to go see Frank today."

"I will after breakfast," Oliver said, and then fell silent for a moment as he thought over his next words. "You can't take pictures of Frank's family any more, David. He doesn't like it."

"I'll take pictures of whatever I want," David said decidedly.

Oliver frowned. "You're gonna make him mad, David."

"So?"

"Frank's my friend."

"No he's not, Oliver. He's just some guy who feels sorry for you. I'm your only friend. Me and you--we only have each other. Don't you remember that, Oliver?"

"Frank's different. He likes me, David! And you told me he was different. Remember, David?"

"I said you should say hi to him, not fall for him. He's using you."

"That's not true!" Oliver snapped in a rare outburst of anger towards his brother. "He likes me. He told me so. He likes me more than you, even."

David laughed bitterly. "Doesn't everybody? He's not really your friend, Oliver. We don't have friends."

Chapter 6

by DomLuka

Thanks to jim for editing!

Frank bit into a fresh ham sandwich as he stood on his front porch and looked across the lake towards the red roof. Oliver had said he'd come over again today, but so far he hadn't shown up, and Frank was getting antsy. For all he knew, Oliver could have told his parents what had happened yesterday, and they'd changed their minds about letting him come over. Then again, after yesterday Frank needed to give Oliver more credit than that, he decided. And he did. It was simply easier to concern himself with Oliver's whereabouts than to think about his other problems. Like David.

It had been on the tip of Frank's tongue that morning to tell Mr. Crook who he suspected of being responsible for yesterday's unexpected events. He probably would have, too, if it wasn't for the fact that he couldn't actually prove that it had been David; and then there was the fact that he completely doubted Crook's dependability, anyway. Even Frank's mom pointed out that the man probably wasn't fit to take on the responsibility of a dog, let alone the duties of an officer of the law. Frank had to agree with her. Although, Crook's mention of the photography club had caught Frank's attention, and for a good part of the morning he'd been wondering if he could seek out more information about the group in town.

"Frank?"

Frank glanced back at his sister, flashing her a welcoming smile. He'd been trying to be extra nice to her since yesterday afternoon.

"Hey."

"Mom wants to know if you're ready for lunch."

"Already taken care of," Frank replied as he held up the remainder of his sandwich before shoving it greedily into his mouth.

"Oh," Rudy replied, but didn't go back into the house. Instead, she stared out at the lake. Frank frowned. He couldn't help being worried about her. She'd been afraid to sleep in her own room the night before, and hadn't at all been comforted by the sheriff's visit. "There's a cat under my bed," she said. "He hissed at me when I tried to get him out."

"Be careful," Frank warned. "Some of them are kind of wild."

"Will you get it out for me?"

"Sure," Frank agreed.

Rudy sighed as she moved to stand next to him. "I'm bored, Frank."

He smiled at that. "You're the one who didn't want to go back to camp today."

"I hate it there. It's stupid. Is Oliver coming over today?"

"Maybe. I think so."

"Can I go with you and Oliver somewhere?" Rudy asked.

Frank looked at her, stomping down the urge to say no. If Oliver came over, t

here was a lot that Frank wanted to say to him, and none of it was meant for his little sister's ears.

"We'll see," he told her, just as his mom came outside to interrupt them.

"We have a phone, we have a phone," she said in a sing-song voice. She was also hopping around like an over-caffeinated cheerleader, which had Frank rolling his eyes. She just grinned and ruffled his hair in response as she repeated herself one more time. "We have a phone. So, who should we call first? Grandpa? Uncle Chris? One of your friends, one of mine? Who wants to go first?"

"Daddy!" Rudy cut in as she rushed back into the house. Jessica sobered while Frank only scowled after his sister.

There were several moments of awkward silence before Jessica tapped her son's arm and gave him an encouraging smile. "Do you want to go in and talk to him, Frank? It's been a while. I'm sure he'd like to hear from you."

Frank gave his mom a look that clearly stated his opinion on the matter, although he held back from expressing it out loud. "I'm gonna go take a walk," he announced.

"Now?"

"Yeah. Now."

Jessica frowned, looking pointedly at the scab blemishing her son's top lip.

"Promise you'll stay close."

Frank rolled his eyes and made a show being completely unconcerned with his mom's worrying as he kissed her cheek and gave her a short nod. "I won't be gone that long," he promised, but then stopped halfway down the stairs to look back. "Hey, Mom? Are you going back into town today?"

"I'm not sure. Why? Is there something you need?"

Frank shrugged. "Not really. Just let me know if you do, okay? I think I'll wanna go with."

"Sure, honey," she agreed.

Frank turned to leave once more, but paused again for a different reason as he faced the lake. Not far off a familiar little motor boat was headed for the far side of the water with one dark-haired passenger.

"It looks like you'll have company on your walk," Jessica commented.

"I'll see you later, Mom," Frank said, and instead of heading off into the woods on his own, he started walking towards the low-lying bridge that Oliver liked to dock at. By the time he reached it, Oliver, with his messy hair and big crooked smile, was climbing out with a lightweight backpack strapped to his back as he waved to Frank.

"Hi, Frank! My mom said I could come over by myself today, but I have to come home at four o'clock. I brought your clothes back. Do you want them now?"

"That's okay," Frank replied. "You can give them to me later. Wanna go for

a walk?"

"You don't want to go to your house?" Oliver asked, as if he were actually confused by that.

"Not really," Frank admitted. "We got our phone hooked up so Rudy's calling my dad. I don't really wanna be around for it."

"Oh. Okay where are we gonna go walking to?"

"I thought I'd ask you that," Frank replied. "You're better at not getting lost than I am."

Oliver smiled. "Okay, Frank."

They walked up the road, past the trails that Frank had already bothered to explore, and for about twenty minutes of that Frank felt guilty for not being the best of company. He'd used most of the time to vent about his father, something he normally wouldn't have done, but he couldn't quite seem to help it. Oliver was a good listener, and never gave any indication that he thought anything Frank had to say was boring, nor did he jump in and give Frank false reassurances or the well-intended but pushy advice that someone else might have. He simply listened. He also listened when Frank told him about Howard Crook and what the man had said, but instead of adding his thoughts to the situation as Frank had hoped he would, Oliver chose to remain silent.

"He said he'll call if anything comes up, but I doubt it," Frank explained.

"I think if I want to figure out who was outside of Rudy's window I'm gonna have to figure out who it was." He paused, and studied Oliver out of the corner of his eye for a long moment. "I mean, I don't know many people with a camera, except David. Do you think... do you have any idea who it might have been, Oliver? I didn't see anything, but I thought maybe if you did..."

"I didn't see anything, Frank," Oliver said at the same time he reached over and took hold of Frank's hand. Frank glanced down at the gesture, a reminder of the physical boundaries they'd crossed the day before. It took him a few more silent steps to realize that he was returning Oliver's grip. He frowned at himself, more than towards the situation.

"Whoever it was could come back," Frank said, realizing that he was sharing a genuine fear with Oliver.

"Maybe they won't, Frank," Oliver replied after some consideration. Frank stopped walking to face him, feeling irritated that Oliver appeared convinced.

"How would you know?" Frank demanded, sounding harsher than he'd intended. He couldn't help it. He wanted answers, and it only aggravated him that at everyone had something to hide, maybe even Oliver.

Oliver's brow knitted and he frowned at Frank. "I just don't want you to be upset, Frank. I said that to make you feel better."

Frank stared at his friend for a long moment, and then choked back a laugh.

To make him feel better. People told him things that were meant to make him feel better all the time. Like, his mom saying that everything was going to work itself out, or Rudy telling him that he didn't look too bad on a hair d'ay from hell. But, no one but Oliver, Frank imagined, would have pointed it out to him.

"Sorry, Oliver. I'm just stressed right now."

"About your dad, Frank?"

"Among other things. Look, Oliver... I know you don't want David to get in trouble, okay? But if you know it was him, then just tell me. I swear I'll just want to talk to him. Maybe if I know why he did it... and then attacked us--you remember he attacked us, don't you? If I just knew..." Frank stopped talking to take in a startled breath when he suddenly found Oliver's mouth on his own, and with a gentle hand to the other boy's chest, he pushed him away. "Oliver, stop, I'm trying..."

Oliver suddenly released Frank's hand, looking offended enough to get Frank's attention as he crossed his arms and looked at his feet. "Why not, Frank?" he demanded.

Because I'm trying to have a normal conversation, Frank thought. But, instead of saying that out loud, he considered the question and how he wanted to address it. It wasn't like Oliver was asking him why he didn't want to be interrupted. "Okay..." Frank said slowly, allowing himself to catch up with the situation. "Yesterday..."

"It was okay to kiss you yesterday," Oliver cut in.

"Yeah, well maybe we shouldn't have done that," Frank replied. He reached out to place a comforting hand on Oliver's shoulder, but Oliver only shrugged him off. "Oliver..."

"You said you liked me, Frank."

"I know I did... and I still do, but I was thinking about it, and maybe I shouldn't have... maybe we..."

"David said you were just using me," Oliver said bitterly, surprising Frank as the other boy met his eyes again.

"What?"

"You don't really like me, do you? You were just using me, Frank."

Frank took a physical step back when faced with the accusing look on Oliver's face and he shook his head, dumbfounded. "No, that's not it. That's the thing, Oliver, I don't want to use you. That's why..." Frank released a something akin to a growl that sounded rather grumpy, and stopped himself from saying what he might regret later when Oliver appeared confused. Frank didn't think Oliver would like being told what had really been on his mind. It wasn't that Frank didn't like kissing Oliver. In fact, it seemed to him that he'd liked it too much. He liked a lot about Oliver a little too much, he was beginning to realize. He liked the smell of lemons, the soft messy

hair, the often-laughing hazel eyes and the big, crooked grin that seemed more charming every time he saw it. Physically, he saw Oliver for what he was. An appealing young man who Frank could see himself doing a lot of things with. The problem was the fact that when Frank talked to Oliver, he often felt as if he was speaking to a boy much younger than himself. Not a stupid boy, but one who might not completely understand what those kisses meant. Of course, there was no nice way to say any of this to Oliver. Frank was definitely smart enough to realize he was walking on thin ice over the subject, and was forced to do the best he could, hoping that Oliver would understand. "I do like you, Oliver... and I wouldn't use you, okay? I just thought that maybe we shouldn't do that anymore because I don't want... I don't want to take advantage of you, because I care about you. Make sense?" "No, Frank."

Frank ran both hands through his hair, wishing that he could rewind the entire conversation and start over while Oliver studied him searchingly.

"You can't take advantage of me," Oliver finally said, and when Frank looked at him questioningly, he smiled. "And if you take advantage of me when you kiss me, then I like it." Oliver reached for Frank's hand, taking him off guard again when he suddenly sat down, seeming unconcerned with anything that might be on the ground beneath him before he looked up at Frank expectantly. "I like you a lot, Frank. I don't want David to be right."

Frank forced himself to sit on the ground because Oliver was still gripping his hand, and became annoyed when the moisture from the recent rain soaked through the back of his jeans, but tolerated it. "He's not right, Oliver," he insisted. "You are my friend," he added sincerely, only to find that Oliver was no longer paying attention to him. "Oliver?" Frank paused when he realized that Oliver was removing the backpack from his back and opening it in his lap. He glanced inside at the contents, and then at Frank.

"David says he's my only friend," Oliver said in nearly a whisper, as if he didn't want to be overheard, despite the seclusion. "It's because we're the same, Frank. He says we don't have friends. Were not supposed to... but you're here now, and I want things to be different. I don't want David to get in trouble anymore. Here. Here, Frank. Don't be mad at him anymore."

Frank watched, curious and somewhat nerve-racked as Oliver removed a plastic bag from his backpack containing a thin stack of what were obviously photographs. He held the bag out for Frank, and forgetting the meaning of patience, Frank all but snatched them from Oliver's hand and forced himself to look down at the first image. It wasn't the horror he'd been expecting.

"David took that one for me," Oliver explained. "But I don't want it if it makes you angry, Frank. You can have it. You can have all of them. I tried to find them all, Frank."

Frank unzipped the plastic bag and removed the photo he'd been aware of. Th

e picture Oliver had told him about, where he was on his bike. What startled Frank was that the photo seemed to have been taken at close range, since there weren't many trees obstructing the image, and the idea of David getting so close without Frank realizing it was unsettling. But, other than that, the image seemed rather innocent. That's probably why Frank found himself holding it out for Oliver when the other boy seemed nervous over his reaction.

"It's yours," Frank said. "Keep it if you want."

"You don't care?"

"I don't care," Frank insisted, and turned his attention to the next photo as Oliver quickly took the picture of Frank, as if he thought it would be snatched back at any moment. It nearly was, too, but only because Frank was startled by the next one. He recognized it as the day they'd moved in. He was standing with Rudy, both of them looking rather depressed and disappointed in front of their new home. And if Frank hadn't known any better, he would have thought they'd posed for the picture. Facing the camera, their eyes seeming focused on the lens. It didn't seem possible. The next picture was the same, only Frank's mother was the subject, looking tired, but still more cheerful than her offspring. Her eyes were looking right through the picture at Frank. He frowned, wondering how none of them knew they were being photographed. "How did he do this?" Frank demanded, without looking up. "David knows how to use a camera, Frank," Oliver replied, as if it were obvious.

Frank continued to flip through, deciding that most of the pictures had been taken his first week there. There were some of him exploring the trails either alone or with Rudy, and one where he was kissing his mom goodbye as he got in the car to head to town. And the more he looked the more it became apparent that he was the main focus in the images. The photographs were decidedly unsettling, but there weren't any taken through the windows of Frank's house. He was disappointed, feeling that he still lacked the proof he'd been hoping to find. Frank was beginning to realize that he didn't just think it had been David. He hoped it was.

He knew it was a switch from thinking that David was a victim of his parents, and it wasn't that Frank had completely ruled that out, either. He remembered the unsocialized boy who'd been suspicious of an ice cream cone, and still felt sympathy. But, after hearing his mother mention that David might be responsible for mistreating Oliver, Frank found himself developing a quick bias against him. For Frank, it would make sense that David was the one sneaking around his house, especially now if Oliver was right when he said that David believed they only had each other. Maybe, Frank thought, David was jealous of his friendship with Oliver. It would go to his mom's theory. And, as Frank thought of the attack the day before, recalling how their at

tacker had targeted Oliver first, he couldn't help wondering if it really was Oliver's brother. Jealous and angry brother. It could all make sense, if only Frank could prove it. If he proved it, then... well, Frank wasn't sure what was supposed to come after that. Maybe he could help Oliver, because he was convinced that Oliver was in need of some sort of help. And if anything, he'd sleep easier at night.

Frank suddenly became aware of the cool breeze striking his face, and the hair at his nape prickled as he looked up, feeling crowded by the towering trees. He quickly slipped the photographs back into their bag and then placed them in his pocket as he got to his feet and held a hand down for Oliver. "Come on," he insisted, realizing a strong urge to get out of there. "Let's get back to my place, okay?"

Oliver took Frank's hand, accepting the assistance off the forest floor, but seemed put off when Frank placed a firm hand on his shoulder to guide him back the way they'd come with a noticeable amount of force. "Is something the matter, Frank?" he asked, looking around curiously when Frank began to look over his own shoulder.

"No... I mean... I just get the creeps out here, you know?"

Oliver shook his head. "No, Frank."

Frank sighed. "Let's just go. You have to be home at four, right?"

"Yeah. Four o'clock, Frank."

"Okay, well, maybe we have the time to watch a movie or something before then."

Oliver smiled. "Okay, Frank."

.....
"Frank! Dad wants to talk to you!" Rudy called through the house, her voice nearly fading before it reached Frank's bedroom where he calmly pushed back his bed sheets, walked barefooted across his bedroom floor, and slammed his door so hard that he was certain that the people in town could hear it.

That should get the point across, Frank decided as he yawned, stretched, and headed back to bed for another hour of sleep. It was another Saturday morning, and for days now, ever since their phone had been connected, Rudy had been making a point of calling their father. He'd even called them a few times, which made Frank rather eager to avoid answering the telephone. He didn't want to talk to his dad, and the fact that the man suddenly wanted to talk to him didn't make a whole lot of sense to Frank. It wasn't as if the man had wanted to talk when they'd been in the same city, and there was no way that Frank was willing to set himself up for more disappointment by allowing his dad to think that he wanted to talk to him after all that.

He'd just crawled back into bed, pulling the covers nearly over the top of his head, when there was a soft tap on his door. His mother didn't wait for him

him to answer before she stepped in to check on him, and Frank was forced to open his eyes.

"Are you alright?" Jessica asked.

Frank frowned and wiped some more sleep from his eyes. "Why do you let her talk to him? She's just gonna get hurt."

"I think he's trying, Frank," Jessica replied. "I'm not saying that you have to forgive him if you're not ready to, but maybe..."

"I'll never forgive him."

Jessica sighed. "Okay. Listen, I've got to go to work pretty soon. There's some more pancakes out here if you're hungry, and you don't have to worry about Rudy today. I'm taking her with me so she can meet a friend from camp."

"I thought she didn't have any friends."

"Well, I guess she does now. Seems like a nice enough girl. Do you want to come, too? You've been asking to go."

"No. Oliver's coming over again today." Oliver had been coming over just about every day, a small fact that had helped ease Frank's mind. It was reassuring that Oliver's parents were allowing the visits, and Frank had no intention of missing one.

"Well, you guys have fun, then... just remember, if you go out, or even if you're here..."

"We'll lock the doors," Frank promised. "Can I use the car tonight when you get back?"

"I guess so," Jessica replied, leaning back on the doorframe as she regarded her son. "Where do you plan to take it?"

"I don't know," Frank said grumpily. "I just wanna get out of here for a while. I'll probably shop or go to a movie or something."

"You'll let me know before you leave?"

"Fine. I'll let you know before I leave," Frank agreed with all the hostility of a seasoned teenager. Jessica just smiled, loving him anyway.

Frank stared at the cracks in his ceiling as he waited for his mother to leave, and then he reached into his nightstand drawer and removed the plastic bags of photographs which had been there for nearly a week. Frank had done a lot of staring at them lately, and did some more after removing them from their plastic bag. He'd become quite familiar with the eight images over the last few days. They were beginning to frighten him less and less, only because he'd been walking around his property every morning attempting to discover where David could have hidden to take some of them, and had come up with a range of possibilities. That at least convinced Frank that David didn't have some mutant ability to turn invisible. Very reassuring. Other things, though, were not.

Frank abandoned the idea of getting more sleep as soon as he heard his mom's

s Subaru drive away from the house, and twenty minutes later he was dressed and outside, staring across the lake at the red roof of Oliver's house with a pair of binoculars borrowed from Rudy. There was too much in the way to get a good view of anything other than the roof and the barn, but when a flash of yellow moving somewhere along the road leading to the house caught Frank's attention, he focused on that. A yellow truck. It appeared that Oliver's parents were leaving, so Frank looked back towards their property, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Martin children. Their boat was visible where it was docked, and he watched it for a few moments, knowing that it would be there for at least another few hours. Oliver usually came over after lunch. That meant that if Frank left for a while, he probably wouldn't miss him.

He went to the shed, and a moment later he was on his bike and on the road, hoping he remembered the easy way to get to the other side of the lake.

.....
The Martin house was quiet, the curtains drawn shut, no light coming from within. Frank frowned, wondering if anyone was home at all. It was possible that Oliver's parents had taken him and David somewhere, but Frank doubted it. From his short conversations with Oliver he already knew that it was Mr. Martin who was most likely to go to town for work. Mrs. Martin worked from home, but on occasion the two of them went out together; but according to Oliver, they usually left him and David at home.

Frank felt hesitant as he climbed the steps and approached the door, and found himself tapping rather than knocking. A moment later he was lifting his fist to try again when he decided that no one would have heard him, but his hand paused in midair as the doorknob began to turn. Frank took a step back, his eyes lifting to a familiar face that made it possible for him to relax, and he smiled back at it. "Hey, Oliver. I know you were gonna come over later, but I was wondering if you wanted to come over early. It's just about warm enough for swimming," Frank observed. "But, uh, since I'm here, I was wondering if I could talk to David before we left."

Oliver looked back at Frank, his smile slowly fading until it didn't exist at all, and as he leaned back against the front door he crossed his arms in a defensive posture. "So what do you want with David, Frank?"

Frank's eyes narrowed. "David?"

One of David's shoulders shrugged. "Present. Come to give me grief about my hobby? What's wrong, Frank, don't like to get your picture taken? Personally, I think you're pretty photogenic."

"I just don't like it when someone takes my picture and I don't know about it," Frank retorted. "Especially when they have to sneak around the bushes and peek through someone else's windows. Did you learn how to do that in your stalker's handbook, David?"

David pushed off of the door and took a step forward that Frank interpreted as somewhat threatening, but held his ground.

“You think it was me?” David demanded, sounding incredulously offended.

“Why not?” Frank replied. “Seems like you like sneaking around, and I’m pretty sure I owe you for this, too,” he added, indicating his lip, which was still visibly bruised.

David smirked. “If I’d hit you your teeth would be stuck to my knuckles about right now.”

The arrogance of the comment aggravated Frank, and suddenly all his frustrations were aimed pointedly at David as he blindly moved forward and gave David’s chest a shove. “Wanna prove that, asshole? Go the fuck on. You like pushing people around? Like pushing your brother around? Go ahead. Try me.”

Frank didn’t get the attack he’d expected, and even wanted. Instead, David made a point to step away as he looked at Frank like he’d lost his mind.

“You think I hurt Oliver?” David sounded as if the very idea was hilarious.

“I’ve never touched him!”

“Then who did?” Frank demanded. “And don’t tell me I’m imagining things because a few days ago I saw him! And I don’t know what the hell’s going on around here but I know it has something to do with you!”

“And why not?” David snapped. “Everything is my fault--but I never touched Oliver!”

“Then who, David?”

“Who do you think?” David growled.

“Are you saying it was your parents?” Frank asked.

David fell silent for a long moment before he shook his head. “No. They wouldn’t hurt Oliver. And I ain’t got nothing more to say to you, Frank.”

David turned and reached for his door, but didn’t get it open before Frank grabbed his arm and spun him back around.

“Do they hurt you, David?”

David’s eyes met his guest’s suspiciously as he shook Frank’s hand off and his lip slowly turned up into a scowl. “You don’t get it? Do you?”

“What am I supposed to get, David?”

David laughed, and then met Frank’s eyes with a seriousness that almost seemed desperate. “Look around you. Look deeper.”

Frank sucked in a breath and gripped his hair, suddenly resisting the urge to pull it out. “No. No. You know what, David? If you don’t want to talk to me, fine. But if anything else happens to Oliver I swear I’ll mention it to everyone who walks past me until someone believes it because believe it or not, I do care about him, and I’d help you too if you could just knock off this cryptic bullshit for five minutes!”

David took an abrupt step forward, startling Frank into silence. "Oliver's not here right now," he said quietly. "Time to leave, Frank."

"David..."

"I don't got no answers for you. Everything else you can see. You're just not looking!" he said, sounding angry over it.

Frank opened his mouth to inform David that he sounded like a crazy person, but then closed it and decided that it wasn't worth the effort as he turned and headed down the front steps. "Just tell Oliver to call me when he gets back," Frank said as he reached his bike and began to walk it towards the road.

"Hey Frank," David suddenly called, causing Frank to pause and look back at him. "Did it ever occur to you that whoever was looking in your windows wasn't looking to take a picture of anyone in your family?"

"You think..."

Frank didn't get to finish his response when David turned, walked into his house, and gave an obvious dismissal as he slammed the front door.

.....
Frank didn't know what time it was when he arrived home, but he knew that something wasn't quite right when he got there. His mom's car was parked on the side of the house, which he hadn't expected. She should have been working until later that afternoon. When he saw that the front door had been left carelessly wide open, he felt a knot rise in his throat as he rushed towards it.

"Mom!" Frank called as he entered, looking around for any signs of trouble. "Mom!"

"In here, honey!" was the muffled response, and as he reached the kitchen he looked over the scene with a good amount of confusion. With good reason, he thought. The scene at the kitchen table was strange enough.

He had to look twice when he noticed not one, but two redheaded girls at the table sharing peanut-butter sandwiches. He was about to demand if Rudy had multiplied before both girls looked over their shoulders and he saw that one had glasses and a lot more freckles. He shook off the oddity of the picture they made and looked towards his mother, who was attempting to wrestle something out of the garbage disposal she'd insisted they install after moving in. Frank strode across the kitchen and pulled her hand out of the drain before he reached in himself and found the mangled spoon that had gotten trapped.

"Thank you," Jessica said once he retrieved it. "I feel like I've been trying to pull that out forever. Where were you at?"

Frank ignored her question. "The front door's wide open," he said accusingly.

Jessica sighed. "I know. It's just so hot in here and that swamp cooler's start

ing to smell again.”

“You told me to lock the doors whether or not I’m home...”

“Frank,” Jessica cut him off, looking amused. “It’s hot. And I think letting some air in will do us some good. Besides, we’re all here now. Have you said hello to Rudy’s friend, Stephanie?” she asked pointedly, letting Frank know that he was being rude.

He sighed. “Hi, Stephanie.”

“Hi,” the girl replied, sounding too chipper for Frank’s current mood.

“Mom,” he started, but Jessica was already moving past him and into a plastic grocery bag left on the counter top. She reached in, and when she turned back to face him she was presenting a whistle connected to a shoelace.

“Here,” she said. “We’ve all got one. I couldn’t find anyplace that sold pepper spray, but if there’s any trouble, we can blow our whistles.”

Dumbfounded, Frank looked between the whistle and his mom until she finally rolled her eyes and put it around his neck herself. He noticed that Rudy was already wearing one before he finally cracked a smile and found himself trying not to laugh. But, he did manage to keep from telling his mom that he thought blowing a whistle at an attacker would be about as effective as trying to tickle one with a feather. “What are you doing home?” he asked. “I thought you were working today.”

Jessica’s smile faded, and she headed towards the living room. Frank couldn’t tell if it was because she planned to avoid the question, or if she didn’t want Rudy and her friend to hear her response.

“Mom?” he asked again when they reached the living room and his mom went about straightening things that didn’t need to be straightened.

“Everything’s fine, Frank. They just didn’t need me today, that’s all.”

“They fired you?” he demanded.

Jessica straightened. “No.” she said quickly. “But it seems that in this town, everyone has slow days. Even ice-cream stores on hot days.”

“Oh.”

“They said they’d call me back next week if they needed help.”

“Next week?”

“Frank,” Jessica said quickly. “Don’t make a big deal of it. We’re fine--and don’t you dare go looking for a job just because you think you need to support us. That’s not your job.”

“Well not all of it should be your job, either.”

Jessica sighed. “I talked to your dad a little this morning. He’s going to start paying child support.”

“And you believe that?” Frank asked skeptically.

“We’ll see what happens,” Jessica replied. “In the meantime, I don’t want you worrying about this... Your dad wants to talk to you, you know. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt if...”

“We’re not talking about this,” Frank stated.

“Frank...”

“Mom... please.”

Jessica fell silent, although it was obvious she wanted to say more. It was better that she didn’t. The short fuse Frank had when it came to his father had only become shorter over the last few days, and they both knew it. He needed more time.

“Okay,” Jessica relented. “But I don’t want you to worry about my job, alright? I’ll be teaching again before you know it.”

Frank gave a slow nod, also deciding against an argument. He was worried, and he was going to worry, but if it would prevent him from having to discuss his father, he could allow his mom to think that he was leaving all the worrying to her. For a little while.

“So are you back for the day?” he asked.

“Looks like it. Stephanie’s parents are probably going to come pick her up later. It turns out they live on our side of town. Isn’t that nice.”

“Yeah. Good for Rudy.”

Jessica smiled. “You can have the car now if you still want it. Any idea what you’ll be doing yet?”

Frank shook his head. “I’ll probably just look around town for a while, Mom.

I’ll be back soon, too. Oliver should still be coming over in a while. Um, if he gets here before I get back, could you maybe ask him to wait for me?”

“I can do that,” Jessica agreed, smiling. “You guys are still getting along, then?”

“Yep,” Frank said before he leaned over to kiss his mom’s cheek. “Keys?”

“In my purse,” Jessica replied, knowing that her son would help himself. She watched him do just that as she went to where it was sitting near the front door. “Frank?”

“Yeah?”

“You are okay, right?” she asked.

Frank looked up to meet her eyes, and forced himself to smile somewhat genuinely. “I’m fine, Mom.”

.....

For once, Frank saw the benefit of living in a small town.

“Jenny Woodmoore has a camera,” the woman with dark, silver-streaked hair explained from behind the gas-station counter, where Frank had stopped to fill up the Subaru. “She took the pictures for my daughter’s wedding just last year. Turned out real nice.”

“Do you know if she’s in the photography club?” Frank asked.

“Well, I don’t know if you’d call it a club. But I think she gets together with her friends every once in a while. They’ve all got those fancy cameras. I

think she's working at Karrigan's just down the street this summer. Maybe you could talk to her about it. She's a real pretty girl," she added with a wink

Frank forced a smile. "Thanks... um, one more thing. Do you know where I can buy a camera?"

The woman smiled brightly, and pointed to a rack of disposable cameras near the register, claiming, "The best in town."

No more than ten minutes later, Frank was discovering that Karrigan's was one of the few restaurants in town as he pulled into the dirt lot in front of it. It seemed a little busier than the other businesses around, but not by much. As he entered, he felt like he was walking into a fancy McDonald's that had a sour odor beneath the smell of greasy burgers and thick fries. A waitress approached him right off, and after a quick look at her bright yellow name tag, which didn't say Jenny, he allowed her to show him to a table where he ordered a side salad and a soda. As soon as she disappeared, he was out of his booth and taking the long path to the restrooms, taking in everything he could on the way.

There was an old couple on one side of the room, and an older waiter, but the action seemed to be in the opposite corner where a girl around his age dressed in the restaurant garb leaned over a corner booth laughing at something one of the three guys--also around Frank's age--said to her. He detoured towards them, watching her closely as she flipped a light brown ponytail over her shoulder, and then turned. A quick glance down at her right breast told him that she was who he was looking for, and he headed to the restrooms to wash his hands.

Frank's meal wasn't at his table by the time he returned, and in a last minute decision, he decided to switch tables, moving into Jenny Woodmoore's section where he removed his newly purchased disposable camera from his pocket and began to inspect it as if it were the most complicated instrument he'd ever come by. He only had to put on the act for about five minutes before Jenny Woodmoore was standing over his table, regarding him curiously with a small salad and a drink between her hands.

"Excuse me, this wouldn't be yours, would it?" she asked.

Frank looked up into friendly blue eyes and smiled. "Oh, yeah," he replied. "Hope you don't mind, but I switched tables. The other one was in the sun. It's pretty warm today."

"That's no problem," Jenny insisted as she placed his food in front of him while Frank went back to playing with the camera. "If you need anything else just let me know."

"Sure," Frank said, before suddenly aiming the camera at the girl's face. "Smile."

To his surprise, Jenny not only grinned, but struck a pose as he took his pi

cture, and when he lowered the camera, she grinned. "We don't have a lot of tourists come through here," she remarked, eyeing his five-dollar camera.

"Oh, I'm not," Frank said quickly as he looked sheepishly down at the camera in his hands. "Actually, I just moved here."

"Really? Wait--you have a little sister, right? Rudy? Red hair?"

"Yeah, actually," Frank replied, now regarding Jenny somewhat suspiciously.

"She goes to my family's summer camp," Jenny said excitedly.

"Oh... um, yeah, that's her."

"I like her," Jenny commented as she surprised Frank again by slipping into the booth across from him. "She talks about you a lot."

"She does?"

"She mentioned a few things," Jenny remarked as a slow blush crawled over her cheeks before she eyed Frank's camera again and promptly changed the subject. "So are you just out looking at the town?"

"Nah," he said. "I did that a few weeks ago. Actually... I lost my camera during the move." He held up the disposable to explain. "I picked this up because... I thought it would be better than nothing. I really miss using mine, you know?"

"That's awful. Do you think you'll find it?"

"Probably not," he said sincerely. "Hey, you wouldn't happen to know where I could get another one around here, do you?"

Jenny looked thoughtful for a moment. "That depends. What kind was it?"

Frank blinked and then shook it off and did his best to sound humble. "Actually," he said, lowering his voice, "I have no idea." Jenny gave him an odd look, and he quickly explained. "It was a gift, from my grandmother. I mean, she died and left it to me."

"Aww..."

"It was a while ago," he said quickly. "But I was sort of teaching myself how to use it, and I'd really like to find another."

"Well, do you remember anything about it?"

"It took pictures."

Jenny laughed. "Okay... hmm, you could try Mr. Gelve's garage. It sort of doubles as a pawn shop, and he might have something there. But don't get your hopes up. If you want to spend some money, I special-ordered mine."

Frank raised his eyebrows. "You're into photography?"

Jenny grinned. "Definitely. Actually, there's a whole group of us that gets together on Sundays. There's not much else to do around here, really... you wouldn't be interested in coming sometime, would you? It's just a bunch of kids from school."

"I don't know," Frank said carefully. "I mean... would you wanna show up with this?" He glanced at his camera, and Jenny smiled.

“I’ll let everyone know what happened. I swear they won’t make fun of you. You should come--we’ll all be going to school together in the fall, anyway.”

Frank frowned. “That’s nice of you... Jenny.” He made sure to look at her name tag again. “But I don’t know...”

“Look,” she said, standing as an older man appeared across the room and regarded her disapprovingly, “I’ve gotta get back to work. If you wanna come we’ll be meeting here around eleven o’clock. Just after church.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Will I see you there?” Jenny asked.

Frank looked at her as if she were deaf. “Like I said, I’ll...”

“No,” she said, laughing. “Will I see you at church?”

“Um...”

“We’ll talk about it more then,” she insisted, and then rushed off to carry on with her duties.

Frank sat back in his seat as he watched her walk away. Currently, there were two things he hoped for. First, he hoped that Howard Crook was as reliable as Frank thought he was, and hadn’t mentioned his family to any of Jenny’s friends. Second, he hoped that he could talk his mom into letting him use the car again before eleven o’clock tomorrow.

.....
It looked like Oliver had attempted to get his hair to stay down today. It seemed neater somehow, but still stuck up in places from constantly running his fingers through it. Frank had noticed the habit a while ago. There were times when Oliver would fall silent, as if contemplating something important, and his hands would take turns going to his head, his fingers reaching for the scars beneath his hair. He did that now as he stared at an outdated tetris game on Frank’s computer.

“Hey,” Frank said as he stepped past the door. His mom had directed him there when he’d arrived home and asked if Oliver had shown up. It seemed that Jessica had sent Oliver there since Rudy was already over at Stephanie’s house, and she was busy putting lesson plans together.

Oliver hadn’t heard Frank come in, and stood quickly, appearing startled as he turned to face him. His smile came soon enough, though. “Hi, Frank. I’ve been waiting for you. Are we gonna go swimming now?”

Frank looked over Oliver, noting the light-blue swimming shorts he was wearing below a dark t-shirt, and frowned. “I was thinking about going swimming earlier,” he admitted. “Did David tell you?” Frank didn’t think it was likely. It seemed obvious to him that David didn’t approve of his friendship with Oliver. But, Oliver’s nervous expression told a different story. “Really?” Frank asked, without waiting for a verbal response. “I didn’t think he’d even tell you I was there.”

“David’s mad again,” Oliver replied. “I don’t wanna talk about him right now, Frank.”

Frank let out a breath, not at all as frustrated as he usually was when Oliver dodged his questions. In fact, this time, he agreed with Oliver. He didn’t want to talk about David, either. He hadn’t been particularly pleased with their conversation that morning. He’d hoped to find answers, but only walked away with questions, and the same lingering suspicion that David had been sneaking around his house. But there was more to it now. There was the photography club. He had as much doubt towards David’s involvement as he had suspicion. He supposed that he didn’t want to rule anything out just yet, but he needed a break from it. At least, until tomorrow.

“You know what, Oliver?” Frank said as he closed his bedroom door. “Let’s go swimming. You want to do it here, or do you know a better place?”

Oliver grinned. “We can take my boat, Frank.”

Frank thought that sounded good enough, so long as they didn’t run into any floating, dead animals. He went to his drawers, unpacked his long-lost swim trunks, and stripped down to pull them on, not putting much thought into the way that Oliver had fallen silent as he watched, but Frank did find himself laughing when he caught the other boy blushing.

Downstairs, they said goodbye to Jessica, and Frank promised he’d be back before it got too dark before they headed out with a couple of towels and the bottled water his mom had insisted that they have. Frank was glad they took it. It was a hot day, the kind that caused the sun to sting their skin and the humidity refused to allow them to escape the heat. But at least the water was cool. In fact, it was cold enough to be uncomfortable in some of the deeper areas, so Oliver took the boat to one of the wider coves. They could see his red roof from it, but the area was still quiet, and perfect for swimming. Although, Frank had to be convinced of that last thing when he felt something brush up against his knee as soon as he jumped in the water. Fortunately, Oliver convinced him that it was likely a piece of driftwood, and assured him that he’d never seen snakes in the particular area.

“Snakes?” Frank demanded, appalled.

Oliver grinned. “Saw a whole nest of them the other day.”

“That’s not funny, Oliver.”

“You have to be careful if you see them in the water, Frank. They’ve got poison. Do you know what a water moccasin looks like? I’ve got some pictures of them I can show you. The babies look different from the big ones. You should know what all of them look like.”

“You’ll tell me if you see one, right?” Frank asked as he warily looked down at the murky water he was treading.

Oliver laughed as he launched himself through the water towards Frank. “I’ll make sure none get close to you, Frank,” he promised as he circled around

nd behind Frank, wrapping both arms loosely around his neck to hold on.

“You’d better not,” Frank grumbled, and then smiled despite himself when he felt Oliver’s nose gently nudging at his damp hair. He turned in the water to meet Oliver’s eyes, and with a playful smirk Frank dug his fingers into the other boy’s ribs, tickling until Oliver was laughing so hard he could hardly stay above the water on his own. This prompted both of them to move a little closer to land, where they could feel the rough bottom of the lake beneath their toes. Oliver enthusiastically dunked himself and came up shaking out his hair, causing Frank to laugh.

“I don’t wanna go home soon, Frank,” Oliver commented. “I wanna stay with you for a long time.”

“My mom said you could sleep over some time. Do you think your parents would let you?”

Oliver’s smile faded as he shook his head. The negative response was exactly why Frank hadn’t asked the question sooner, among other reasons. “They’ll say no, Frank.”

“That’s okay,” Frank insisted as he reached for Oliver’s waist and pulled the other boy towards him. “Maybe some other time. And we still have a while before you have to go home, right?”

Oliver nodded, and his smile returned when Frank leaned forward until their noses touched, and then their lips.

Frank hadn’t bothered to tell Oliver that he wasn’t sure they should be kissing after the first time he’d done it, and it had quickly become obvious that he’d changed his mind. Oliver had a lot to do with that when he’d promised that Frank wasn’t pushing anything on him, which had been Frank’s main concern. And, Frank enjoyed the affection they shared. It was torture sometimes, the way he tried to take things slow. He liked it best when Oliver made the first move, and sometimes afterwards he’d question how involved he should actually become with Oliver, but he’d decided that time would answer that question. The fact was, Frank was less lonely with Oliver. He’d known he had feelings for him, but it seemed that every day he saw him they’d develop just a little bit more, and every day the things he thought were different about Oliver seemed less important, almost as if they didn’t exist. Except one thing. The innocence factor was still bothering Frank, and not just within their developing physical relationship.

Even if the Martins had agreed to let Oliver and Frank see each other, Frank was still worried over what went on in Oliver’s home. But since Oliver insisted that he wasn’t being mistreated, Frank was forced to rationalize that perhaps he was seeing a problem that wasn’t there. Maybe it was possible that he wanted to find something wrong, because if his attention was on the Martins, then it wasn’t on his own broken family. If this was true, then Frank knew that it wasn’t fair to Oliver, but even so, it was difficult not

to worry, because even when Oliver claimed that nothing was wrong, there was another boy living in that house that seemed more wrong to Frank every time he came to mind.

Oliver's eyes were closed when Frank gently pulled away from the kiss, giving him a moment to study the other boy's peaceful expression; his eyelashes looked longer, wet and clotted together, his pink tinted cheeks and slightly puffy lips as his tongue slipped out to taste where Frank had just been. Frank suddenly wanted to pull him closer and hold onto him. He seemed fragile, and because of that Frank hated anyone who'd ever want to harm him. "Does he hurt you?" Frank asked, and Oliver's eyes snapped open.

"I don't understand, Frank," Oliver said quietly.

Frank sighed, and didn't explain himself. Instead, he kissed Oliver again, a gesture that was responded to with an equal effort. Right now, Frank decided, it was just better to kiss him.

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He didn't know how late it was, but outside his window Frank saw nothing but shadows. Darkness, seeping through the glass just as sunlight might have.

He couldn't seem to move from that spot, despite the fact that he was uncomfortable there with the awful creaks and moans that his mother insisted were normal for such an old house. The dripping of water from the gutters outside seemed to grow louder in his ears, alerting him to the fact that the glass was cracked open and a warm breeze was coming through the screen, bringing with it the musky scent of the nearby lake. A layer of goose bumps rose over his skin as the rough, thin fur of the feline sharing his room brushed against his leg. All it had taken to tame this beast was a piece of hot dog, but Frank still cautiously stepped away from it. He still had battle wounds all up his arms from wrestling the creature out from under his sister's bed--the feline's favorite place in the house, it seemed. His mom had wanted him to throw it out of the house, considering how aggressive the cat had seemed, but Frank had brought her--he'd checked--into his own room instead. She'd seemed annoyed by the situation at first, but now it was apparent that the cat was enjoying more comfort than Frank currently was.

His eyes rose to the dark window again, and this time jumped as a startled cry became clogged in his throat at the sight of a human outline in front of his face. The shadow stepped closer, prompting Frank to step back, blindly reaching for anything that might become a weapon. But as the face appeared more clearly, his panic became confusion as he looked out at Oliver's grinning face.

"Christ!" Frank cursed as he leaned closer before beckoning for Oliver to remain where he was. He didn't bother pulling pants on over his boxers as he left his room, and then the house. Barefoot he moved around in the darkness, his eyes searching out his unexpected guest. "Oliver?"

Frank reached the outside of his own bedroom window, only to find that no one was there. He frowned, and then jumped at the tap on his shoulder. "Damn it, Oliver!" he cursed, spinning around. "What are you doing..."

Frank's voice seemed to fade away as he met eyes, shining at him through the darkness, dark and furious. It was Oliver's face, but the expression...

David stepped forward pointedly, lifting an object threateningly in his left hand. Frank couldn't seem to move as he stared at the object, silver and shining, polished to perfection, just like always, and as it came down with a blunt force towards his head all he could think was that his dad never would have given one of his old soccer trophies to David. They were even more important to him than Frank and his sister were; his dad had taken those stupid trophies, but...

Frank's eyes snapped open. A glance at the glowing numbers on his clock told him that it was just past three in the morning. His chest was vibrating, and lifting a hand, he found the cat curled up and purring there. His throat felt dry and his head ached, and there was a faint ringing in his ears as he looked around at the shadows in his dark room, feeling disoriented. He released a shaky breath, purposely not looking towards his window, which he somehow knew, was cracked open, and his hands shook as he lifted them to his sweat-dampened hair. He took a few deep breaths, and then fell still, listening carefully as he realized that the ringing wasn't coming from inside his ears at all, but somewhere in the house. They hadn't had the phone that long, and Frank wasn't used to the sound.

He moved the cat away from him carefully, or at least he tried to. It didn't work. She was quick to object to being pushed aside, and as she leapt onto the floor he winced when her claws momentarily dug into his chest. The pain succeeded in waking him, and he forced himself from his bed. He regretted it as soon as his bare feet touched the floor and he became lightheaded from standing up too fast.

Half walking, half stumbling, Frank made his way out his door and down the narrow hall, pausing at the doors of his mom's and sister's bedrooms. Rudy's door was cracked, and he could hear her softly snoring, undisturbed by the phone disrupting the night. His mom's door was closed, and after a moment of listening, he decided that the noise wasn't bothering her, either. He continued on, careful not to stub his toes on the furniture as he reached the living room.

Each ring of the phone sounded more insistent than the last, causing nervous tension to swell in Frank's chest, but he didn't rush. He paused in front of the phone, sat down in the cozy arm chair next to it, and even took the time to clear the sleep from his throat before he answered groggily, not putting nearly enough thought into who would possibly be calling his house at three in the morning.

“Hullo?” he mumbled, still rubbing at his eyes, which seemed slow to adjust to the severe darkness of the house, even after sleep.

The response came in a whisper. “Is it you, Frank?”

Frank blinked. Arron? Eric? Isaac? No. Couldn’t have been any of his friends from back home. He’d never called them with his number, only written again to give it to them, hoping for some sort of response so he could save on the long-distance bill. “Who is this?” he asked, and cleared his throat again when his voice came out scratchy. He felt thirsty. Really thirsty.

“Did you really mean it? Would you do it, Frank? Would you help?” The voice seemed shaky. Distant.

Frank woke up a little more, his awareness prickling. “I don’t know...” he said cautiously. “Who is this?”

Another whisper. “You know who.”

There was a long silence as the caller waited for Frank to respond, and when he finally did, he sounded far from happy. “David? Do you know what fucking time it is?” He was irritated. He’d given his number to Oliver. Not David. His recent nightmare seemed reason enough to hang up now, but he didn’t. “What are you even doing calling me at...”

“I can’t do it anymore,” David interrupted. “I don’t want to. You can make it stop. You’re different.”

Frank paused a beat, beginning to listen to what David was saying, ignoring his irritation over the situation. “You can’t do what anymore?”

“It’s too much. Too fucking much!” David suddenly burst out. “I’m not here. .. I’m never here. I’m empty.”

“Did you get into your parent’s liquor cabinet or something?”

“I can’t love them. I don’t know how anymore. I don’t. I don’t. What do I do, Frank? Stop it? I can stop it. I will stop it.”

“David, what are you talking about?” Frank asked. David kept saying his name, but it didn’t seem like he was actually talking to him. “Just tell me, okay? Did something happen? Where’s Oliver?”

There was another silence, and even through the phone Frank could feel the anger on the other end of the phone, so much so that he felt himself recoil even before David’s next outburst. “Not Oliver! Stop with Oliver! It’s always fucking Oliver!”

“Shit. Okay... David, is everyone there alright? David?”

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Mary Martin looked around the corner, into the living room where David was now pacing with the phone in his hand.

“No,” he hissed into the receiver. “Alright? Alright? It’s never alright, Frank.”

She thanked god that his back was to her and he didn’t know she’d left her room yet, and cursed him because of who he was on the phone with. She knew

it was a bad idea to let Oliver see that boy. Now, David was going to tell him everything. She couldn't let that happen.

Holding her hand over her fast-swelling black eye, she moved cautiously back to her bedroom to think for a moment. Damn Brian! She had been completely unprepared to be awakened in the middle of the night as David snuck back through his bedroom window. She'd been afraid that Oliver had had a bad dream and went to check on him, but ended up with a confrontation to deal with instead, and she'd have to face it alone. She hadn't been surprised to find her husband gone. She woke up to that more often than not, the same way she often smelled Francine Barker's favorite perfume all over his clothes when he came home from town. Normally, she didn't mind it. If he was with Francine, then he was leaving her alone, but tonight... damn him, she needed him tonight.

There was a thud in the living room, furniture crashing as David cursed, and she jumped. He was just a boy, she told herself. But then, the pain in her eye reminded her that he was a strong boy. He'd threatened to kill her more than once, and she was beginning to believe he'd actually do it. But she had to stop him this time. Stop him before he ruined everything. Things were quiet. Peaceful. She wouldn't let him take that away.

Blindly, Mary Martin reached over her dresser, feeling a picture frame and a bible before she felt the thick, cheap candle holder Brian had given her last year for Christmas. She held it in her hand for a moment, concerned over the weight... she couldn't strike him too hard. Had to be careful. She wrapped it in Brian's pillow case, hoping it would provide the safety net she needed.

On tiptoes she snuck back into the living room, careful not to trip, careful not to breathe. She did her very best not to make a sound as she eyed David, now leaning over the windowsill, his head hung, the phone still to his ear. He was speaking softly, and as she grew closer, she could hear what he was saying.

"Do you know what it's like, Frank? Do you know it's like to be seen but not heard?... I do. I'm ready to tell you now. I'll tell you everything."

Mary crept even closer, raising the candle holder only to lower it again, hesitating. She couldn't do this. No. She had to.

"I know what it's like to not exist," David whispered. "And when I do... they take the light away."

Mary lifted the object in her hand once more, closed her eyes, and swung, hoping that it wasn't too hard as she made the blow make contact with the back of her son's head. Her eyes snapped open when she heard him fall, and looking down, she was faced with David's startled eyes, now glazed over, watering a stream of tears as he stared back at her and struggled to keep the phone to his ear while he managed a few last words before he dropped.

“They always take... the light away. Help me.”

Chapter 7

by DomLuka

Thanks to jim for editing!

Honey, just have a glass of milk and try to go back to sleep. No more sugar before bedtime, m'kay?

That's what Frank imagined he'd hear from his mom if he woke her up to tell her about the phone call he'd just gotten. That's why he didn't. Instead, he dressed, snuck into her purse for the car keys, and as quietly as possible, pulled the Subaru away from the house, hoping not to wake anyone. It was still dark, his headlights casting deep cutting shadows as he took the dirt road slowly, unable to see beyond what was in front of him. The windows were up, keeping out the cool air, which might have been comfortable any other time.

Frank felt like he couldn't breathe, but he was wide awake, even while his mind was oddly numb of all the thoughts that should have been running through it. The truth was, Frank didn't want to think. He didn't want to think about the last moments of that phone call before the line went dead--the pleading in David's voice, the suspicious sounds of a scuffle, and the rush to hang up on him. He didn't want to think about what he was about to do because of that call, either, because Frank knew that as soon as he started thinking about it, he'd realize how incredibly foolish charging out in the early hours of morning to launch a rescue with no backup really was. He just needed to get there. Through every wrong turn before he reached the Martin house, Frank just wanted to get there, and when he did, he found himself somewhat grateful that he didn't lose confidence at the door.

He'd left the Subaru headlights on, aimed at the house. It was too dark, otherwise, and he wasn't interested in any more surprises. This time, Frank wanted to be the surprise, which is why he hardly hesitated before lifting his fist to relentlessly pound on the front door. No tapping this time. He wanted to be heard, and he wanted to be heard quickly. He wasn't disappointed when he saw a light inside come on just before the door cracked open, and was further relieved when he found that it wasn't Oliver's dad he was facing. Mary Martin wasn't as nearly as intimidating, especially in a fluffy purple nightgown. She looked more frightened than surprised when she saw Frank, which he immediately used to his advantage. He really wasn't in the habit of intimidating women. His mother would have made a point to tear him a new asshole if he ever had, but this time, he was willing to make an exception. “Where are Oliver and David?” he demanded.

Mrs. Martin was quite the actress, Frank decided, when she appeared to be outraged through the thin crack in the door she was standing behind. “They're sleeping, and you should be, too. Obviously your mother has no idea you're

out at all hours of the night or I'm sure..."

"I just got a phone call from David," Frank cut her off. "He's not sleeping. Get him."

Mrs. Martin narrowed the one eye that Frank could see on him. "Go home, or I'll call the police." She started to slam the door, but this time Frank was quick to get a foot in.

"And I'm sure that'll do you a whole lot of good," he said sarcastically. "Where is David?"

When Mrs. Martin didn't answer and attempted to shove her door closed on Frank's foot instead, he'd finally had enough. With both hands on the door he pushed his way by it and Mary Martin, into the house.

"That's it!" Mary huffed, stepping back. "I'm calling the police!"

"Go ahead," Frank replied as he looked over the perfectly normal living room for anything not-so-normal. "I was gonna get to that, anyway." He glanced challengingly towards Mrs. Martin, and as he'd suspected, she stopped short of picking up the phone. But what he hadn't expected, was the swollen purple blemish marring her left eye. That definitely hadn't happened from being clumsy, which is exactly the explanation Frank thought he'd get if he asked. "Where's your husband?" he asked, finally recalling that forcing his way into someone else's house wasn't the safest scenario in the world. Mary must have seen that the idea of running into Mr. Martin made Frank nervous.

"He had to run out for a minute. You better not be here when he comes home. I'm warning you..."

"Ran out at three in the morning?" Frank mumbled skeptically under his breath before he decided to focus on the task at hand. If Brian Martin was gone for the time being, then he thought it was best to hurry. "David?" he called, moving further into the house, cautiously making sure that the door stayed wide open behind him. "David!" He raised his voice as he neared the hallway and Mary stepped into his path.

"I told you, he's sleeping!"

Frank ignored her and brushed by, opening the doors of two rooms, an office and a master bedroom before he found the one he was looking for. He paused in the doorway for a long moment, taking in the simple space. Tidy, but cluttered. And, there might as well have been a taped line down the middle of it.

There were two twin beds, one on each side of the room. One was neatly made, looking like it hadn't been slept in tonight. There was an old car magazine at the foot of it, right next to a red lighter. On that side of the room there were photos tacked over the walls, mostly of objects that most might find meaningless. A wilted leaf, a fish on the end of a fishing line looking rather unhappy to be there, the shadow of a tree and a bird guarding over its fallen

nest. The effect seemed dark to Frank. Angry and sad all at the same time. And all of it, the pictures, the bed, the worn black sweater on the floor--it wasn't Oliver's. That was easy enough to see.

The other side of the room was much more chaotic. But it seemed comfortable. The bed was a pile of tangled sheets, clothes were folded on a chair, waiting to be hung. There were a few aquariums full of caught crickets and frogs, and a wedding photo of the elder Martins right next to a framed poster of a cartoon chicken that was smiling unnaturally. There were old action-figure toys arranged over a dresser and a World's Greatest Son trophy, likely purchased in a dollar store. But none of that was what Frank focused on as he moved to the unmade bed and lifted up a familiar picture of himself on a bicycle that had been partially tucked beneath the pillow. He stared at it for a long moment before placing it back where it had been, and when he looked up to face Mrs. Martin, she looked like an animal who'd been suddenly caught in the sight of a predator.

Frank simply felt stunned. It occurred to him that before walking into this bedroom, he'd actually expected to find at least Oliver in it. At this hour, someone should have been sleeping in those beds. It was possible that since Mr. Martin wasn't there, he could have taken them somewhere; but if he had, Frank doubted that it was your average father-son outing, otherwise, Mary would have simply told him. Instead, she'd chosen to lie, and every warning bell Frank had seemed to be going off in his ears.

"Where are they?" he asked again, but the question seemed rhetorical when he didn't bother waiting for an answer. This time as he pushed past Mary to get out of the room, he was calling more than David's name, his voice sounding slightly panicked in his own ears. "Oliver? Oliver? Oliver!"

"That's enough!" Mary shouted as she followed after him, making a grab for Frank's arm only to have him shake her off. "I want you out of my house! Now!"

Frank wasn't listening. He was too busy moving through the Martin residence as if he owned the place, leaving no door unopened in his wake. Closets, bathrooms, even a three-foot-tall chest used to store blankets; he checked it all, calling for Oliver in the process, and occasionally shouting out David's name. But nothing. Nothing. Surely, Frank thought, if they were there, someone would have called out. Someone would have responded. He would have gotten something. Frank rounded on Mary as he backtracked to the kitchen and she followed him in, flipping on a light that momentarily assaulted his eyes. "Where are they?"

She crossed her arms, pursed her lips. Nothing. Frank released an exasperated sigh and headed through the kitchen, towards the back door. He only had the garage left to check, or so he thought. He had his hand on the back door, knowing full well that Mary Martin planned to lock him out as soon as he

went through it, when he spotted another door off to the side. It looked like another closet, but Frank still reached for it, knowing he'd found something important when Mary shouted out for him to stop, even as he yanked the door open and looked down a steep staircase in front of him that led down to a thick door. He was there in a moment, surprised by the bluntness of the surface as his fists began to meet it after he found it locked. "Oliver! Oliver? Answer me! David?"

No response. Frank spun around, jumping slightly when he found Mary Martin behind him once again, this time appearing more upset than angry. She almost looked like she was going to cry, but Frank found himself completely insensitive to it. "Unlock it!" he ordered, startling the woman with his tone. She shook her head at him, and in response he turned and aggressively began to move back up the stairs. He was surprised when two steps later, Mary changed her mind and rushed down them to do what he'd told her to do. Frank didn't consider himself a very intimidating individual, especially one capable of intimidating adults, but when it worked this time, he wasn't about to apologize for it and watched as Mary Martin removed a key hidden beneath a piece of worn carpet on the floor. With shaking hands she brought it to the lock, and when she appeared too upset to make it work on the first try, Frank snatched the key out of her hands and did it himself. He heard the lock click, paused momentarily, and shoved the door open. And then he stared. There. In the strip of light provided from the open doorway a boy he knew lay seemingly unconscious, knees curled into his chest, on the cold cement floor of a windowless basement.

"Please," Mary suddenly said. "You have to understand..."

Understand? Frank took the time to flash the woman a disgusted look before he was in the room, kneeling down to the form dressed in a t-shirt and loose jeans. Frank touched a cold arm, and then slid his hand around to the back until he was satisfied that the other boy was breathing. When he glared back at Mary Martin and saw that she was crying, he felt like doing a little crying himself. "How could you do this?" he demanded. "Why would you do this?"

Mary Martin choked back a sob. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Frank was on his feet before she even started to close the door, but by the time he got there he was hearing the click of the lock, and suddenly David's strange message made sense as the light went away.

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Jenny Woodmoore was an early riser. She always had been, a habit she believed she'd inherited from her mother, who'd always said that the sky looked its best just before the sunrise. Jenny agreed. Most mornings she could be found out on the docks with her camera in the dark, waiting for those first

few perfect moments of the sunrise.

This particular morning was a cool one, and as she sat on the edge of the docks it didn't stop her from slipping her bare feet into the icy water until her toes nearly ached. Looking up at the sky, still cluttered with a few visible stars, she once again thought about how she wouldn't mind spending the rest of her life right where she was. Their little town was a peaceful one, and she couldn't think of any place better. I wish Jay could feel that way, she thought wistfully as she heard soft footsteps coming up behind her.

Jenny didn't bother turning to see who else would be out that early on a Sunday morning. Instead she just waited as she felt a warm body kneel down behind her, and leaned back onto a comfortably firm chest as loose arms wrapped around her body from behind.

"You're late," she grumbled, leaning her head back on a shoulder to look at the pale face and chocolate eyes watching her.

Jay shook his long blond bangs out of his face and smiled. "Next week, you let me sleep in," he informed her.

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Whatever. You know you don't sleep in."

Jay let out a breath and turned his attention to the shining dark water while Jenny continued to watch him.

"What're you thinking?" she finally asked.

It took a moment for him to respond. "He knows it was us."

Jenny frowned. It felt like they'd been having this conversation repeatedly since the day before. "Don't you think he would've said?"

Jay shook his head. "Yesterday wasn't a coincidence. He wanted you to invite him into the group today. Bet the guy's never taken a picture in his life."

Jessica fell silent for a long moment. "Isn't this what you wanted? If he shows today, you can ask him..."

"I can't just ask," Jay stated. "Don't know if I can trust him."

Jenny sighed and leaned closer to him, causing him to tighten his grip on her. "I wish you could let this whole thing go," she whispered.

"I can't."

"Why not?" she asked, annoyed. "It's getting to be too much for you, Jay. Let it go."

He shook his head again, and then rested his chin on the top of her head.

Jenny sighed. She wouldn't get anywhere with him. He was too determined.

"He has to know something, Jenny," Jay insisted. "He's spending time with the Martins."

"That doesn't mean..."

"It has to."

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Frank rubbed at his eyes with his swollen fists, becoming frustrated as he b

egan to realize that it didn't matter how much time passed, his eyes would never adjust to the darkness. No light. It was suffocating. To make matters worse, he had no idea where the door was. He'd quickly realized that there was no handle on this side of the wall, and everything felt the same beneath his fingers. For all he knew, he'd been screaming at walls for at least a half hour.

Sliding down against the wall until he was seated on the cool floor, Frank tried to remain calm. He was most definitely in trouble, but he was confident that he could still get out of it. He guessed that Mrs. Martin was waiting for her husband to get home. Frank didn't even want to think about what might happen then. He chose to think about his own mother, instead. She'd be waking up in a few hours, and as soon as she realized that both he and the car were gone, he had no doubt that she'd be sending up smoke signals. She'd find him. She had to.

A soft groan reaching his ears pulled Frank away from his own troubles as he remembered that he wasn't alone; and feeling guilty and foolish, he felt his way across the floor on his hands and knees until he felt a sock-covered foot and inched his way closer to the body, realizing that he still didn't know who his company was.

"Head hurts," a voice mumbled, and Frank immediately felt his way to the boy's hair, remembering that there was one simple way to figure out who the voice belonged to.

"Oliver," he whispered as soon as he felt the familiar stretch of scar tissue. And with that out of the way, he quickly began to search for the cause of the pain Oliver was experiencing. Only, a lump on the head proved difficult to feel against the already uneven skin. "Don't move," Frank insisted when Oliver attempted to sit up. Gently, Frank shifted and lifted Oliver's head onto his knee, hating that he couldn't see him.

"Frank?" Oliver asked, sounding surprised. "Frank?"

"Shhh. Yeah. It's me."

Oliver was silent for a long moment, and Frank jumped a little when he felt the other boy's finger's touch his cheek. Frank took the hand and held it over Oliver's chest, where he could feel the other boy's steady heartbeat. "I don't like it in here, Frank. It's too dark."

"Yeah," Frank agreed. "Listen, Oliver. We're in trouble, okay? I need you to tell me what happened. Please, it's important."

"What happened?" Oliver repeated, sounding dazed.

"How did you get down here?" Frank asked.

"I don't know, Frank."

"Oliver," Frank started, quickly becoming frustrated. But, he managed to check himself when he felt Oliver become tense over his tone. "Oliver, do you know where your brother is?"

It seemed like an important question to Frank. He felt relieved that one brother was accounted for, especially since it was Oliver, but David was still missing, and despite the danger of his own situation, Frank couldn't help being worried for the other twin.

"He was here," Oliver said groggily. "I thought he was here with me... it was dark, but...I don't know, Frank. I don't remember."

Frank paused for a moment, wondering if it was possible. "David?" he called out. When there was no response, he carefully eased Oliver into a sitting position. "Stay right where you are, okay?" he said, but as soon as Frank began to move away from Oliver, Oliver reached out and clutched his arm.

"Don't go, Frank!"

"It's okay," Frank promised, reaching out to touch Oliver's face for reassurance. "I'm not going anywhere. I've just gotta find out if your brother's here."

Oliver released him then, and Frank slowly crawled away, allowing his hands to search the floor for him until he came to a wall. Back and forth he moved, feeling for any sign of David. As he searched, he listened to the sound of Oliver's breathing. It became shorter and strained as Frank grew further away, and finally, Frank made a point to talk to him.

"We'll get out of here, Oliver."

"Okay, Frank."

Frank froze in one corner of the room as his fingers brushed against something other than the hard floor. A soft material, coarse in texture. He slid his hand up it. "Has this ever happened before, Oliver? Have you ever been stuck in here before?"

Oliver was silent for a moment, and Frank heard him release a frustrated sound before he answered. "It's the blackouts, Frank," he replied miserably.

"I don't remember."

"You don't remember if you've been trapped in here before?" Frank asked as he lifted the object he was touching. It seemed to be just a blanket. He lifted it to his nose, deciding it was clean, if not a little dusty. David wasn't there as far as he could tell.

"No," Oliver groaned. "I... sometimes I come down here on my own, and the door accidentally locks. My mom has to let me out."

Frank turned his head in the direction of Oliver's voice and shut his eyes. The blackness of the room was beginning to get to him, causing his head to spin. "That's not possible, Oliver. The door locks from the outside--with a key.

It was never an accident. It sure as hell wasn't an accident that I got locked in here."

Frank heard Oliver sniffle and started to crawl back with the blanket. "I don't know why I'm in here, Frank," Oliver said as Frank found his knee in the dark.

Frank moved so that he was behind Oliver and pulled the other boy back to rest against on his chest as he draped the blanket over him. "Try to remember," he insisted. "Look, your mom was hiding you when I got here. If I hadn't seen the door... shit, Oliver. She locked us both in here, okay? I needed to know why. When that door opens again, we're both gonna have to fight, you got that? My mom's gonna figure out that something's wrong when she wakes up, but until then... shit."

"My mom will let us out, Frank," Oliver insisted, obviously not seeing the situation as dire as Frank did.

"No, Oliver... you don't get it..." Frank paused to collect his thoughts, and found himself pulling Oliver closer against him, as if it would help him to convince his friend that they were in trouble. "Okay. How 'bout this... do you know what time it is?"

"I don't think so, Frank."

"Early," Frank informed him. "So early that it's not even light out yet. Think, Oliver. You're usually sleeping in your bed right about now, aren't you? So how did you get here?"

"Are you usually sleeping in your bed right now, Frank?"

Frank released an exasperated sigh. "David called me. He wasn't making any sense. I knew something was wrong, so I came over here. Your mom locked me in here with you, and I still don't know where your brother is. Your dad was gone, too... do you think David's with him, Oliver?"

Frank felt Oliver shake his head. "Dad says David's bad," Oliver said quietly. "I don't want him to get in trouble anymore."

"Neither do I, Oliver," Frank said honestly. "They keep him down here when he's in trouble, don't they? They keep him in the dark."

Oliver sniffled again, and Frank lifted his hand to Oliver's cheek, dismayed to find it wet with tears. "No, don't cry," he insisted. "Not right now, Oliver ..."

"He tries to be good, Frank!" Oliver suddenly said. "He tries. He tries. It doesn't work, Frank. He gets angry. He doesn't like the dark, Frank!"

As Oliver burst into tears, his body shaking, Frank was at a loss, unable to provide much more support than the way he hugged the other boy to his body, gently shushing him. He wanted to scream, wanted to get up and find the door. It was hopeless, but it didn't stop him from shouting out once more to be let out. It only seemed to aggravate Oliver more. But suddenly, the sobbing stopped and he became still in Frank's arms.

"It's too dark," Oliver whispered. "I know, I know."

"Oliver?" Frank asked hesitantly.

"I can't. Can't do it. We have to stop, okay? I don't want to be in trouble."

Frank frowned, hugging him tighter as he tried to understand what Oliver was talking about. But as he continued to listen, the only thing that became clear

ear to Frank was that Oliver wasn't speaking to him at all.

"No one is bad. We all have to be good. Be good. It's too dark. He's my friend. I don't want to hurt Frank. Never, ever let anyone hurt Frank."

Frank felt a chill creep up his spine with those last few words. He didn't understand what Oliver meant, and he wasn't even sure he wanted to. He was beginning to feel sick. Dizzy. Blind. Taking in a deep breath as if he suddenly couldn't get enough air he moved his fingers to Oliver's hair, tilted his head back and searched out Oliver's mouth with his own. Frank's lips were aggressive, insistent as he guided Oliver to turn towards him, and as their tongues met he pulled Oliver closer, wanting to be smothered with something other than the darkness.

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Brian Martin stood frozen in his kitchen, staring out the small window behind the sink. Outside, the morning glowed orange with sunrise. But there was no beauty in it. Not in his house. Not this morning. This morning, everything was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong! And now they were in trouble, thanks to his wife. And he supposed that she expected him to fix everything. Idiot. The woman was a complete idiot. An idiot who happened to be sobbing at the kitchen table in the most obnoxious manner.

"Shut up!" Brian finally snapped, spinning around to glare at his wife as the veins in his forehead threatened to break his skin. "Just shut up!"

His harsh tone shocked Mary into silence. For about five seconds. When she started crying all over again, Brian dug his fingers into his hair and momentarily closed his eyes, willing himself to be patient. But, as he looked at his wife again, all he could do was growl.

"You locked him in?" he demanded. "What was he even doing in the house in the first place?"

"He forced his way in!" Mary said defensively. "I told you, I didn't know what else to do! When he saw Oliver... I just know what he was thinking, Brian! And you weren't here, damn you! You should have been here!"

Brian frowned. "I told you, I couldn't sleep. I didn't think I wouldn't be able to go fishing for a few hours without everything falling apart!"

Mary bit her tongue, refraining from pointing out that he hadn't been fishing. She accepted that excuse every other time, and this time would be no different. Besides, they needed to focus on bigger things. Their lives weren't just falling apart. They were going to hell.

"What are we going to do, Brian? We can't just leave him there, and when we let him out you know he isn't going to keep his mouth shut."

"Yes he will," Brian stated.

Mary swallowed nervously. "What're you gonna do?"

"We have no choice. We have to make him understand why it'll be a bad idea to cause trouble for us."

.....

Oliver's breaths were slow and steady, his hands calm and warm on Frank's shoulder, and he returned every peck of a kiss as gently as Frank gave them as he pressed his body softly against Oliver's while they stood against the wall where Frank imagined the door was.

"Are you okay?" Frank whispered.

"I think so, Frank."

"And are you sure you can do this?" Frank asked. "It's important, Oliver."

It had been a horribly slow process for Frank, trying to convince Oliver that something was very wrong with his parents. In fact, Frank hadn't entirely succeeded. Oliver was convinced that his parents loved him. He was good. They wouldn't hurt him. But, it seemed that Frank had managed to convince him that they were in a bad situation that they needed to get out of. Or, at least he'd convinced Oliver that everything would be okay once they got out of the basement. Frank wasn't happy that it had required a little manipulation on his part, but he didn't have a choice. He'd explained his plan to Oliver as if it were a game, but if there was a chance that they could get out, Frank planned to take it. It seemed like the hardest part would be to make sure that they both got out.

"I think so, Frank," Oliver said again, but he didn't sound nearly as certain as Frank would have liked him to.

"Oliver, please... I have to get out of here. Your brother could be in trouble. Do you understand that?"

"Because he was bad?"

"No," Frank said quickly. "That's just it, Oliver, I don't think he is...please, help me get out of here, and I swear we'll get this all sorted..."

Frank stopped as he heard something on the other side of the wall, and holding his breath, he listened carefully until it became clear that someone was coming down the stairs. More than just one person if the muffled voices were any indication.

"They're coming to let us out," Oliver said optimistically as he attempted to move past Frank, but Frank quickly pushed him back.

"Oliver, no! Remember what we talked about?"

"But, Frank..."

"Oliver... help me," Frank begged, feeling even more desperate than he had a few moments ago as he waited for a response, unable to read, or see for that matter, Oliver's face.

"Okay, Frank," Oliver finally said, and Frank allowed himself a small sigh of relief as he handed Oliver one end of the blanket he'd found in the room.

"Okay," Frank said. "Just like we practiced, okay? But not until they open the door."

"Okay, Frank."

Frank leaned over to press one last kiss onto Oliver's cheek, and then moved away, into position. His plan was relatively simple. He was going to do the only thing he knew how to do in this situation. He was going to attack and run. He'd been smart enough to figure out that Mary Martin wasn't going to come back alone. She'd have Oliver's dad with her, and Frank knew that he couldn't best Brian Martin with strength alone. All he had at his disposal was a blanket, so with Oliver's help, he hoped to tangle the Martin parents in the blanket long enough for them to escape. It seemed like a good enough plan. They probably wouldn't see it coming, and he only needed to slow them down enough to get away. He knew that there was still a possibility that Oliver wouldn't be joining him, but that problem could be solved as soon as he got home and told his mother everything. As soon as she learned what was going on in the Martin house, she'd make sure that the Martins would never get near Oliver or David again. Frank was confident. There was just one thing he hadn't counted on.

It had been hours since his eyes had been exposed to even the faintest amount of light. When that door opened, he could hardly make out the two shadows behind it as brightness flooded his senses and he was blinded with white, piercing light. Instinctively, he wanted to flee from it, but instead he tugged the blanket and charged forward. "Oliver, now!" Frank ordered, hoping that Oliver was willing to try, even if he was as handicapped as Frank was. As it turned out, Oliver did try. The two of them moved towards the door quickly, holding onto the blanket, using it to prevent the Martins from grabbing them as they forced their way out the door. As Frank began to make things out he heard Brian Martin curse, and Mary Martin gasp as they became tangled in the blanket. Frank didn't stop to see how tangled they'd become. He started up the staircase, half crawling to keep himself balanced and jumping when he felt a hand on his ankle. He nearly kicked whoever was behind him until he looked back to find Oliver there, squinting and looking terrified.

"Oliver! Stop!" Brian shouted.

"No, don't!" Frank stated, reaching down to grab Oliver's hand. He was too late. Mary Martin had managed to get out of the chaos long enough to grab hold of her son and pull him to his feet.

Oliver didn't struggle as his mom's arm went around him. Instead, he looked at her curiously as she smiled and touched his face, as if she weren't guilty at all for mistreating him. Frank was disgusted, but decided his best chance was to deal with it later when he realized that Brian Martin was catching up to him, and catching up fast. "Wait! Wait a minute!" Brian shouted. Frank was fairly certain that Mr. Martin was speaking to him, but waiting for the man to catch him simply wasn't on his list of priorities.

Frank reached the top of the stairs, and remembering that the back door was c

loser that front, he went for it. His hand slipped on the lock, once, twice, on the third try he was shoving the door open and taking in the fresh air without pausing to enjoy it. He felt disoriented as he made his way around the house, focusing on getting to his car. The sun was out now, but the musty scent in the air told him that it was still early morning. He supposed that it didn't matter what time it was, so long as he made it home.

The Subaru was where he left it, but he stopped short of reaching it, his shoes skidding on the dirt as his heart leapt to his chest and he stared at his car keys, held firmly in Brian Martin's grip as he blocked Frank's path.

Frank immediately began to back up, ready to run into the woods if necessary, but this time paused when Brian Martin spoke. "Hold on, son. I'm gonna give you your keys, and you can go, alright?" he said gently, holding his hands up in a passive gesture. "I just wanna talk to you for a sec."

Frank, out of breath, regarded the man skeptically.

"Okay," Brian tried again when he realized he wasn't reaching him, "here. Here." He tossed the keys, and Frank caught them one-handedly, refusing to be distracted. He didn't even bother to look at them as he glared at Mr. Martin.

"Get out of my way," Frank ordered, but this time Brian shook his head.

"In a minute. Before you leave here, I need to make sure you and I reach an understanding."

"Understanding?" Frank repeated, incredulous. "Your wife locked me in a basement!"

"Yes, she did," Brian admitted. "That was a mistake, I'll tell you right now. But she was scared. You gave her a real fright, and she didn't know what else to do."

"It's true. I'm sorry," Mary Martin's voice said, and Frank forced himself to take his eyes off Brian long enough to see that Mrs. Martin was standing on the front porch.

"Where's Oliver?" Frank demanded, concerned that he was back in that basement again.

"He's in his room," Mary insisted. "He's fine, I promise you. Please, Frank, just listen to what we have to say to you."

Frank swallowed down a knot of nervousness in his throat. "I'm listening," he said carefully, not really sure he had any other choice.

"Frank," Brian said as he took a step closer, "you've got us all wrong."

"Stay back!" Frank snapped, and Brian complied. It took Frank another moment to determine that the man wasn't going to come any closer. "I saw what you did to Oliver. You had him locked down there."

"We had no choice. It was for his own safety," Brian insisted.

"His own safety?"

"Yes," Brian stated. "We're not bad people, Frank... Oliver, he's just... he's

not like other boys. We tried to warn you about it..."

"He's different so you keep him locked in a basement?" Frank demanded. "You people are completely fucked! And what did you do with David, huh? I know you've kept him in there, too, and don't think you can stop me from.."

"We're not gonna try to stop you, Frank," Brian interrupted. "But before you go tell everyone what you've seen here, I want you to think about something for a minute."

"And what's that?" Frank asked hotly.

"When was the last time you saw David and Oliver together?" Brian asked, watching closely for Frank's reaction.

Frank frowned. "I don't know, I guess..."

"Never," Brian said. "You've never seen them together, have you?"

"So? What does that have to do with anything?"

"It has everything to do with what's happening here, Frank," Brian Martin insisted. "You see, we couldn't have done anything with David--because David doesn't really exist."

"Excuse me?"

"David and Oliver are the same person, Frank," Brian explained, and he might as well have been speaking another language for the look Frank was giving him. "It's true," Brian said.

"It is," Mary added. "There is no David, Frank."

Frank shook his head. "No. No, you're crazy. Both of you..."

"A long time ago," Brian continued forcefully, as if he suspected Frank didn't want to hear it, "our son--our only son, Oliver, had a bad accident. Mary and I thought we'd lost him... we did lose him. For a long time he wasn't the Oliver we knew anymore. He couldn't talk, he couldn't eat... he couldn't even smile, and then one day, we met a doctor who told us that he could give us our son back, and he did. But Oliver didn't come back alone, Frank."

"And you expect me to believe that David..."

"We thought it was just a phase at first," Brian explained. "He started talking to himself. We thought he was just playing, but when he started talking about David, we realized that he had an imaginary friend. When he started school... well, we tried to discourage it. Other kids were laughing at him. But, David didn't just go away. Instead, Oliver began to take on his persona, like he was two different people."

"I saw their room," Frank stated. "They are..."

"It seems that way. Mary and I accepted it a long time ago. We accepted David. I guess we thought it would be easier for Oliver if we let him believe he really had a brother... but as he got older, well, things changed. David... David's persona, he started acting out, causing fights, arguing with us. He became violent, and no matter what we did... he just got worse. We fin

ally figured out that the only way to deal with him was to tell him we didn't want him. It worked some, too. Oliver has been more... Oliver, since then. But sometimes David... well, sometimes we can't handle him when he turns up. We've found that a dark room..."

"Oh god," Frank mumbled, suddenly feeling sick to the stomach as he took in exactly what he was being told and considered it.

"My wife didn't lock Oliver in there last night, Frank. It was David," Brian explained. He pointed towards the front porch. "Do you see what he did to her?" he asked, referring to her black eye. "It's not the first time, and it won't be the last. She had to knock him in the head just to get him down there, he's..."

Frank suddenly looked towards Mary Martin, her eye... the phone call from David. In the basement, Oliver had said his head hurt. And it was true, he'd never seen the two of them together before. Not once. He'd been all through the house, and not a single family portrait with all four of them flashed in his mind.

"Do you understand now, Frank?" Brian asked, and Frank looked at him. "Do you understand why you can't tell anyone about David? They'll take him away. They'll put him in a hospital somewhere."

"Well maybe that's where he needs to be!" Frank snapped, feeling overwhelmed.

"Is that where Oliver needs to be, too, Frank?" Brian demanded. "Because it wouldn't just be David they'd be taking."

"Frank?"

Frank spun around at the sound of Oliver's voice, and stared at the boy standing on the front porch with his mother.

"Frank," Oliver repeated, starting to move forward, looking as if he expected Frank to go meet him.

But Frank couldn't. Frank found that he couldn't do much of anything at the moment as he realized that he didn't know who was behind those hazel eyes at all. He was suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to run as he stared at Oliver, shaking his head. "No. No," he said.

Oliver stopped, frowning. "Frank..."

"I can't do this," Frank stated, looking between three family members when there should have been four. He moved towards his car, no longer cautious of Brian Martin, which was just as well since the man moved aside to give Frank room.

Oliver watched, confused as Frank moved into the Subaru and started the engine, refusing to look at him as he began to back down the driveway. "Frank!" Oliver called as he began to walk after the vehicle. "Frank! Why are you leaving, Frank? Are you gonna come back? Frank?"

Mary moved to join her husband, and the two of them exchanged glances as t

heir son stopped ahead of them, looking dejectedly down the dirt road. "So what do you think?" Mary asked. We can't keep this up forever. People ask questions, Brian. It's in their nature. He could be trouble for us." Brian frowned. "He'd better hope not."

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Jessica rolled her eyes as she finished brushing her teeth. The phone had just started ringing, and already she heard Rudy's rushed footsteps as her daughter ran to answer it. Jessica didn't need to ask who it was, either. Sam had been calling a lot lately. Jessica still had quite a few issues with her ex-husband. He'd hurt her, and even worse, he'd hurt her kids. When Rudy had first wanted to call him, Jessica had made a point to call and warn him first... at which time she also threatened a good amount of bodily harm if he decided it was necessary to break either of her children's hearts again. But, she'd been pleasantly surprised when she found that Sam was remorseful over his past behavior, and ready to make an effort towards his children. It might have come a little late, but Rudy seemed satisfied.

Jessica only wished that Frank would give his father another chance. She could understand why he wouldn't want to. He'd probably been hurt the worst by Sam. But she hoped that for Frank's sake, he'd eventually come around and at least talk to his father. They'd been close before the divorce, and she knew that her oldest hadn't been particularly happy since.

Jessica combed her hair, listening to Rudy as she chatted happily away with her dad, and then decided to see if Frank was up yet. It wasn't likely, but maybe if she caught him off guard she could talk him into getting on the phone for a few minutes. That wasn't very likely, either, but worth a try, Jessica thought.

She was debating over whether or not she wanted to wake him gently when she opened his bedroom door, and frowned to find that he wasn't in his room at all. It seemed that a cat had taken over his pillow, though. The very same cat she swore she'd asked him to put outside the night before.

Shaking her head, Jessica headed towards the kitchen, blowing a kiss at Rudy on the way. If Frank wasn't sleeping at seven o'clock in the morning, he was definitely eating. But, when she reached the kitchen, there wasn't even a dirty dish in the sink. She headed out the front door, standing on the porch for a few moments as she looked around, wondering where he'd gone off to. It was then that she realized that something was missing other than her son, and her mouth dropped open as she thought of all the ways to ground him for taking the car without asking first, or even leaving a note for that matter. Honestly, he knew better than that.

She was just about to go back inside when she heard an engine, and turned inside to see Frank parking her car around the side of the house. She crossed her arms, and as soon as the driver-side door was open and she was sure he c

ould hear her, she was telling him exactly what she thought of this situation.

“Frank Seaberg, where have you been? So help me, if I find out you’ve been out all night with my car...” Jessica paused, frowning as her son moved closer. Something wasn’t right. His walk was sluggish, his face drawn. He looked pale, bringing out new circles under his eyes, which seemed pitifully red and swollen. She’d seen him after a night of hard partying before, and this wasn’t it. “Frank? Where have you been?” she asked as she moved to meet him. “What’s the matter?”

She was startled when he walked right to her and leaned down to rest his chin on her shoulder, but she did exactly what her instincts forced her to do and hugged him. “Hey,” she said, a new gentleness entering her voice. “What’s the matter? Are you alright?”

Frank straightened himself, and met his mom’s eyes, shaking his head. “No,” he said with a scratchy voice. “Not really.”

“Well Frank...” Jessica started, but was abruptly cut off when her daughter rushed out of the house screeching.

“Mom! Mom!” Rudy said, squeezing her way between Jessica and Frank to tug on the arm of her mother’s bathrobe. “You have to come inside!”

“Hold on,” Jessica insisted, still looking worriedly at Frank.

“No, it can’t wait!” Rudy insisted. “Mom!”

Jessica released an exasperated sigh and turned her attention to her daughter. “Okay. What?”

“You have to talk to Dad!” Rudy informed her.

“Why?”

“He’s coming!” Rudy exclaimed. “He’s coming to see us! He’s coming here!”

Jessica’s eyes widened, and she immediately turned to see Frank’s reaction, but he was no longer standing there, and she watched worriedly as her son moved through the front door, slamming it hard on his way.

Chapter 8

by DomLuka

Thanks to jim for editing!

Oliver wiped at his eyes with the back of his hands as if it would stop the tears from flowing. David always told him not to cry. Guys just didn’t do that, and Oliver was no baby. But, what else could he do when he felt so lost? Nothing around him was as it was supposed to be, and as his dad literally dragged the twin bed that belonged to David out of his bedroom, Oliver wanted to do more than cry. He wanted to scream.

“Don’t do that, Dad!” he called. “David won’t like that! You’d better put his bed back!” But the mattress had already disappeared out the door. Oliver turned his attention to his mother, who was purposely avoiding his eyes as

she filled a box with pictures that covered David's side of the room. Oliver went to her. "Mom? Mom? Why're you taking all of David's stuff? Mom, don't do that. Those are his pictures." Oliver reached for one, but Mary quickly put the box down to grasp his hands and give him a gentle smile.

"Oliver, why don't you go outside for a while, alright? Feed your chicken."

"But Mom--Mama, David's things..."

Mary's smile faded and she lowered her voice. "Now you've gotta stop this, Oliver. There is no David."

Oliver frowned. "No. No. David's my brother, Mom. I love him."

"He's not real, Oliver. Remember? We talked about this. Now you can't talk about him anymore."

"But..."

"You don't want anyone to take you away from us, do you?"

"No, Mama, but David..."

"And you want to see Frank again, don't you?"

Oliver paused, his face bunching up in distress. Nothing was right. For days now, nothing had been right. He wanted to see Frank, but Frank hadn't come to see him, and he didn't understand why his parents were saying that Frank didn't want him to go over there. "Can I see him?" Oliver asked.

He'd been asking since Frank drove away without saying goodbye. He hoped the answer had changed.

"Well, that depends," Mary replied. "Oliver, I want you to try to understand that Frank isn't very happy with you right now. We've already talked about what will make him happy, haven't we?"

Oliver turned his eyes away from his mom's, shaking his head. "No," he said flatly.

Frustrated, Mary reached up, grabbed Oliver's chin, and forced him to look at her. "Frank doesn't want to hear about David. No one does."

Mary gasped when Oliver suddenly pushed her hand away. "It's not nice to say things that aren't true, Mom!" he snapped. "Frank said David's not bad. He's my brother!"

"You don't have a brother!" Mary stated. She could feel her hands shaking, pressure building behind her eyes. Why couldn't Oliver just understand? And she hated the look on his face, the confusion, the hurt, the anger. Things had gone too far, and now Oliver had to suffer for it.

Mary suddenly reached for him, wanting to provide comfort, but Oliver lurched away from her, pulling his own messy hair. "Why? Why? Why?" he demanded, moving to the box full of David's pictures. "These are his! You can't take them away. He won't like it! You can't!"

Oliver finished, only to jump right along with Mary when they heard a crash in the doorway and turned to find Brian standing there over David's now shattered camera as he looked disapprovingly at Oliver.

“There is no more David in this house, son,” he said before looking at his wife. “I need your help outside, Mary.”

Mary frowned, but followed her husband, glancing back at Oliver only briefly before they left him to mourn over David’s most cherished possession.

.....
Frank was well aware of his mother standing at the attic stairs, frowning at him as he looked through one box after another, but that didn’t stop him from pretending that he wasn’t. Until she finally talked to him. It was always a bad idea to pretend not to hear her, because she’d figure out what he was doing and he wasn’t likely to hear the end of it for days.

“What are you doing? I thought we decided that everything up here is stuff we can do without. What are you looking for?”

“A camera,” Frank said flatly. “Any camera.” Besides the disposable one, he thought. Anything else would be better. “How is it that we have, like, a billion family pictures and no camera?”

Jessica looked thoughtful for a moment, and then turned on a light as she stepped further into the attic, illuminating the small room. Frank frowned. After all the boxes he’d hauled up here, he’d been completely unaware that this part of the house even had electricity, which is why he’d been relying on a pathetic amount of light coming from a sliver of a window. A dusty window.

“I think we have a few of them,” Jessica said as she knelt down next to him to help look. “Have you checked the box that old stereo’s in? The one with the brown speakers?”

Frank stood to do just that. “Nothing here,” he said a few moments later. “Whatever happened to that polaroid?”

“We tossed that. It was a pain in the butt. What do you want a camera for, anyway?”

Frank shrugged. Now was a good time to be evasive. “Just thought I’d take pictures of a few things around here.”

“Hmm... I don’t know if I can find a camera... but come with me.”

Frank watched curiously for a moment as she left the attic, and then followed her, turning off the light on his way out. In his mom’s bedroom, he watched her reach up onto the shelf he’d installed there the week before, and a second later she was passing him a small black case that he hadn’t seen in a while. Opening it, he didn’t find a camera, but the video camera his parents had bought two years before.

Jessica shrugged. “It’s better than nothing. But, you might want to charge it first.”

Frank had to agree. “Thanks,” he said as he turned to go. “This’ll work.”

“Hey,” Jessica called, following him. “You’re not going out now, are you?”

Frank looked at her. "Depends. Can I use the car?"

Jessica narrowed her eyes. "Frank..."

"One way or another," he cut her off, "I'm not going to be around when he gets here. Oh, and if you let him stay here, could you let me know now so I can clean out the shed? I'll need somewhere else to sleep."

"You're not sleeping in that shed."

"So he's not staying here?" Frank asked.

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to make an effort here, Frank," Jessica stated. "But for the record, no. I told your father that he'd have to make other arrangements."

"Good."

Jessica followed Frank out into the hall, and then cornered him in the living room. "You know, you're going to have to talk to him eventually," she said.

"No. Actually, I don't," Frank said confidently before walking around his mother to get to the front door. She still got there first, though.

"Honey, I understand that you're trying to protect yourself here, but is this really how you want it to be?"

"What I want, is for him to leave us alone," Frank informed her. "He didn't have a problem with it before. I don't see what's so different now. So can I use the car, please?"

Jessica sighed. "I'm sorry, but no. Your dad's supposed to call when he gets into town and your sister and I are going to go meet him. I wish you'd come."

"I already have plans," Frank said flatly.

"With Oliver?" Jessica asked, raising an eyebrow. She was well aware that for the last week, Frank hadn't seen Oliver once. In fact, he'd hardly left his room. She'd thought that the sudden dark mood her son had slipped into had a lot to do with his dad's visit, so she'd been hopeful when he actually gotten out of the bed and joined the rest of the family for breakfast that morning; but now she could see that nothing had changed, and she was beginning to suspect that Frank's problems had to do with more than just Sam coming into town. Unfortunately, when Frank didn't want to discuss something, it was frustratingly hard to get him to open up.

"No. I just... wanted to go do something in town. I don't want to be around here right now, okay?"

Jessica sighed. As much as she wanted to, she knew that it would be cruel to force Frank to stick around and visit with his dad. If anything, it would only make matters worse since he'd not only be furious with one parent, but two. He needed space, and Jessica was good at choosing her battles, which was why she was prepared to give it to him.

"Well... you could always ask Mr. Dron for a ride. I know he's going to head

out in a little while for more paint. He might even give you a ride--even though you haven't lifted a finger to help him all morning."

Frank frowned. His mom was paying Mr. Dron twenty-five dollars--mostly because he wouldn't accept any more--to paint the trim on the outside of the house white in an attempt to brighten it up. Normally, it was something Frank would have done himself, or at least helped with, but two nights ago he'd accused his mother of trying to fix the place up for his dad's benefit. He was sticking to that theory, and wanted nothing to do with it, but that didn't stop him from plugging in the camera to charge for a while, and heading out the front door.

It was windy more than it was cold, and although the occasional cloud passed over the sun, it was a fairly bright day. Frank appreciated it, the sunlight they'd had over the last week. It tended to ease his disturbing nightmares when he woke up to it, and that had happened more often lately than he found acceptable.

The darkness. Frank hated it every night when he went to bed, though he refused to sleep with a nightlight. But every time he turned off his bedroom light, closed his eyes and submerged himself in darkness, he was back in the Martin house. Back in the basement. He'd become aware of how much the situation had shaken him the first night he'd spent in his room afterwards, and seven days later, it was becoming all too clear to Frank that his sudden fear of the dark wasn't going to be as easily conquered as it had been when he was five and his dad had scared the monsters away. And Frank had only been forced to endure his experience for a few hours.

Wondering if Oliver was okay, safe, and not in that horrible, dark place, had been a constant in Frank's mind since he'd driven away from the Martin house. The thought of Oliver alone in that room shook him, frightened him and angered him. But he hadn't been back to check. He hadn't woken up early, expecting to see Oliver, and he hadn't pondered going across the lake to knock on the Martins' door. In fact, Frank had done his very best to avoid even looking towards the red roof that Oliver Martin slept under.

It wasn't Oliver's fault. Frank might have thought he was angry with Oliver at first, but it hadn't taken him long to figure out that that wasn't the case at all. He couldn't be angry with Oliver. He didn't even know if Oliver had been intentionally hiding anything from him. Frank simply didn't understand. He didn't understand any of it, and every time he tried, he quickly came to the numbing conclusion that he didn't even know where to start.

He'd replayed what Brian Martin had told him a thousand times in his mind, each time attempting to recall every word until he no longer knew if he was remembering what really happened, or remembering something his own mind had fabricated. The one thing that had continued to come back to him with an abundant amount of clarity, was the look on Oliver's face. Oliver's f

ace. Oliver was the one who'd befriended him when he'd been alone. He was the one who listened to Frank every time he talked about the things anyone with lesser patience wouldn't have been able to stand. They'd shared kisses, and the kind of looks that were only meant for each other. He'd done all of this with Oliver, but now it seemed that he'd done all of this with David, too. He knew Oliver, but not David. But if he didn't know David, then Frank had to wonder if he knew Oliver at all, and the entire concept confused and frustrated him. Oliver was David. The sweet kid with a happy smile and innocent demeanor was the arrogant, crude, prick. And Frank couldn't see it. He didn't understand how one could be the other when they were so different. But he believed it.

He'd never once seen them together. True, it wasn't necessarily solid proof that they were one and the same. But, when he thought about how close Oliver claimed to be to David, how much Oliver cared for him, it was rather difficult to believe that Oliver hadn't wanted David around more when they were together. And that smile--they had the same one. Even David in his less coarse moments had that smile.

Frank thought back to the time he'd gone to the Martins and found David there alone as he slowly walked around his house. When David had greeted him at the door, he'd thought it was Oliver, and perhaps, it had been. The boy's demeanor had changed only when Frank had specifically asked to talk to David... and then David had been there.

Perhaps he was putting too much thought into it. Maybe he just needed to keep doing what he'd been doing for the last week, and stay away. It wasn't as if he didn't have his own problems to deal with.

Frank could smell paint even before he saw the ladder leaning up against the house and looked up to see Mr. Dron slowly painting the trim around the attic window. He frowned at what he was actually considering. Being trapped in a car with Mr. Dron for any amount of time wasn't within Frank's comfort level, but at the moment, he was desperate.

It wasn't that Frank thought Mr. Dron was a bad guy. Mr. Dron just happened to remind him of every old, unapproachable cowboy from every western he'd ever seen with his weather-burned appearance and tired but sharp eyes. Perhaps those characters could be entertaining in a few movies, but up close, Frank found that men with large-rimmed hats, who never smiled or laughed about anything, didn't make for great company.

Frank approached the ladder slowly, feeling uncomfortable when Mr. Dron glanced down to acknowledge he was there, but didn't offer any greeting. Not even a simple nod. Frank wanted to walk away, but chose to hold the ladder instead, as if it were actually needed.

"Need some help?" Frank called up. He didn't want to help, either, but he figured that outright asking for a favor would be considered rude. Then again,

the way that Mr. Dron glanced down at Frank as if it were a skunk at the bottom of his ladder, could have been considered rude, too. At least his response was civil enough.

“Just about to come down. I’ll be heading out soon. I’m sure there’s plenty more you can help your mom with around here, though.”

Frank frowned at the accusing look that Mr. Dron shot him. The old man seemed to be under the impression that Frank didn’t lift a finger to help his family. But, instead of becoming defensive, he put his pride in check and forced a smile as he looked over Mr. Dron’s work. “You’re not finished yet.” “I’ll finish tomorrow. Gotta pick some stuff up.”

“Are you going now?” Frank asked. “I mean, to get what you need?”

Mr. Dron stepped off the ladder, wiped his hands on his jeans, and openly frowned at Frank. “Might as well.”

“Want some company?” Frank asked, only to have Mr. Dron step past him to clean up the opened paint can he’d left on the ground.

“Don’t think so.”

Frank stared at Mr. Dron’s back for a long moment, and then stepped determinedly up behind him. “Well would you tolerate some company, then? I need a ride to town.”

Mr. Dron looked over his shoulder, raising a bushy eyebrow beneath his large hat.

Frank let out a breath and added, “I’ll pay for the gas.”

.....

Mr. Dron had about twelve cars in various conditions around his house, and since Frank had offered to pay for gas, he’d made sure to stop and get the only one with the empty tank on the way out to town. By the time he dropped Frank off in front of the movie theater, like he’d requested, Frank was feeling a little bit like an idiot and a lot perturbed with Mr. Dron for being an all-around jerk. But, at least he was away from his house.

He’d needed to get out. The biggest reason was because his stomach had been in knots all week over his father’s visit. He didn’t even know how to begin to deal with it, so he avoided it. Just like he was avoiding Oliver... or

David. Or whoever he was. Oliver, Frank decided. It was simply easier to think of him as just plain Oliver. Who happened to share his body with someone named David.

He was avoiding them both, he figured. When he wasn’t worrying over whether or not they were okay, Frank had to admit that doing his best to avoid them was currently one of the more important things in his life. And a lot of it had to do with the fact that he was afraid. He was afraid of what they were. He was afraid of how it worked, because he was afraid of the way it was so different from anyone’s normal standards. He’d been afraid to leave his house during the day because there was the possibility that he could run

into someone with Oliver's face, and not know how to respond to it. And he had no one to talk to about any of it.

His mom. She would have been a good choice, had he wanted to share these burdens with anyone, and Frank knew it. But he was afraid of that, too. He was afraid she'd be too good. If Frank told her about any of it, especially the part where Mrs. Martin locked him in a basement, his mom was likely to raise hell and drag the devil up by his toes. And he wanted her to. He wanted her to so badly that it was torture to keep it from her. He'd never felt so in-over-his-head before and he wanted to give it all away. Just let her take care of it. She would, he had no question about that. But he felt he couldn't. It would only make matters worse. He kept thinking about what Brian Martin said. They'd take Oliver, put him somewhere. Maybe somewhere worse than the dark. Frank couldn't live with that. And maybe, he told himself, the Martins were doing the best they could. He'd seen Mary Martin's eye, proof that David was dangerous. If they had to lock him up to keep the family safe, he wasn't so sure that he could condemn them for that. He just hated that Oliver had to share the experience with David. Because no matter the circumstances, Frank knew that Oliver wasn't David. Or rather, Oliver wasn't like him. He couldn't do anything that might hurt Oliver. He wouldn't. So for now, he'd keep their secret.

Getting away was a good thing, according to Frank. And, it wasn't as if he'd asked Mr. Dron to drop him off at the theater so he could spend his day watching movies and forgetting about his problems. Although, as he walked through town towards Karrigan's, he couldn't help feeling that that would have been the better idea. Unfortunately, Frank disliked loose ends when they involved creeps photographing his little sister. And currently, Frank had a rather large loose end.

It hadn't been David. It couldn't have been, not when Oliver had been in his room when the whole thing had happened. Not to mention, Oliver had been with him when he was attacked. And without David, Frank's list of suspects had dropped down to zero, which was actually more than it was less.

Now, everyone was a suspect. He didn't have a clue.

But, he wasn't willing to forget about it. Armed with a video camera, he was following the only lead he had, hoping that he wasn't too late. It was eleven fifteen. The week before, Jenny Woodmoore had told Frank to meet her at eleven o'clock, when the photography club planned to get together. Frank had no idea if these meetings occurred every week at the same time, or even on the same day for that matter, but he was willing to find out. If anything, the trip would occupy his time with some much needed distraction.

Karrigan's was less empty this time around. Frank had walked in during a small lunch rush. It was unexpected, but welcome. There seemed to be less of a chance of being noticed in a crowd, and he found that's exactly what he w

anted when his attention was drawn to a noisy corner full of other people his age.

There were six of them, sharing two plates of greasy fries. He recognized Jenny right off. This time, her jeans skirt and faded blouse suggested that she wasn't working, and he was pleased to see a camera in her hand and a few others over the table. He was quick to take in the others: two girls, including Jenny, who he paid little attention to. A guy with dark, shaggy hair in the corner seat was too big to be suspected of being at Rudy's window. He was beyond tall, and rather big-boned. Frank decided that there was no way he would have been able to tackle him. Another with curls and bushy eyebrows was too thin, and at least a foot shorter than Frank.

That left two. Frank's eyes were first drawn to the mullet-topped guy with dark hair and artificial red streaks. He was toying with a camera, looking irritated over the chatter going on around him, which made Frank wonder why he didn't just leave the table. Frank also wondered if it was possible that he was staring at the guy who'd left him with a split lip a few weeks ago. But, speculation wasn't going to get him anywhere, so he forced himself to look over the last guy at the table, who seemed to be all over Jenny Woodmoore.

When Frank was in kindergarten, he'd been invited to his friend Eric's birthday party. For a final surprise gift, his parents had presented him with a German shepherd puppy. Everyone had wanted to take their chance to say hello to the little creature with cute, uncut floppy ears and enough kisses for an army of giggling school children. But, from the moment his parents had placed that puppy in Eric's lap, he'd had his arms around it, and his possession of his gift seemed borderline greedy as he refused to let anyone else get in a good scratch behind the ears. Frank was reminded of the experience as he looked over at Jenny and the guy who couldn't have been anyone other than her boyfriend.

He was subtle, but the this-is-mine attitude seemed to be written all over him. It was as if he always had to be touching her, tucking her hair behind her ear whenever she looked at him, holding her hand atop the table when anyone else was looking. Even when he reached for his drink his free hand would be under the table, touching her knee.

Body language told a lot, Frank thought. It was something he was paying more attention to lately. Or, at least reflecting on. Like with Oliver. When he was with Oliver, there was comfort, nudges, mild looks and smiles. Every time he'd been near David, there had been a wall up. Tension, anger, and suspicion. The same face, but two different beings.

Frank momentarily closed his eyes. It was too much. All of it was too much. He missed Oliver. But, maybe Oliver, or the guy he thought Oliver was, didn't exist. Never existed.

Frank felt like he couldn't breathe, but as he opened his eyes, he was startled into sucking in a deep breath. Oops, he thought, realizing that Jenny's boyfriend was looking right at him. With the way that Frank's luck had been going lately, he wouldn't have been surprised if the guy assumed that he was looking at Jenny and now wanted to express how much he didn't like that. But fortunately for Frank, Jenny spotted him next, smiled, and went to greet him. The boyfriend was on her heels the whole way, but at least his expression seemed relaxed and approachable as they reached Frank together.

"Hey there," Jenny said, eyeing his bag. "Did'ya find your camera?"

"Not exactly," Frank replied, opening the black case to show her the camera.

"But, there's probably no harm in using this for a while."

"Nice!" This came from Jenny's boyfriend, who surprised Frank by practically snatching the video camera out of his hands to inspect it before walking back towards the table, already pushing at the buttons.

Jenny rolled her eyes as she watched the blond go, and then flashed Frank an apologetic look. He just shrugged.

"That's Jay," she explained. "He'll give it back in one piece, I promise."

Frank smiled. "That's okay."

"You didn't show last week. Wasn't sure I'd see you here today."

"I didn't even know if you'd be here today," Frank admitted. "I figured I might as well find out, though. Um, sorry about last week. I got kinda busy."

"That's fine," Jenny insisted, nodding him towards her table. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

Frank followed, and wasn't surprised when Jenny formally introduced him to Jay, first. He seemed nice enough. A lot nicer than what Frank's first impression had led him to believe, even if Jay didn't seem interested in returning

Frank's camera any time soon. Frank couldn't have cared less as he put his attention into meeting everyone else at the table.

This one girl apart from Jenny was chatty, and seemed a little overeager when she asked Frank to sit next to her; the tall guy was eager to express how friendly their town was; and the short one wanted to know if Frank had an album at home so they could see his work. Frank conveniently lost that in the move, too.

Overall, he was encouraged by how quickly these people seemed to accept him. All except for one. When Jenny finally introduced him to the red-streaked mullet head, Frank was quick to forget about everyone else at the table.

"And this is Jeremy," Jenny said. "He takes mostly black and whites. Seems to think he has enough color in his hair."

Frank looked across the table, ready to greet Jeremy as he had everyone else, but seemed to lose all track of what he was doing as Jeremy offered him one cold glance to acknowledge he was there, and then dismissed him by going back to his camera.

Jenny was still talking, but Frank had no idea what she was saying as he stared at Jeremy a little longer. Something was familiar. Frank had a bad feeling about the guy, but couldn't quite place it for several long moments before something clicked. The name. Jeremy... Jeremy. Jeremy Flaskis. Oliver had mentioned a Jeremy, and Frank was quick to suspect that Oliver's Jeremy and this one were one and the same. The guy definitely seemed intimidating, and Frank could just picture him threatening Oliver if he didn't like him. Although, now that Frank thought about it, there might have been more of a reason than that. Like, maybe Jeremy's dog really was threatened. But, when Oliver had sworn that he didn't do it, perhaps that wasn't the complete truth. Maybe it was David. It would make sense. If David was capable of attacking his mother, he was capable of tormenting an animal.

Frank remembered the image of the dead cat, floating in the lake. He had a sick feeling that David had had something to do with that, too, and swallowed down an uncomfortable thickness in his throat before forcing himself to shake off the memory and focus.

Jeremy Flaskis... he'd seen David tormenting his animal... perhaps David had run off. Later, he saw Oliver and threatened him, not knowing the difference. And why would he notice? They shared the same body, after all.

Frank narrowed his eyes at Jeremy before he realized he was doing it, and unfortunately, it was just in time for Jeremy to notice.

"What?" the other boy demanded, drawing the rest of the table's attention to Frank.

For a moment, Frank wanted to respond. A protective urge had him close to daring to tell Jeremy Flaskis what he thought of him; what he thought of someone who'd wish harm on someone like Oliver, even if it was warranted to a point. Right then and there, he was fully tempted to ask Jeremy Flaskis why he was looking through the windows of his house as he remembered something David had said. Did it ever occur to you that whoever was looking in your windows wasn't looking to take a picture of anyone in your family? Jeremy Flaskis was looking for Oliver... or David. But why? Frank wondered. Did he suspect that something was wrong with them--him? Did he know the truth? Oliver's secret? If he did, that made him dangerous, Frank decided. Maybe he wanted to prove it. Maybe he wanted to prove that Oliver--David--was dangerous. Maybe he wanted him gone. Frank would have loved to know, but quickly decided that this wasn't the time. David had told him to look deeper. Frank hadn't known what that meant at the time, but maybe Jeremy Flaskis was a good place to start. Maybe that's what David wanted. He wanted Frank's help to protect himself...and Oliver.

And not knowing if that was exactly what he wanted to do, Frank knew he would anyway as he forced a friendly smile in Jeremy's direction.

"I like your hair," he lied. "Any idea where I can get that done?"

Instead of responding, Jeremy rolled his eyes, and once again went back to his camera, leaving everyone at the table in an awkward silence until Jenny released a nervous laugh and looked at Frank. "Why on earth would you want to do that?" she asked, surprising him by ruffling his hair. "I love this color."

"Frank's lip quirked in amusement, but it wasn't what he was feeling as he looked to Jay for his reaction to his girlfriend's antics. But again, Jay seemed relaxed, friendly. He also seemed very efficient when it came to a much-needed subject change.

"Alright," Jay said, taking Jenny's hand. "You losers ready to get out of here?" He paused and looked at Frank, finally handing back the video camera. "Come on, Frank. This'll be fun."

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Oliver's eyes itched. Swollen, and dry, he rubbed at them like the irritation they were, the pressure from his fingers making him feel dizzy as he attempted to walk a straight path away from the back of his house. Attempted to walk it quickly.

He was supposed to be feeding his chicken. That's what he told his mom he was doing. It was the only way he'd been able to get outside. His dad had gone to town, but not before saying that Oliver needed to spend some time in his room--his half empty room. His own room. It all felt wrong to him. Everything was wrong to him. It was frustrating that he seemed to be alone in sharing the feeling. But he wasn't right. Oliver knew that. He'd always known he was different. It just became hard to bear when it was shoved in his face in the large doses he'd been getting lately. He'd wanted to get away. He needed to think. Needed to be free. Just for a little while. He was afraid he'd only have a little while. His mom would go to the garage to check on him--probably already had. And then she'd look. She'd look until she found him, and he'd be back in that room again. That horrible, suffocating room that made him feel...sad. Sad. That was it. An emotion Oliver could latch onto through the rest of the confusion and uncertainty he was experiencing. Sadness--loneliness. They were like the same thing to Oliver.

He stopped wiping at his eyes as the place where the tire swing used to be came into sight. It wasn't there anymore. Now, it was no more than a rope hanging from a tree, but the place held memories. When he was still small, Oliver used to sit there, and he and David would tell one another their secrets.

It was the place where David first told Oliver that his parents were not good people; that they should be punished. It was a secret. Oliver had never told a soul.

He looked past the frayed rope, swaying lightly against the wind, as if someone had just walked past it. He could see a thin path from where he was standing, created by light traffic over the years, and moved that way, walking t

hrough a patch of the woods that seemed greener than the rest, spotted with wildflowers and tall weeds. He could hear the sound of trickling water flowing along the earth, but couldn't see the natural stream, only felt it as he trudged through it, the water flooding his tennis shoes somewhere below the knee-high grass. Moving into the shadows of tall trees, Oliver stopped and let out a breath. A relieved breath, as he abruptly turned around and desperately spoke to the space in front of him.

"What do I do? You were right about them. You were right, David. You have to tell me what to do. David, I don't know what to do!"

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When Jay had told Frank that they were going to have fun, he'd hoped that the outing would include a trip to his side of the lake, so he could get a good idea of what went on out there. But, no one even mentioned getting in a car, let alone leaving town.

The group headed away from the restaurant, walking the sidewalks like well-rounded individuals who had no intention of wreaking havoc on their beloved small town. Conversation revolved pretty much around Frank, which didn't surprise him. They were curious. They wanted to know where he was from, and how he came to be in a town that wasn't even on the map. He could at least be honest about that, and even found a new place to vent over what a jerk he thought his dad was. When the majority of the teens agreed with him, he found that he actually liked the group--not counting Jeremy Flaskis--and had to remind himself why he was there in the first place. It wasn't to make friends.

He was supposed to be looking for faults within these people. Suspicious behavior. Anything. The truth was, as they moved through the town, Frank no longer knew what he was looking for. Whatever it was, he expected to see it in Jeremy Flaskis. Unfortunately, Frank realized, in his mind Jeremy Flaskis was already guilty, and that was making it difficult for him to see whether or not there was someone else there who might have an issue with his family... or Oliver's.

Frank almost wanted to ask. But again, he held back. He listened, he studied, and when four others with cameras joined him he turned on the video camera and let the tape do some of the memorizing for him since he couldn't remember everyone's names, let alone faces. The camera was still rolling fifteen minutes later as Frank took in the inside of an old, closed-down brick building after sneaking through a busted-out back window.

"Won't we get in trouble for this?" Frank asked no one in particular.

Jay was the one who answered him. It was no surprise, he'd been sticking pretty close to Frank since they'd left the restaurant. He'd even let go of Jenny's hand a few times to do it. "Only if we get caught," he replied, grinning. When Frank didn't look amused, he continued, "Look, this town has no

real cops. Worse thing that happens is someone hears us in here and calls someone else's mom. But, it probably won't happen. We come here all the time. It's not like anyone else is using it. The owner was some old man who never came to church; he opened a skate rink here but it closed down a year later. Hear he died or something."

That would be a shame. If the owner had to close down because of slow business, he certainly wouldn't have had that problem now, Frank thought as he lifted his camera and watched two twelve-year-old boys on roller blades dart by on the screen. Granted, not everyone was on skates--there were plenty of skateboards, sneakers, and even a scooter--but the place was certainly busy. The group he'd come with seemed to be socializing more than anything but there were some getting in the best shots they could of all the action. Frank turned his camera on Jay just as Jay took a picture. When Jay looked back, he only smiled, seemingly unbothered by the attention. At least, a lot less bothered than Frank was when Jay turned the tables and took his picture. Frank was quick to hide his unease, but Jay didn't miss it.

"Don't you like getting your picture taken?" he asked.

Frank glanced away, feeling like he'd had this conversation before and not caring for it. "Not really," he admitted. "I mean, not anymore." He looked back at Jay, wanting to see his reaction, but the other blond only seemed confused.

"Not anymore?"

Frank studied Jay for a long moment, decided he had no idea why Frank would be wary of people with cameras, and forced a smile. "I guess I'm camera-shy."

Jay smiled. "That's okay. Lots of people are." To prove it, he raised his camera just as Jeremy walked by and snapped his picture. He was flipped off for his effort, but Jay only seemed amused by it. Frank wasn't, and found himself narrowing his eyes on Jeremy's back before Jay drew in his attention again. "So've you had any problems?"

"Like what?" Frank asked suspiciously.

"Like, at your new place. It's kinda run down."

"We're working on it," Frank replied. He was frowning, wondering what else Jay knew about his place.

"Hey, I didn't mean to offend," Jay replied. "I just meant... listen, I've done some work over there at your place. I'm familiar with it, so if you think you might need help with anything, I'll help."

Frank's mouth dropped open, and he was fairly certain that it was unflattering since his eyes were practically bulging, too. But he managed to compose himself as he turned his full attention, and the camera's, on Jay. "When?"

Jay shrugged. "A while back. Actually, I used to end up over there every time it rained. The place needs a new roof, but I can help you out with a temporary

ry patch job. The plumbing's not too bad, I think they fixed the electrical. But like I said, if you..."

"You've worked on my house?" Frank cut him off, and Jay frowned at him. He'd already answered that question.

"Didn't I just say that?"

"When the last owner lived there?"

Jay's frown deepened now. "Yeah. I used to help her out when she needed it. She was in your house all by herself. Do you know anything about her?"

Nasty woman who threw a rock at Oliver's head.

"Just what people say," Frank replied.

"And what's that?" Jay asked, sounding somewhat defensive to Frank's ears

"She was a crazy witch," Frank replied. "Liked to throw rocks at her neighbors. I heard no one misses her."

"Who told you that?" Jay demanded.

"Just a friend of mine."

Frank hadn't initially intended to get a rise out of Jay, but it seemed apparent that they guy had some sort of fondness for Odetta Grover. It was a development that he hadn't expected. He thought back to everything Oliver had told him about the previous resident of his house. Nothing would suggest that the woman even had friends. But, if Jay had been close to her, and knew of her troubles with Oliver and David--mostly David, not that anyone else would know it--then maybe David had made another enemy for Oliver, and Frank was looking at him.

"Friend, huh?" Jay repeated, shaking his head before he narrowed sharp eyes on Frank. "You really shouldn't believe everything you hear."

"Oh yeah?" Frank replied, sounding taunting. He couldn't seem to help it, and it occurred to him that maybe he wanted to make Jay angry... or get him to react to something. Slip, and say something he didn't intend to.

It didn't work. Instead of the angry outburst Frank expected, Jay just looked at Frank as if he'd been unnecessarily cruel. "Yeah," Jay said. "I miss her." He paused to give Frank a long, searching look. "And you don't know anything," he added decidedly, right before he walked away and Frank lost him in the crowd. Jay didn't approach him again before he snuck out the broken window and headed for home.

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Frank ached; from his ankles to his lower back he was stiff and tired, and the humidity had left him feeling the need for the longest shower of his life. Next time, he told himself, if he wanted to go to town without a car, he'd make sure he had a ride both ways. Because it was really a long, long, long... long, walk home.

He knew he could have called his mom. Unless she'd gone to meet his dad, th

at is. And if she was with his dad, Frank would have rather walked, anyway.

Besides, it gave him plenty of time to think. It was just too bad that the more Frank thought about things, the more lost he became.

He didn't know what he was doing. He'd confirmed his suspicions that something wasn't right in the Martin house, and while he was beginning to think he was better off not knowing what that was, he couldn't ignore it. But there were other things that he could ignore, but chose not to. Like, the person who'd been caught lurking outside of his house. There'd been no sign of any mysterious figures for weeks now, but Frank couldn't get it out of his head, especially after new revelations about Oliver. The more he dwelled on it, the more convinced he became that Oliver... or David, had an enemy. At this point, Frank didn't want to admit that he cared about that, but it was just another thing he couldn't help. He could have made friends today, he realized. But he only had room to concern himself with one, and it happened to be the one that he wasn't sure he even wanted. Not now.

He wished that the video camera's battery had a longer shelf life. He would have liked to review the movie he'd taken on the way home. He didn't know what he'd find on it. Things in the old skate rink had been pretty much a blur, but he knew that after Jay left him, he'd done his best to film everyone that passed by. Maybe if he watched close enough, he'd see something. A gesture, a movement, or a familiar black sweater. He could look at the video as soon as the camera charged, and it made him eager to get home.

Or, maybe he could just forget it all. Maybe he could let it go and focus on the shower and long nap he was looking forward to. That sounded like a good idea. He could put off everything else until tomorrow. Maybe he would have, if he hadn't been abruptly reminded that he had another problem entirely to deal with.

Somehow, the shiny black Lexus just didn't look right in front of the shack he called home these days. Tired, hot and sore, Frank stopped behind the vehicle and stared for long moments as he felt a fair amount of resentment overcome him. He hated that car. The sight of a pin-sized scratch on the right rear bumper was almost enough to celebrate over, he thought. Waxed monthly, washed weekly or every two hundred miles during trips, rain or shine. Frank hated it. He hated everything about it. All it was to him was a reminder of the last time his parents fought.

The tension been going on for a while. And then one weekend his father had come home with that car. An impulse buy that his mom insisted they couldn't afford if they wanted to celebrate Christmas that year. What got Frank, was how how unlike his father it was to go out and do something like that. At the time, he'd been sure that the man would see reason and return it to the dealership just for the sake of keeping the peace--mentally and financially--in the family. But he'd kept it, and no more than two weeks later, he w

as gone. His mother had done her best to make it a good Christmas later on, but it had been gone as soon as his dad had bought that damn car, as far as Frank was concerned.

Frank suddenly reached down, picked up a rock, and moved forward before he could think what he was doing. Too perfect. The damn thing was too fucking perfect, just like his dad's life now that they weren't in it. He had the jagged edge of the rock about six inches away from the side of the bumper when his mom's voice from inside suddenly caught his attention.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that! If you think you have any right to walk through my door and have the nerve to tell me what I'm doing wrong, Samuel-Martin-Seaberg, you can just get out now!"

Frank looked down at the rock in his hand, realized what he was about to do, and tossed it over his shoulder. Still holding his camera bag, he headed towards the back door, optimistic that he'd found a more reasonable outlet for his anger.

"Oh, stop overreacting, Jessica!"

Frank's steps faltered at the sound of his father's voice, but he forced himself to continue.

"Overreacting?" his mother repeated. It was her dangerous tone. A smart man would get out now.

"They're my kids, too," Sam said in a passive voice. "I have a right to say where I want them to live, and if you think this dump cuts it..."

"This dump is what I could afford! You haven't lifted a finger with Rudy or Frank in months!"

"Will you stop yelling? I'm just saying..."

Frank reached the open back door just in time to see his mother's face turned as she narrowed her eyes on the tall man with overly tanned features and a full head of blond hair. "Stop that!" Jessica ordered. "I swear if you keep acting like I'm being unreasonable..."

"You are being unreasonable. Just listen to yourself," Sam stated, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the kitchen counter.

"I can't!" Jessica ranted. "I'm too busy listening to all the bullshit coming out of your mouth!" Sam opened his mouth, likely ready to say something antagonizing in that aggravating calm tone of his, but Jessica cut him off first, pointing her finger. "Don't you dare! I swear if you keep treating me like an unreasonable female I'll start acting like one!"

"Where's Rudy?" Frank was hardly aware that he'd said it out loud before both of his parents looked at him, startled. His father stepped away from the counter, meeting his eyes, but Frank was quick to look at his mother. He'd come in, wanting to scream at the intruder, but as soon as he'd seen his parents in the kitchen it was nothing more than a bad flashback. The fighting. He'd learned to cope before, and his survival mode had kicked in. But ju

st like before, he couldn't allow himself to get away without his sister. Since he'd always been more sensitive to his parents' arguments than he was, and if he found her in her room crying right about now he wouldn't be surprised. He'd be pissed, but he wouldn't be surprised.

Jessica knew it, too. She looked nothing short of ashamed as she looked at Frank. She never liked her kids to hear her fighting. "Frank..." Jessica started carefully before pausing to compose herself as she forced a smile in his direction. "I talked her into going to Stephanie's for a while. After you left, I thought it would be best if I met your dad on my own at first," she explained, glancing towards Sam. "There were a few things we needed to talk about."

"You weren't talking," Frank pointed out, surprised by how calm he sounded when his hands were shaking so badly he had to put down the camera and shove them in his pockets.

"Hey, Frank... you look..."

Sam's gentle attempt at polite conversation was quickly cut off when Frank cut his eyes in his direction. "Don't talk to me," Frank said flatly, and then looked right back at his mother. He couldn't seem to make eye contact with his father for more than a few seconds at a time, especially when the man was looking back. It was irritating to Frank, how simply looking at him caused an unwanted reaction that felt suspiciously like vulnerability. "I'm going for a walk."

Jessica sighed. "Frank, you just got back. You don't have to..."

"Frank," Sam cut her off, moving even closer to his son. "I know you're angry with me, but we have a lot to talk about. I think..."

"I don't care what you think," Frank stated, right before he turned to walk right back out the door. He'd felt brave before. Now he just felt cornered.

"Frank, wait a minute," Sam called, his patient tone fading. Frank could hear the man's large footsteps coming from behind him.

"Sam, don't," Jessica hissed. "Now's not a good time..."

"Frank!" Sam persisted. He was growing tired of being avoided, and reached out to grab Frank's arm before the boy could get out the door. But, Frank was no longer a passive little boy willing to be snatched up like a toddler, and Sam Seaberg wasn't expecting the way the teen rounded and shoved at him as if he were warding off an attack.

"Get off!" Frank snapped.

"Frank!" Jessica cried, obviously as startled as her ex-husband. But, even her voice didn't seem to calm her son.

"Don't you get it?" Frank shouted, glaring at his father. "You might have Rudy fooled but I don't want you here--the only reason you are is because of her! Don't fucking talk to me, and if you talk to my mom like that again I'll throw you out myself!" Whirling, he stepped out the back door, but

paused momentarily before he added for good measure, “Asshole.”

“Frank, wait!” Sam insisted, but Frank did no such thing.

As Frank headed away from the house, he could hear his mom telling his dad that he needed to back off. He wasn’t sure if he wanted the man to listen to that advice or not. He’d thought that yelling would make him feel better, but he found that all it did was make him want to yell more. He wanted to scream about everything that infuriated him about Samuel Seaberg until it was right again. But that was impossible, and even if it wasn’t, he couldn’t. He kept walking instead, needing to maintain at least some control.

Frank felt shaky, suffocating in his own skin. He pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it on the ground as he walked around the house, as if it would provide him with some extra air. He needed to sit down, but didn’t dare.

He was too exhausted. If he sat down, he’d never get up, effectively trapping himself to deal with his dad. And the nerve of the man! We have a lot to talk about. They had a lot to talk about during the divorce, Frank thought furiously. There was plenty to talk about, as far as Frank was concerned: every weekend that he expected his dad to show up only to be disappointed. There was no way he wanted to talk now that it was convenient for his father. He had more pride than that. I have more sense than that, he told himself. It hurt, but he wasn’t going to let his dad get to him. He didn’t trust the man enough to let that happen. Moreover, he didn’t trust himself. Frank could have kicked himself for all the times he’d found himself missing someone who didn’t give a damn about him.

“Frank?”

He heard his mom’s voice as he reached the front of the house and looked back. He couldn’t see her, but obviously she meant to catch up to him. He almost wanted to go to her; even took a step back in that direction.

“Jessica, hold on! I want to know what you’ve been telling him!” Frank heard his father’s voice, and stopped.

“What are you talking about? You think it’s my fault he won’t talk to you?” she demanded. “You’re as self-absorbed as ever.”

Frank briefly closed his eyes, shook his head, and started walking again. He needed to get away. He’d come back later, crawl into bed... he hoped by then his dad would be gone. His mom wouldn’t let him sleep at the house. Frank hoped she wouldn’t let him sleep at the house. He couldn’t take that now. In fact, he wasn’t sure how he was supposed to take it later, either.

Frank turned down the shoreline towards the bridge as he wondered whatever happened to getting through one day at a time. It had been so much nicer than stressing over how to get from one minute to the next. He kept thinking that if he could only get away, things would be right again. Incidentally, he was having those thoughts when he came to the bridge and took abrupt notice of a small motor boat rocking above the water’s surface, and not just a

ny boat. His eyes slowly widened as realization dawned, but there was no time to think about it when he heard his name being called, and spun around to see his father headed down the shore, jogging in his direction. A prickle on the back of Frank's neck caused him to look to his right, and as his eyes met hazel ones his balance faltered and he swallowed hard.

Oliver... David... Frank had no idea who he was looking at. This guy--the one he'd been avoiding to escape that very question. But it didn't matter. Looking at him, Frank found that he really didn't care. Whoever he was, he was exactly what Frank needed.... at least, he needed his boat.

"Oliver," Frank finally decided, figuring that David would have said something obnoxious by now. Frank reached out, grabbed the boy's wrist, and pulled him towards the boat where they stepped in one at a time. "Go!" Frank ordered, taking no notice of the surprised expression studying him as he looked back to see where his dad was. Samuel was getting closer, could see what Frank was doing and picked up the pace.

There was a jerk as Oliver pushed the boat away from the bridge, and Frank turned to help him only moments before the engine gurgled to life, and for long moments as they glided across the water Frank watched the image of his father become smaller, until he could no longer make out the disappointed expression on his face.

When Frank turned back to his unexpected rescuer, he was short of breath, but still managed to move to the seat across from him.

"Who was that, Frank?" Oliver asked, still staring back towards the bridge.

"My dad," Frank replied uneasily. "I mean... he used to be my dad."

Frank stared down at his hands, and for minutes he picked at the dirt beneath his fingernails, knowing that he was being watched. When he looked up again, his host's eyes were wide, curious... and something else. Hopeful? Remorseful? ... searching.

Frank frowned, wiping his hands on his jeans as he took a deep breath and found his bearings. "So," he finally said. "Who are you?"

Chapter 9

by DomLuka

Thanks to jim for editing!

Tiredly, Frank leaned over the side of the boat, staring at the dark, glistening surface of the water as it passed over his hand, his fingers leaving a small wake next to the boat. The sound of the engine was no more than a hum in his ears now, and the setting sun cast an orange hue in the air that left him feeling a little too warm, and even more so disoriented as they circled one cove after another.

Frank was feeling awkward with his company. Asking who Oliver was had been a mistake. At least, it seemed that way when the boy's only response was to sulk as he guided the boat around the lake. Oliver didn't seem to be ta

king them anywhere specific, which suited Frank just fine. He was content touring the water for a while. He just wished that he could feel as comfortable with Oliver as he had last week.

Frank was startled so badly he nearly jumped out of the boat when Oliver made a sudden move towards him. It was difficult to know what he should think when the other boy grabbed his wrist and yanked his hand out of the water. Frank jerked away from him, pushing him back into his seat.

"What the hell..." Frank started, but was quickly cut off by Oliver's concerned voice.

"I'm sorry, Frank," he said, cutting the engine and leaving them in silence except for the water sloshing against the sides of the boat. He pointed out at the water, about two feet away.

Frank looked, still frowning until he saw something just beneath the water. It was long, dark, and moved like a raised flag as it slithered beneath the surface. Leaning over the side for a better look, it took him a moment to realize that it was a snake he was looking at.

"Those have poison," Oliver said. "I thought you were gonna touch it, Frank."

Frank watched the snake disappear, turned back to Oliver, and let out a breath. He felt like an idiot. Thanks to the hurt look on Oliver's face, a sorry idiot. Frank didn't know what he'd been thinking. Obviously, he was on edge for many reasons, but this wasn't the time to release his frustrations. Oliver wasn't the right person to release them on. "Listen," he said, feeling exasperated. "There's... there's some really weird shit going on around here, and I don't know if I can..."

"Are you mad at me, Frank?" Oliver interrupted, looking as if that was the only thing in the world that concerned him at the moment. In fact, he looked almost terrified of the answer, and suddenly, the last thing Frank wanted to do was disappoint him.

"No. Not at you, Oliver," Frank said, although he probably could debate that with himself for a while. "It's... the situation." Frank paused, collecting his thoughts. When he met Oliver's eyes again, he decided to be blunt. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Oliver scratched at his head, looked down at the water as if it was supposed to tell him how to answer.

"Tell you what, Frank?"

Frank groaned. "Okay, that--that, makes me angry."

"Don't be angry, Frank," Oliver whispered.

"Then tell me the truth! Why didn't you tell me about David? Why did you let me think..."

"I did, Frank! I did. I told you about David all the time!"

"No, that's not... I know you talked about... god. Damn it! You let me thin

k you had a brother!" Frank blurted. "And you let me worry--you let me think ..." Frank stopped himself and rubbed tiredly at his face. He was beginning to feel dizzy. Nauseous. His head ached and his emotions were in turmoil. He was damn sure that the long walk from town to home wasn't helping any. He felt himself sway and closed his eyes briefly before he felt a hand grip his upper arm, followed by Oliver's voice.

"Frank!"

Catching himself against the rocking boat, Frank looked to see that Oliver was next to him now, steadying him. "I'm talking about him like he's real," Frank mused. "David's not real."

Oliver's eyes widened, as if he'd just been betrayed. "No, Frank. You're wrong, and he won't like that."

Frank laughed, not knowing what else to do. "You mean you won't like it. Your parents told me, Oliver. I know the truth."

"David..."

"No!" Frank snapped, causing Oliver to recoil. "He's not real! Just stop lying to me and tell me the truth!"

Oliver took in a deep, shaky breath, pulling at his hair some more as he shook his head. His following outburst wasn't at all what Frank was expecting. "You're wrong! He's not a lie, Frank! He's real! He's real!... They're wrong! You're all wrong." Oliver gasped, covering his mouth as if to catch it. "They took away his things, Frank. They took it all away, and told me I couldn't talk to him anymore. But it's not the truth. He's real."

"Where?" Frank demanded. "If he's real, then where is he? Where is he?"

"Here!" Oliver shouted, holding his head. "Here is the truth, Frank. And here ..." he suddenly fell calm, bringing his hand to rest over his heart. "I love... I love my brother, Frank. And that's the truth. It's the truth! Why, Frank?" Oliver asked, looking desperately to his friend. "Why are they taking him away? You said... you said we'd be safe, Frank. You said it!"

A sudden flashback of being submerged in total darkness sent a chill up Frank's spine as he faced Oliver, who at some point had latched onto his wrist until his knuckles turned white. Frank was suddenly at a loss when it came to what to say. Had to close his eyes for a minute. "That was before... I thought..." Frank was having trouble. Back in the Martin's basement, he had told Oliver that everything would be okay. But that was when he'd thought that Oliver and David had been suffering inexcusable abuse. What he'd learned from the Martins changed that. The parents weren't the ones who were a danger. David was. "Don't you get it, Oliver? All David does is hurt people." Frank stared down at the water, frowning for long moments before his eyes suddenly snapped up to Oliver's. "Do you remember the cat? It was dead. You said that there were some things we weren't supposed to see. Remember, Oliver? Were you talking about David? Oliver..."

Oliver shook his head, and wiped at his eyes before they had a chance to water. "Why are you doing this, Frank? David's not bad... he tries. He tries. He is my brother! He couldn't be anyone else, Frank!"

He's you, Frank thought, feeling exceptionally depressed about it. But, even as he thought it, seeing the expression on Oliver's face made him question whether or not Oliver actually knew it. The realization cautioned him to be careful. It wasn't as if he'd stuck around to ask the Martins exactly how this thing worked last week, but it was clear that Oliver was agitated. The idea of him becoming agitated enough for David to emerge was enough for Frank to dial it back a few notches. He had to admit that he was curious about what happened when they switched, but he didn't want to satisfy that curiosity over the murky water of a secluded cove. And, he could admit that Oliver played a part in his decision to calm down, too. Seeing him so upset was only upsetting Frank more. He felt frustrated, guilty, and furious over it all at the same time. The way that Oliver caught a single tear beneath his reddened eye, sniffled, and looked away, was just about all Frank could take today.

"Hey," he said, rubbing Oliver's shoulder with a gentle hand. "Hey." Frank shook him softly, enough to get his attention, and then he forced a reassuring smile. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, okay? Let's not talk about it right now. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Oliver half nodded, half shook his head as he rocked himself and leaned into Frank's hand. "I don't want to leave again, Frank. I just want you to stay with me."

"Okay," Frank was quick to agree. He slid his arm around Oliver, drawing him closer. At the moment, Frank would have done or said anything to wipe that look off his face. "Okay. It's okay."

"Okay," Oliver repeated, turning into him, wrapping his arms around Frank's waist while he buried his face against his bare shoulder.

The boat continued to sway, bringing them closer and closer to the shore as they each caught their breath. Frank kept an arm around Oliver as the temperature in the air dropped, keeping the warmth of his body close to his skin. His fingers had found their way into Oliver's hair, and he absently traced the scars hidden beneath.

"We should go to your house," Frank finally said. He was tired of being in the boat, and decided that Oliver's place was just as good as any. Under normal circumstances, Frank knew that he wouldn't have been comfortable with the suggestion, but anything was better than going home to face the visitor at his house. Oliver, however, didn't seem to agree as his head snapped up and he had the nerve to look at Frank as if he were the crazy one.

"No! No, I don't want to go home, Frank. They won't let me... they said you didn't want to see me anymore."

“Your parents?”

Oliver nodded slowly. “They took David’s things. My dad broke his camera. .. and they get mad when I say his name.”

Frank frowned. The Martins had mentioned that David had gotten so bad that they had to take extreme measures to control him. Now, it sounded that they were trying to get rid of him entirely. From what Frank knew about the situation, he couldn’t entirely disagree with their decision. But, he did wonder if it was even possible. Whatever part of Oliver that David played seemed to be a big one, and he wasn’t sure getting rid of him would be as simple as pretending he didn’t exist. Furthermore, he wasn’t sure if it was affecting Oliver in a positive way. If anything, it seemed to be hurting him.

“We don’t have to go there,” Frank finally said, doing his best to downplay the situation. “I know what it’s like to want to avoid your parents. But let’s go somewhere, alright? I need... I need to get out of this boat for a while.”

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“Baby, you’ve gotta order something or they’re gonna make me kick you out.”

Jay looked up from the table he was sitting at in Hannigan’s restaurant, to find Jenny leaning over him.

“Milkshake, fries... whatever looks good is fine,” he told her before turning his attention back to his table.

Jenny frowned. She was used to his attention being on her, not Frank Seaberg, who happened to be in every photo laid out in front of her boyfriend. Jay reached for another to add to the rows he was making, but she caught it, and his hand beneath hers, and shook her head when he looked up at her expectantly.

“Okay, this has gotta stop, Jay,” she said firmly. “It’s getting weird. Besides, I thought you said he didn’t know anything.”

“I don’t think he does,” Jay admitted, eyeing his girlfriend’s supervisor looking in their direction. “Are you gonna get my food, or have I gotta go somewhere else?”

Jenny released an exasperated sigh, but went to get Jay something to eat. He watched after her for a moment, deciding that an apology would be in order.

Later, of course. Covering his mouth as he yawned, he turned his attention back to the photographs in front of him. Decidedly, it wasn’t his best work.

Most were out of focus, but it couldn’t be helped. Earlier in the day he hadn’t been focusing on the perfect picture as he followed Frank all over the whole skating rink, paying attention.

What had he been looking for? Jay wondered. In every shot Frank was aiming his own camera at a different person. Or who was he looking for? Jay had a good idea, but he had his doubts that Frank would actually take things this far. It seemed that he was the suspicious sort. In a way, Jay could respe

ct that. If anything, he could relate. He wished that he'd been more patient with Frank earlier. Played it nice, until he learned more. He wondered if there was anything he could do about it now. He supposed that he still had another option; one more thing that could get him close enough to Frank. The problem was, he didn't know whether or not it would work, and he didn't know if trying it was the best of ideas.

Someone sliding into the booth across from Jay caught his attention, and he did his best not to frown at the tall boy with red streaks in his hair.

"Jay," his company said casually.

"Jeremy," Jay returned. Jeremy's very presence compelled him to start stacking up the pictures. They weren't friends. At least, not by Jay's standards. Jeremy was one of those guys who just didn't get along with anyone, but chose to consider the people he didn't like as friends anyway. Otherwise, he wouldn't have any. So, there really wasn't anything surprising about him randomly sitting at Jay's table. And, usually, Jay didn't even mind. Only today, he wasn't in the mood for it. Jeremy might act like a dumb jerk, but Jay was completely aware that the guy was somewhat intelligent. And observant.

"What the hell is this?" Jeremy remarked. He'd noticed the pictures quickly, and the similarities in them.

"Nothing special," Jay replied. "A lot of bad shots. The lighting was wrong, wasn't paying attention..."

"No, him," Jeremy interrupted, dropping a heavy finger directly over Frank's face in one of them. "Looks like you must really like this new friend of yours. Sure Jenny won't get jealous?"

"Fuck off, Jeremy," Jay said, gathering the rest of the photos.

Jeremy laughed. "Seriously, is that loser still around? I might wanna get out of here if he shows up again."

Jay looked up. "Why's that?"

Jeremy shrugged. "I just don't like him around. He creeps me out."

"How so?" Jay asked skeptically. He'd never known anyone to creep Jeremy out before.

Jeremy frowned. "Never mind. I just don't like him, alright?" He stopped, and Jay frowned. He didn't think he'd get anymore out of him. But it seemed that a few moments of silence was all Jeremy needed to continue. "I saw him hanging out with those freaks. Like, he was over at their house."

Jay swallowed, wishing he had a drink in front of him to pick up. "Freaks?"

"Don't play dumb, Jay. My dad works with Brian Martin. Everyone knows that whole family's fucked up. That guy's been around them a lot," Jeremy said, nodding towards the stacks of pictures. "Who the hell knows what's going on in that house. They're all a bunch of devil worshipers or something"

. And it don't seem to bother your new friend much, either."

"You've seen Frank go to their house? When?"

"Saw him when I was out walking my dog. He was all chummy in their little boat, and..."

They were interrupted when a plate full of fries was dropped roughly in front of Jay.

"There's your fries," Jenny said, frowning.

Jeremy smirked up at her. "Look, she is jealous."

.....

Frank's legs felt wobbly as he trekked through the woods alongside Oliver, not far from where they'd left the boat. He figured that they were about a mile away from the Martin house, and he was exhausted. He didn't even bother to explain his actions when he suddenly sat, leaning back against the trunk of a tree as he ignored the way the bark scratched his back. Oliver stopped walking and cocked his head curiously.

"Is something wrong, Frank?"

"Yeah," Frank said honestly. "I'm tired. I'm dehydrated. I don't remember the last time I ate. I can't go home... and I'm out here with you, avoiding everything that we should be talking about because I'm completely freaked every time I think about how you might flip on me."

"Why would I do that, Frank?" Oliver asked, alarmed as he moved to sit down.

Frank only sighed and leaned into him. "I'm sorry, Oliver. I'm just kinda testy right now, you know? I'm not feeling real good."

"Are you gonna be sick, Frank?" Oliver asked.

"It's possible," Frank replied, realizing that it was an actual possibility as he closed his eyes, only to find that doing so made him dizzy. Oliver stared at him for long moments, seeming unsure of the situation before he tentatively raised his hand to Frank's shoulder. "I just need to rest for a few minutes," Frank told him when it came to his attention that Oliver was worried.

"We could stay here for a long time, Frank," Oliver suggested, surprising him. "Like camping."

Frank laughed, mostly because he liked the idea, as absurd as it was. "We don't have any food. No water, and it's been cold at night."

"What happened to your shirt, Frank?"

"Took it off somewhere I guess. Listen, Oliver, we can't stay here. It's either your house or mine, and right now I think your place would be best."

Oliver shook his head again. "No, I don't want to go home, Frank."

"Because you snuck out without telling your parents?"

Oliver was quick to look guilty. "They wouldn't let me see you, Frank. I left when my dad went to work. My mom thinks I'm feeding my chicken. It's a lucky chicken."

Frank sighed. "Well trust me, she doesn't think you're feeding it anymore. They're probably looking for you. Shit, she could have seen you on the lake with me."

"I know that, Frank," Oliver replied, lowering his voice. "David..."

"David what?" Frank asked when Oliver suddenly stopped, as if he'd said something wrong.

Oliver met his eyes. "David told me to be fast, or they'd catch me."

Frank sighed. "David told you?" He wasn't sure he liked that Oliver could be influenced by David even when David wasn't in control.

"He told me how to get out," Oliver explained. "He told me how to get to you, Frank. I don't wanna go back home."

Frank took in a deep breath as he slowly pulled himself to his feet, and then held down a hand for Oliver. "Well, you're gonna have to," he insisted as he pulled him up. "And you're not going to get in trouble--if we go now. I'll talk to your parents. It'll be alright, Oliver."

Oliver leaned back against the tree, crossing his arms. Frank frowned.

"Look," Frank said. "What if I promise not to leave you there unless you say it's okay?"

"You won't leave?"

"Not until you understand that you're not in trouble."

Oliver looked thoughtful. "Will you make them let me see you, Frank?"

Frank indulged Oliver in a small smile as he reached out and took his hand again. "I'm not going anywhere this time. I promise."

.....

"Why didn't you lock him up?" Brian Martin demanded of his wife as he followed her out to the front porch. "You were supposed to be watching him!"

He wasn't sure how much more of this he could take. He'd expected his wife to be more competent than this, but the phone call he received at work in the middle of the day proved otherwise.

"We agreed not to put him in the basement anymore," Mary reminded him. "It's too risky now. We never should have moved David's things. It's too hard on Oliver."

"Well he's going to have to deal with it. He'd be just fine if you hadn't mothered him so much!"

Mary turned to face her husband, shaking her head. "None of us are fine, Brian! Not anymore! And this is too much to do to Oliver. He doesn't want to believe that David's not real, and if we can't convince him...I can't do this anymore, Brian. I can't. Everything's falling apart."

"Then we're just going to have to hold it together, just like we always have. I'm gonna start by finding Oliver, and once he's home he's staying home, Mary. I don't care what we've gotta do to make that happen!"

Brian turned, heading for his truck, only to stop at the sound of his wife's voice.

ice.

“Brian. You don’t have to find him. He’s home.”

Brian turned and followed Mary’s eyes out to the river until they fell over Oliver’s little motorboat coming towards them slowly. He was going to have to get rid of that thing, he decided. But, that would come later. It appeared they had company, and he was irritated to find that Oliver wasn’t alone. But, that didn’t stop him from forcing a smile as he moved towards the water to help the boys out of the boat. He took only a moment to consider Frank Seaberg’s shirtless and worn appearance before he reached for Oliver, helped him out, and pulled him in for a hug. “You had us worried to death, Oliver! Where’ve you been?” Brian demanded, frowning at the tense way Oliver regarded him.

“It was my fault,” Frank said as he moved to the shore with no assistance. He looked at the Martins each in turn. “He came to see me, and I wanted to take a walk before we came back here.”

“Well we’re sorry if he bothered you,” Brian said, guiding Oliver into his mother’s hands. “It won’t happen again. Go ahead and use the boat to get back across the lake if you want.”

Oliver looked over his shoulder at Frank as his parents led him towards the house, as if Frank would go back on his promise and do just that. But, Frank was quick to follow the family.

“He didn’t bother me, Mr. Martin,” Frank said, stopping the older man. “It was as... it was good to see him.”

“Well that’s nice of you,” Mr. Martin replied.

“Not really,” Frank replied, and Mr. Martin turned to face him completely. “I shouldn’t have... look, I handled the situation badly. I want to make it up to Oliver, and...”

“There’s no need to do that, Frank,” Brian insisted. “Mary and I understand.”

“I want to,” Frank said firmly. “Actually... I was wondering if I could talk to you, sir.”

Brian sighed. “I’m not sure it’s really a good time for...”

“Come in, Frank,” Mary said, earning herself an impatient look from her husband. “Come on in,” she repeated. “Oliver has a shirt you can use, and it’s getting close to suppertime. I’ll fix you boys something to eat.”

Frank gave her a nod. “Thank you.”

Frank followed the family up their front porch slowly, not appreciating his last memory of being there. In fact, he wasn’t sure he would have stepped foot in that house at all if it weren’t for Oliver, and the fact that he was exhausted. It left him questioning his ability to make sound decisions as he entered the house and found it uncomfortably dark. He was immediately distracted from that discovery, however, when Oliver made a sudden move away

from his mother and grabbed Frank by the wrist.

“Come look, Frank!” he shouted, pulling Frank down the hallway as if he were afraid someone would stop him.

“Oliver!” Mary scolded, sounding annoyed. But, Oliver didn’t stop until he’d led Frank straight to his room and flicked on a light.

“See, Frank! See--they took all David’s stuff!” Oliver stated, surprising Frank even more than the half-empty room.

Frank simply had no idea how to react. Oliver seemed to expect Frank to be just as upset as he was, but Frank wasn’t sure he should be. Looking around, it seemed that the room belonged to one person. All of the things that had been David’s were, in fact, gone. It was the way it should be. David didn’t exist. Oliver did. Frank just wished that Oliver wasn’t so upset about it. But, there wasn’t much he could do apart from a reassuring hand on Oliver’s shoulder.

“We’ve been making a few changes around here,” Mary Martin said from behind them. “Oliver hasn’t been taking all of it well.”

Frank only nodded. He wasn’t comfortable commenting on it. Oliver was standing right there, after all, and he didn’t want to talk about him as if he wasn’t. Instead, he found himself squeezing Oliver’s shoulder, and smiling at him. “You know, if you move some stuff in here around, your room could look bigger. I mean, it’ll look nice if you spread your stuff around a little. Like, it’s all yours.”

Oliver’s brow creased, but instead of responding, he only hung his head, causing Frank to feel for him even more. He felt like he should apologize, but he wasn’t sure exactly what he should be apologizing for.

“Frank, you look like you could stand washing up a bit,” Mary remarked, passing them to head for Oliver’s closet.

“Yeah. Sorry about that,” Frank replied, feeling a little embarrassment kicking in. “I’ve been outside for most of the day.”

“Give him the blue shirt, Mom,” Oliver said, sounding rather sullen. “It goes with his eyes.”

“Sure, honey,” Mary replied, and did just that. “Oliver can show you where the bathroom is, Frank.”

“Oh, I know where it is,” Frank replied, and then regretted it as it reminded everyone of his invasion of the Martin house and the following events the week before. At least Mary had the decency to look ashamed. Frank found that he didn’t mind that very much as he looked at Oliver. “How about you show me, anyway.”

“Okay, Frank.”

Oliver and Frank left the room together, while Mary went in the opposite direction to join her husband. Frank found himself watching Oliver on the way to the bathroom, noticing that his carefree persona seemed to be missing.

g for the moment, and if the boy didn't seem to be bothered by current circumstances, Frank might have thought that David had taken over. He turned to Oliver as they reached the restroom, and smiled again.

"Hey," he said. "I'm still not going anywhere, alright? I'm gonna talk to your parents."

"But you're not gonna tell them to let David come back, are you, Frank?" Oliver asked.

Frank frowned. If David was Oliver, then it seemed that Oliver did have some control. If David wasn't allowed to exist, then Oliver didn't allow him to.

At least, not to the extreme that he had before. It would make sense, since Oliver had to be the most obedient person on the planet as far as Frank was concerned... unless he was listening to David. Frank sighed. He definitely needed to do his best when it came to getting answers from Oliver's parents.

"No," Frank said carefully, taking a step closer to Oliver. "David doesn't belong here... but you do. Believe me, Oliver, I'd rather just have you here."

Frank leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek. "Don't be sad, alright? It'll work out. Things usually do."

Frank's words didn't seem to make Oliver feel much better, so Frank had to settle for Oliver's short nod before he walked away from the bathroom, and Frank turned on the light as he closed himself in, pausing for a moment when he saw a labeled toothbrush holder. The one that fit into the slot marked David was missing.

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Clean hands. Clean face. Fresh shirt. Frank almost felt human by the time he left the bathroom, wondering where everyone was in the quiet house. Halfway down the hallway he heard Mary Martin's voice call for him, and it led him to the living room where he was happy to see that they'd turned on a lamp, but as he looked at the Martins sitting together on a sofa, he found himself feeling troubled.

"Where'd Oliver go?" he asked.

"He's in the kitchen starting on dinner," Mary explained. "I think he volunteered because you're here."

"He'll burn the biscuits," Brian added. "But it'll mean the world to him if you try just one."

Frank nodded. "I'll do that." He was so hungry he would have eaten charcoal.

"Why don't you come sit down," Mary said politely as she directed Frank towards a chair. He sat, and she poured him a tall glass of lemonade, which Frank readily accepted and downed in just a few seconds.

"Would you like some more?" Mary asked, amused.

He certainly did, but not wanting to embarrass himself further, Frank declined.

ed.

“So,” Brian said, looking Frank up and down. “Why don’t we get right to it.”

“Okay,” Frank said. “I want to talk about Oliver, how...”

“You don’t have to pretend with us, son,” Brian said. “If you’re over here to avoid something else, there’s no need to pretend you care about Oliver.”

“Brian!” Mary said.

“I do care about Oliver,” Frank stated. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Oh come on now, be honest. I know a runaway when I see one. Now, I can appreciate that you wanna get away from something you don’t like, but I won’t have you using my boy...”

“You’re wrong!” Frank snapped, and then let out a long breath before he forced himself to meet Brian Martin’s eyes. “Look, my dad’s here visiting my sister,” Frank admitted. “I don’t want to see him, so I’ve been out all day. I know I haven’t been around since... but I mean, come on. Seriously. Can you even blame me? Your wife locked me in a basement and then you dropped that bomb about David...”

“Okay,” Brian quickly interrupted. “Just calm down there. All we’re saying here is that...”

“I know what you’re saying, but you’re wrong. Oliver’s my friend, and I want to keep it that way. I promised him I would. But I can’t do that unless... I need to know how this thing works. That’s why I’m here, Mr. Martin.”

The Martins were both silent for a minute. Brian looked annoyed, while Mary flashed her husband pleading looks.

“How it works?” Brian finally asked.

“Yeah,” Frank replied impatiently. “How does it work? Brian and Oliver are the same person, right? So do they like, take turns, or does David just come out of nowhere whenever he wants?”

“David has always done what he wants,” Brian replied, as if that would be explanation enough.

“Well, you’re obviously trying to get rid of him. Is it working?”

“We’re doing what we think is best,” Brian said, and then added, “David’s not real. The sooner Oliver understands that, the better.”

“Then Oliver doesn’t really know? He thinks David’s real?”

Brian and Mary exchanged glances, and then it was Brian who spoke again. “Yes. He’s convinced that he really has a brother.”

“Well... why?”

“They talk to each other,” Brian replied. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Oliver tells you that he’s physically seen David. But, we’re working on it, and I think we’re making progress.”

“But David can still show up at any time. Can’t he,” Frank said, more than asked.

“Oliver thinks he needs him.”

Frank thought on that for a moment. “If Oliver’s real, and David’s not... how come Oliver seems so much... younger, than David?”

“Well, the boy’s always wanted to be normal,” Brian said. “Maybe he wants to be like David.”

“Maybe?” Frank asked skeptically. “If he wants to be normal, why would he make someone up who’s so... David’s violent, right? Why would Oliver want to be that? He always tells me that he wishes David could be good.”

“Well, obviously, he’s let the situation get out of hand,” Brian responded, sounding irritated. He wasn’t accustomed to being interrogated by a teenager.

“Or you’ve let the situation get out of hand,” Frank said.

“Now wait a minute,” Brian snapped as he leaned forward on the sofa, but his wife dropped a restraining hand on his arm before he could stand.

“You’re right, Frank,” Mary said quickly. “We’ve let it get out of hand. But we’re trying to fix it now.”

“And that’s all you need to know,” Brian said firmly, this time standing.

Frank stood, too. “Hold on. You haven’t told me anything. Before David takes over--are there any warnings? And Oliver’s blackouts... does he do that when he’s David? Or is it something else? How come he remembers some things, but not others if...”

“Young man!” Mary cut him off, surprising him. “That’s quite enough. My son is very stressed out right now, and he doesn’t need you adding to it. Now unless you’re going to stay calm when you join us for supper, we’re going to have to ask you to leave.”

Frank frowned, wanting to respond negatively to that, but holding back. When Oliver suddenly returned from the kitchen to ask his mother if she’d help season the chicken--which was okay to eat because it wasn’t lucky--Frank volunteered to go with them, and escaped Brian Martin’s cold glare.

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The food was hot, filling, and flavored. Perfect, as far as Frank was concerned, and he told Oliver just that as he sat at the Martin’s table to share dinner with them. It brought the first real smile to Oliver’s lips that Frank had seen all day, and it made suffering through dinner with the other Martins worth it.

Mary and Brian remained polite, just like Frank, but that didn’t erase the tension in the air. Conversation lagged, giving Frank plenty of time to think. He wasn’t sure he liked what he saw.

Oliver had asked if he could make a plate for David, and was denied. It was increasingly difficult to see Oliver so sad, and Frank wished that there was something he could say or do to make him feel better. But, what Frank really wanted to see, was the Martins make an effort. They carried on as if n

nothing was wrong, when Oliver was clearly suffering. Frank pictured him there, after he left. Alone in that house with his parents. Confused. Lonely. Frank didn't like what he saw.

"Hey, Oliver, what do you think about spending the night? You know, at my place?"

Oliver's head snapped up at Frank before his eyes snapped to his parents. Obviously, the suggestion wasn't something he'd expected. And neither had the elder Martins, Frank observed as he took some satisfaction in their worried faces.

"Can I, mama?" Oliver asked eagerly.

"I don't think so, Oliver," Mr. Martin said; and then so he wouldn't completely look like the bad guy added, "I believe Frank has family visiting."

Frank returned Brian Martin's fake smile. "My dad isn't staying the night with us, and my mom won't mind. You can call and ask her if you want."

"Still," Mary said. "I don't think it's a good idea. Oliver's never spent a night out of the house before."

"I've been camping!" Oliver objected.

"That was different," Brian stated. The look he was currently giving Frank wasn't friendly at all. "You were with family then. I'm sorry, Oliver, but I don't think it's a good idea, either. Finish your dinner now, son."

Oliver sighed heavily, looking defeated. Frank wasn't willing to give up so easily.

"If you're worried about that," Frank said, "he'll be fine. If he's not, it's not like I can't call. And I mean, if it makes you feel better, I can call my mom right now and tell her all about Oliver. I'm sure she'll understand."

Frank's threat seemed to alert everyone at the table, except for Oliver, and for several tense minutes he saw the Martin parents try to figure out whether or not he was bluffing. It seemed that Frank didn't know whether or not he was, either. He'd already decided that it could prove dangerous for Oliver to tell his mom the truth, but at the moment, he was determined. He had no intention of leaving Oliver there tonight.

No more than thirty-five minutes later, the leftovers were put away, the dishes were clean, and Brian and Mary Martin stood on their front steps in the dark, watching as Oliver and his friend climbed into the small motorboat armed with flashlights and overnight bags. They both agreed that Frank Seaberg was becoming more than the average nuisance.

"He cornered us, Brian," Mary said. "He cornered us and he'll do it again. You never should have let Oliver leave this house. You know what'll happen now, don't you? Brian? What are we gonna do? What are we gonna do, Brian?"

"Mary," he returned coldly. "Just shut up."

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Jessica Seaberg looked over her kitchen table, currently dressed for dining.

Lately in her home, it had been serve-yourself-and-sit-down. But tonight, she'd taken the time to set the table and garnish it with a modest meal. Some pork chops, a few seasoned green beans, and her homemade potato salad. She'd even put out the pudding dessert that she'd end up freezing for popsicles later. And she was furious for herself for all of this. The display.

Honestly, she didn't know what she'd been thinking. To assume that Sam was going to show up, smooth things over with her kids, and allow them all to sit it down to a nice family dinner had been completely delusional. It was hard to admit that her teenager was smarter than she was, but just as Frank said, Sam no longer had a place in their home, and attempting to impress him was only irritating her, especially since he'd called ten minutes ago to say that he was going to take Rudy out to dinner.

Jessica knew she shouldn't mind it. This time with her father meant a lot to Rudy. But, it was possible, Jessica admitted, that she was feeling a little lonely. Maybe it was because Sam had been so reasonable with her over the phone. And he really was trying with the kids. But she'd made the mistake of believing for a split second that things would be better when he came.

Not just with the kids, but with everything. For a brief moment, she'd forgotten that she was completely capable of surviving on her own, even in a rundown lake house in a town in desperate need of some modernization.

And now she was alone in her house with dinner getting cold. But most bothersome to Jessica, was that she had no idea where Frank was. It went without saying that she was worried about him. Although, when Sam had told her that he'd climbed into a boat with another boy, she did feel better to know that he was with Oliver. At least Frank wasn't alone. She'd been worried that he'd had a falling out with Oliver, and since Oliver was the only friend that Frank had bothered to make, she was happy to discover that wasn't the case. But she still wished that Frank would come home. At the very least, she wished he'd call. Especially now that it was dark. She knew he was angry, and there was a possibility that he wouldn't come home at all tonight. That's what worried her the most. He wasn't familiar enough with the area to stay out all night, and if he was in the woods, it would be easy for him to get lost.

Jessica left her lonely dinner table and headed towards the living room, hoping to see a sign of her son, even though the last three times she'd checked had made it clear that all she'd find outside is darkness. She reached for the curtain, but stopped short of pulling it back when the turn of the front doorknob clicked in her ears and she spun to face it.

Frank stepped through the door slowly, stopping halfway, as if he expected her to be lurking in wait. He met his mother's eyes, and looked guilty enough to ground, Jessica thought. At the very least, he looked deserving of a

long lecture. But Jessica held off, instead doing something that she thought was much more important as she moved to across the door and silently wrapped Frank in a comfortable hug. She could feel in his shoulders that he was stressed out, but at least he was calm.

"Where is everyone?" he asked cautiously.

Jessica leaned back and brushed a lock of hair from his face to better meet his eyes. "Your dad took Rudy to dinner."

"Oh."

"Are you alright?" Jessica asked, studying him carefully.

He seemed to consider the question. It was a good thing, Jessica decided. She'd get an honest answer that way.

"Yeah," he finally decided. "But I don't want to see him."

"Well, you can stay in your room when he drops Rudy off if you want... but Frank, he could be here for a while, and he's probably going to try to talk to you again. He's still your father, you know. Whether or not you like it, that's never going to change. Take advantage of the situation. All those things you've been wanting to say to him--here's your chance."

"But I don't want to say anything to him at all."

Jessica smiled gently. "But you will. When you figure out it's hurting you more than him, you will."

"Mom..."

"Come have dinner with me," Jessica cut him off as she turned away from the door. She wasn't looking for an argument. There's been too many of those for one day. Now, she just wanted to enjoy dinner with her son, regardless of whether or not it was cold. But, Frank suddenly reached out, grabbing her wrist.

"Mom, wait," he said, and she frowned at the look on his face. She knew that look. He was about to ask for something he didn't think she'd agree to.

"Yes?"

Frank sighed, and pushed the door open a little wider. Jessica stepped back as she realized he was waving someone in. She was surprised, but still managed a polite smile when she saw Oliver Martin appear behind her son, looking oddly timid.

"Hi, Oliver," she said, and then eyed Frank. "It's a little late, isn't it?"

"Can he spend the night?" Frank asked, determined to get straight to the point. "His parents already said it was okay."

Put on the spot, Jessica stared between her son and his friend for several long moments. It was obvious that she didn't think this was the best night for a sleepover, but further consideration brought her to decide that it might be the best night for Frank to have a little distracting company.

"Well, I guess if it's okay with his parents..."

Jessica was as surprised as Frank was when Oliver voiced his thanks... and

demonstrated it by lunging forward to hug her.

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Frank ran his tongue over his teeth in an effort to wash away the rest of the toothpaste. His quick retreat back to his room when he'd heard his father arrive back home with Rudy hadn't given him much time to properly rinse. Now, he could hear voices in the living room as Rudy happily told their mother all she'd done. He heard his dad laugh, and resented it. The man was supposed to be upset, like Frank was. But, Frank quickly reminded himself that he wasn't supposed to care.

He moved down the dark hallway, could see the light coming from his door. Oliver had left the door cracked. Thinking about it, Frank hoped that Oliver was tired enough to go to sleep. It had been a long day and his eyes were beginning to feel heavy. But his ears were open enough, it seemed. At least enough to hear the lone voice coming from his bedroom, and as he reached the door, he realized with some concern that Oliver was speaking to himself again. But this time, Frank understood perfectly who he was talking to, and it sent a cold chill up his spine.

"I told you, David. I told you I'd do it. Frank is my friend... I did what you said, David. It's okay now, alright, David? Don't get mad at me, David... I'm not supposed to talk to you anymore," Oliver said, suddenly dropping his voice into a whisper. "They all say everything will be okay if I don't talk to you anymore. But I know the truth. Don't worry, okay, David? When it's safe... I'll talk to you when it's safe. I don't want to get in trouble anymore. Like a secret, David. It's our secret."

"Oliver?" Frank's voice sounded a little dry to his own ears as he pushed the door open and looked cautiously into his room, as if he actually expected someone other than Oliver to be there. And for a minute, he got the impression that that's exactly what Oliver thought as he caught sight of the boy sitting on his bedroom floor where he'd made a bed out of spare blankets. Oliver was on his knees, wearing the shorts and t-shirt he'd brought over to sleep in, looking up at Frank's bed as if someone was actually sitting there. "Oliver?" Frank said again.

Oliver looked over his shoulder this time, and smiled his crooked smile in Frank's direction. "Hi, Frank."

"Hey," Frank replied as he slipped into his bedroom and closed the door behind him. "Who were you talking to?"

Oliver flushed, and shrugged his shoulders. "No one, Frank."

Frank frowned. As far as he could tell, this was the first time Oliver had purposely attempted to deceive him. But, at least he could tell that the one-sided conversation had nothing to do with a blackout. Frank hadn't learned much useful information from the Martins when it came to Oliver's condition, so now he was determined to piece it together on his own. If Olive

r didn't black out when he talked to David, Frank couldn't help wondering if that happened when he became David. He didn't ask, though. For those answers, Frank decided that he would be better off simply observing, so he forced a smile and headed towards his bed, pausing briefly as he looked to the place where Oliver had been staring. Real or not, something about the idea of David sitting on his bed was bothersome to Frank. But, he forced the feeling away as he climbed into bed, resting his head on his pillow before he looked down at Oliver, who was watching him now. Frank allowed a moment or two to pass before he decisively moved closer in towards the wall.

"Wanna come up?" he asked.

Without answering, Oliver grabbed his pillow and moved onto the narrow mattress, not minding that the space there was limited as he settled in and quietly stared at the ceiling with Frank.

"My stomach hurts," Oliver commented.

"Yeah," Frank replied, sighing. "But there was no way I was gonna tell my mom we already ate. I'm lucky I'm not grounded as it is."

Oliver fell silent again. They could still hear voices coming through the house, and when the only male voice promised to be coming back tomorrow, Frank sighed heavily.

"Is that your dad, Frank? Oliver whispered.

"Yeah. He's dropping my sister off. Should be gone in a minute."

"You really don't like him, Frank?"

Frank was silent for a moment. "There's a lot I don't like about him. Yeah."

Oliver turned his head towards Frank, and his eyes went a little wide. "I'm not allowed to not like my dad."

Frank smirked. "Says who?"

"My dad."

Frank outright laughed. "It doesn't work that way, Oliver. He can't control your feelings. You should know that."

"I don't want to get in trouble, Frank."

"You won't if you don't tell him... I don't think I like your dad, either."

"You sound like David, Frank."

Frank frowned, unsure if that was supposed to be a compliment. Oliver's brow knitted, as if he'd become aware that he'd said something wrong. "I wanna go to sleep now, Frank."

"Alright," Frank replied, sitting up long enough to lean across Oliver and turn off the lamp. He felt Oliver's hand touch his chest as the room grew dark, and placing his palm over it, Frank turned into him and closed his eyes, and then he remembered nothing as he slept until Oliver shook him awake first thing in the morning.

Frank wondered if Oliver was always such an early riser, or if he'd just ch

When the one morning Frank needed extra sleep to wake him up early. Frank's attempt to drag a pillow over his head only made Oliver laugh and try harder to wake him up, and the sound made Frank smile, despite the fact that he was still half asleep.

Frank opened one eye slowly, allowing it to adjust to light that wasn't supposed to be there. It took him a moment to realize that Oliver had opened the curtains, and now sat over him already fully dressed with a smile on his face.

"Good morning, Frank," he whispered.

"Morning," Frank mumbled. "Not so sure it's good. But morning... go back to sleep, Oliver."

"But we've gotta wake up, Frank. It's morning. I'll help you do your chores."

"Chores?" Frank repeated. He didn't recall his mom asking him to do anything this morning. "I don't have any chores."

"Then what do you do in the morning?" Oliver asked, obviously confused.

"Sleep," Frank said, turning onto his side and tucking his hands under his head. "You should try it."

Oliver fell silent, and Frank opened his eyes long enough to see that his guest seemed somewhat disappointed in his response, and obviously unwilling to go back to bed.

Frank groaned. "Oliver..."

"I have to go home today, don't I?" Oliver interrupted. "Later, right Frank? I don't want to go right now. I like it here better."

Frank pushed his hair out of his face as he sat up and looked at Oliver, feeling sympathetic. He didn't want Oliver to have to go back home later, either, but it wasn't as if he could make his friend any promises. He was already on thin ice with the Martins. He could admit that since they'd allowed Oliver to spend the night he felt less wary of them, even if they had done it under duress. However, he was beginning to wonder if his decision to protect their secret--Oliver's secret--was the right thing to do. Hearing Oliver hint that he disliked it at home was new for Frank. He wanted to learn more; figure out if the sudden change was due to the recent changes in the Martin house, or if it wasn't new at all.

"We still have time. I'll get dressed. We'll find something to do, okay?"

"Okay, Frank."

Frank was careful to keep quiet as he forced himself out of bed and dressed, not wanting to wake his mom or his sister while Oliver folded up the blankets he'd left on the floor the night before and talked about a good place for fishing that he knew about, since Frank wasn't up for any long walks.

"We can go, but I don't think we even have anything around here to fish with," Frank said as he opened his bedroom door with Oliver behind him.

“We’ve got our hands, Frank,” Oliver said, grinning as he held them up. Frank smiled. “Do you really think we’ll catch anything that way?”

“No. Not really. We can still go, though, right, Frank?”

“Sure. Sounds fine to me. Wanna get some breakfast first?”

“Alright.”

They fell silent in the hallway as they passed the other bedrooms, but as they reached the end of it, Frank suddenly slowed his pace, his ears alert to a scraping noise coming from the kitchen.

“Is your mom awake, Frank?” Oliver asked, after hearing the noise, too.

“I don’t think so,” Frank answered, reaching back to touch Oliver’s arm and guide him forward.

“Then what is...”

“Shh,” Frank insisted.

Oliver complied, but moved closer to Frank as they headed through the morning shadows and to the kitchen. There, Frank wasn’t sure whether to be relieved by what he found, or terrified of it.

Sam Seaberg looked up from the pancake batter he was stirring in a metal bowl just in time to see the stunned look on his son’s face turn into a rather disagreeable one. “Good morning,” he said carefully, knowing that any words out of his mouth weren’t going to be positively received by Frank at the moment. He was right.

“What are you doing in here?” Frank demanded.

“Your mom let me in,” his father replied. “I got here a little early... she went back to bed. I was kind of hoping that the smell of food would get you or your sister up... It always worked before,” he added with a humorous smile. “Do you guys want some breakfast?”

“No,” Frank stated, despite the reason why he’d wanted to go to the kitchen in the first place. “We were just leaving.”

Sam frowned as Frank headed towards the back door, but refused to give up as his attention drifted to his son’s new friend. “What about you--it’s Oliver, right? How about some pancakes.”

Frank turned back around to see that Oliver had stopped halfway across the kitchen, looking startled and perplexed as he studied Sam.

“He’s not hungry, either,” Frank answered for him.

Sam frowned. “You don’t have to be rude, Frank. If you’re going to have friends sleep over, you should at least let them eat breakfast in the morning.”

“I had two dinners,” Oliver said, obviously trying to be helpful.

“See?” Frank said as he grabbed Oliver’s arm to pull him out the door. “He’s not hungry.”

Sam listened to the door slam and stared down at the batter he’d been mixing for a moment. He was frustrated. There was no getting around that, and decidedly, it wasn’t something that he felt like controlling as he left what he

was doing and went after his son.

“Frank!” he called as soon as he got the door open. But Frank kept walking. Only his friend looked back as he was dragged along. “Frank!” Sam called again. “Does your mom even know you’re leaving?”

The question got Frank’s attention, but as he spun around and glared at his dad, Sam decided that it wasn’t the kind of attention that he wanted from the boy.

“Don’t,” Frank snapped. “Don’t think you get to act like a parent now.”

Sam opened his mouth, wanting very much to point out to Frank that he was still in fact his father, but as his son turned and continued walking with his friend, he decided against it. There was nothing he could say now that wouldn’t result in an argument. That’s not what he wanted. He’d try at a more appropriate time, when they were alone. Sooner or later, he thought, Frank wouldn’t have the choice to run away from him.

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Frank, stripped down to his boxers, looked down at the water from where he balanced in the rocking boat. No snakes. No floating dead animals. So far, so good. He pinched his nose closed with his fingers and jumped out of the boat, making sure to close his eyes before his head made it under the shockingly cold water.

He gasped as he surfaced, looking up to where Oliver was still sitting in the boat, watching him. Sulking. Frank frowned as he swam back over and pulled himself halfway out of the water to better meet Oliver’s eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Aren’t you gonna come in?” Frank doubted that the fact that his teeth were already chattering would encourage Oliver to go for a swim, but he figured it was worth a shot.

Oliver only shook his head, and looked back towards Frank’s house, which they weren’t all that far from. He’d been rather quiet ever since they’d left it.

“What’s wrong?” Frank asked again, placing his cool hand over Oliver’s warm, dry one.

“I don’t like it when your dad makes you angry, Frank.”

Frank laughed at that. “Neither do I,” he started to say, but stopped as he realized that Oliver was looking seriously tense over this. Something about it annoyed Frank. It wasn’t Oliver. Perhaps it was the fact that Oliver was worrying about Frank and his dad when it should have been the other way around. Oliver was the one with the family problems. At least, he seemed to be the one with bigger family problems. Oliver didn’t seem to see it that way, though. He cared about Frank, and the more apparent that became, the more Frank felt like a jerk for staying away over the past week. “Oliver...” Frank paused again, still unsure of what to say. Finally, he just smiled. “Hey, let’s just forget our parents for now, alright? Let’s... let’s forget everything

g. Come swimming with me. And maybe... maybe we'll find some fish in here to catch with our hands."

Oliver still looked unsure, but didn't object when Frank gave his hand a small tug.

"Besides," Frank added. "I don't wanna be the only idiot in here freezing my ass off."

Oliver's smile came slowly, but it did appear. "Okay, Frank."

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"Do you know what it's like, Frank? Do you know what it's like to be seen but not heard?"

"David, you're not making sense. Seriously, if you'd just tell me..."

"I do," came the whispered interruption. "I'm ready to tell you now. I'll tell you everything."

Frank ran his fingers aggressively through his hair as he leaned back into the sofa, his stomach knotting with suspense. He wished he would have turned on a light before answering the phone.

"Okay. So tell me. Tell me what you're talking about."

"And when I do... they take the light away."

"David... what does that mean."

There was a strange sound at the other end of the line. A gasp. A sob. Something moving in the background. "David? David? What are you doing? David! Talk to me!"

"They always take... the light away. Help me."

"I want to. We can meet, okay? Just tell me... David?" Frank became still as the other end of the line became eerily quiet. "David?" he whispered, just before he heard the click of the line going dead. Staring at the phone in his hand, he was unsure of what to think. Something felt wrong. Very, very wrong. He stood, turned back towards his room to get dressed, wide awake now. And then he was frozen in place, heart pounding in his chest as a wraith-like figure moved through the shadows, stopping before him as David Martin's eyes met his, cold and accusing. Frank opened his mouth to speak, but was unable before David lifted his hands to Frank's neck. Unable to defend, unable to breathe, Frank couldn't move. Only listen.

"When were you ever going to help me, Frank?"

Frank's eyes snapped open to a safer place as he sat up and looked over his bedroom. The curtains were still open from this morning, and a light breeze came through the window screen, cooling the beads of sweat that had collected over his forehead during his short nap.

He was getting damn tired of nightmares.

In fact, he was pretty sure that sleeping next to Oliver the night before had been the only time in the last week where his sleep hadn't been interrupted by strange dreams. But, he'd sent Oliver home nearly two hours ago, and

once again he was faced with trying to figure out what his subconscious wanted to tell him. It was becoming clearer now. But unfortunately, Frank didn't like what he was coming up with, or what it was causing him to consider. Outside, the sound of a car door closing interrupted his peaceful quiet, making him jump. Climbing out of bed and moving towards his window, he felt lightheaded. He was thirsty, his dry throat creating a knot he could feel halfway down his chest. But it only became a minor inconvenience as his eyes widened on what was outside his window.

Barefoot and shirtless, Frank turned and headed out his bedroom door, having more than one question when it came to why Jay was outside of his house with a black Ford. Yesterday, Frank had been pretty sure that when it came to Jay, he wouldn't be making a new friend. In fact, he wasn't sure he even wanted to. He also thought the feeling was mutual, so why the guy would show up at his house like this was a mystery he was looking to solve immediately.

"Frank?" Jessica called as he moved through the living room, towards the front door.

"In a minute," he called back, refusing to be distracted from the task at hand. He made his way outside, tiptoed over terrain that his feet objected to as he moved around the house, and came to a stop in front of the black Ford where he stared at Jay leaning over the passenger door.

When Jay finally looked up to find Frank standing there, he was more startled by Frank's messy hair and ragged appearance than his presence itself, but was quick to look as friendly as possible. "Um, hey, Frank..."

"What are you doing here?" Frank demanded, knowing that he sounded more hostile than what was necessary.

Jay sighed, and slowly walked around the car. "Look, I know yesterday I came off as a... I know I was a jerk. There's really no excuse for it, except I was having a bad day and you struck a nerve."

Frank raised an eyebrow. For something that seemed like an apology, it certainly didn't sound like one in tone. "Okay..."

"I figured we could start over," Jay continued. "You know, so you don't get the impression that people around here aren't altogether unfriendly."

"That's why you're here?" Frank asked.

Jay shrugged. "No. That's just what I planned to say if I happened to see you. I'm here to drop my sister off."

"Sister?" Frank repeated.

Jay pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, and Frank redirected his attention towards the Ford. Rudy's newest friend, Stephanie, was standing in front of it now with a pink backpack over her shoulder. Jay smiled as Frank took a minute to consider the situation. "I think you've already met her, right?"

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“Um. Yeah,” Frank replied.

“Hello,” they were suddenly interrupted by Jessica’s voice. Frank turned to face his mom, frowning, but she ignored him as she focused on their guests. “Stephanie, Rudy ran out with her father, but they should be back in a few minutes. You can wait inside if you want.”

“Thanks, Ms. Seaberg,” Stephanie replied as she headed into the house on her own, waving to her brother.

“It’s nice to see you again, Jay,” Jessica said, throwing Frank for another loop. “Thanks for bringing her.”

“No problem,” Jay replied.

“Frank, I hope you’re not out here antagonizing our guests,” Jessica warned as she took a closer look at the expression on her son’s face.

“Not at all, Ms. Seaberg,” Jay answered for him. “Frank and I met yesterday.”

“Oh,” Jessica said, smiling between them. “That’s nice. Maybe you can talk Frank into getting some exercise before he decides to go back to bed at three in the afternoon.”

“Mom,” Frank snapped, annoyed.

“Sure,” Jay said. “I was just about to ask him if he wanted to go hang out for a while.”

“No you weren’t,” Frank said shortly. Not that it did him any good. Clearly, he was being ignored.

“Well I hope you have fun, then,” Jessica said, just before she smoothed Frank’s hair and kissed his cheek. “Honey, if you go out make sure you put on some shoes first.”

Frank made a point to glare at her back as she walked back into the house, and then pretended that she hadn’t just been completely embarrassing as he turned to face Jay again.

“So, is that alright?” Jay asked.

“Is what alright?”

“You know... I mean, we could hang out sometime. Or you could come with us again next weekend. Whatever.”

“Oh. Maybe,” Frank replied. The truth was, now that he was seeing Oliver again, spying on the photography club had lost its appeal. Besides, as far as he knew, no one else had been snooping around his house. It was possible that Mr. Crook had been right and the whole incident had been a practical joke gone wrong; and if that was the case, there were simply more important matters that Frank had to focus on.

“Well how about now?” Jay asked, pulling him from his thoughts. “Look, I’ve got some time, and I was thinking...” Jay continued speaking, but somewhere along the line Frank had stopped listening as his eyes moved past Jay, across the lake where the red roof of the Martin house was visible.

Frank wondered how Oliver was doing. When Frank had watched him move across the lake in his boat a few hours ago, he remembered being worried about what was waiting for Oliver at home. If anything, he'd gotten the impression that Oliver still didn't want to leave, but would since there was still some loyalty in him when it came to obeying his parents. Even if he didn't like the new rules in his house. Once again Frank found himself wishing that he had someone to talk to about this. Preferably someone who wouldn't raise hell enough to get Oliver sent to some hospital somewhere. But, someone who could help him get a better perspective of the situation. He'd stayed away from Oliver because he had been unable to deal with reality. And even last night, after hearing Oliver speak to David, he'd been worried that David would make an unwanted appearance. He had no idea how he'd deal with it if that were to happen. He didn't know if he'd tell David that he didn't belong there, like the Martins did... or if he'd tolerate the presence, even if David frightened him.

Frank's most recent dream was only another reminder of the last time he'd actually spoken to David Martin. That night on the phone... the things David had said were making more sense every day. He'd been asking for help. A part of Frank could understand what he wanted. He wanted to exist. What Frank was having trouble with, was whether or not David had a right to. And who was supposed to decide? The Martins? Frank? Oliver? It was a difficult question to answer, and for Frank there were no black and white answers.

And then there was what David had planned to tell him. I'll tell you everything. Frank wanted to know what that meant. Had he planned to tell Frank what he already knew? Or was there something else? Maybe he'd been planning to tell Frank something that the Martins didn't want him to know, and that was why they'd suddenly decided to do everything they could to silence him for good. Only one thing seemed clear to Frank, and that was that it was entirely possible that David Martin was the only one who had these answers.

"...I wanted to show you something," Jay was saying by the time Frank bothered to listen again. "Do you want to go real quick? It won't take long, and we could talk..."

"No," Frank suddenly said, and when Jay frowned, he tried to look polite.

"I mean... maybe some other time, okay? I just remembered there's something I've gotta do."

"Well... when?" Jay asked, obviously feeling put out.

"I don't know," Frank replied. "Look, I have to go, alright? I'll see you later."

With no further explanation, Frank left Jay standing there as he went back inside and headed straight for the phone. He dialed Oliver's number, only t

o have Mary Martin pick up. She sounded less than thrilled to hear from him

“Oliver’s not here,” she said.

Frank frowned. “He never went home?”

“No, he did,” Mary replied. “But he went out again. I’ll tell him to call you back if I remember it later.”

She hung up on him then, and Oliver never called him back later.

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It was becoming increasingly difficult for Frank to avoid his father. Frank had invited Stephanie to stay for dinner just so the man wouldn’t be able to talk to him about anything personal at the table when his mom insisted they all sit down together, and once again, Sam was back first thing in the morning. This time he’d gone into Frank’s room, shook him awake, and asked if he wanted to go out to breakfast. Feeling cornered and hostile, Frank had grabbed his clothes and dressed on the way out the door. He credited unspent aggression for the way he got around the lake in no time at all, and as he leaned his bike against a tree outside the Martin house, his attention turned towards the open garage as the sound of a disgruntled hen reached his ears. Frank walked over slowly, feeling a reluctant smile tug at his lips as he caught sight of Oliver, who was hugging the creature despite its kicking feet.

“Jeeze, why’re you so mad today?” Oliver demanded of the animal. “Not like you’re the only one who has bad days. I can’t let you out ‘cause of the cats. You know that. Just be nice, alright? I have a wish for you. And I know you don’t like him ‘cause he’s always joking about chickens with their heads cut off, but it’s for David, alright, chicken?”

“It’s lucky, and it grants wishes, too, huh? Wish you would’ve mentioned that before.”

Oliver spun around, startled enough to drop the perturbed animal, and for the next five minutes Frank helped him corner it in the garage before it was safely back in its cage.

“Sorry about that, Oliver.”

“That’s okay, Frank,” Oliver said. He was smiling now. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Frank replied. “So what were you gonna wish for?”

Oliver’s smile faded. “Can’t tell you,” he said quietly.

“Oh.”

“Not ‘cause I don’t want to, Frank. Honest. But if I tell, it doesn’t come true.”

“That’s okay, Oliver. You wanna go for a walk?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Both boys looked up, and Frank found himself frowning at Mary Martin.

“But Mom, I finished all my chores!” Oliver objected.

“That don’t matter, Oliver,” she responded. “I want you to go inside.”

“It’ll be a short walk,” Frank intervened. “We’re not going far.”

Mary frowned. She obviously wanted to argue. But obviously, something in her seemed afraid to. “I want him home for lunch. I mean that.”

Frank smiled, despite himself. “He will be. I promise.”

Mary looked at him oddly as he helped Oliver to his feet. “Thank you, Frank.” But then she looked at Oliver carefully. “You know the places where you’re not supposed to go.”

Oliver lowered his eyes. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Come on,” Frank insisted as he gave Oliver’s arm a tug. There was nothing he wanted more than to get Oliver out of that garage before Mrs. Martin changed her mind.

They headed away from the Martin house, Frank allowing Oliver to take the lead as he asked if everything was okay when Oliver got home the day before. Oliver didn’t seem to have too many complaints, although he did make a point to ask Frank if he could spend the night again. Being able to seemed to be utterly important to Oliver, who held onto Frank’s hand until Frank convinced him that he made sure there’d be more sleepovers.

The day had turned warm when they came to a shaded, secluded spot near the water and stretched out in a patch of tall, damp grass where Oliver held on to one of Frank’s hands with both of his. He seemed in need of some sort of assurance. Frank wasn’t sure what kind of assurance he was supposed to be giving, but he did his best to comply as he sat close enough to Oliver for them to be touching from hip to knee.

“Does it really have to be a short walk?” Oliver asked. “I could have lunch with you, Frank.”

“Your mom wants you home,” Frank pointed out.

“And then you’ll leave again?”

“I never said that,” Frank said mischievously. “I’ll wait if you eat real fast.”

Oliver grinned. “I think that’ll make my mom real mad.”

“But it’ll make you happy?”

Oliver smiled, giving a short nod.

“I’ll wait, then,” Frank said as he settled back on an elbow, pulling Oliver back with him so they remained facing each other. Frank studied him for a long moment, smiling when Oliver leaned forward to brush a soft kiss over his lips. But, by the time Oliver pulled back, Frank had turned serious. “I want to ask you something.”

“Okay, Frank.”

Frank glanced away for a moment, considering how he wanted to ask his question. “I want to talk about David.”

Oliver frowned, lowered his voice. “I’m not supposed to, Frank. I don’t...”

“You won’t get in trouble,” Frank cut him off. “Listen, Oliver... remember

that night, I was locked in the basement with you?” Oliver looked away as if to remove himself from the conversation, but still gave a nod. “David called me that night. Do you know what he said?”

Oliver’s frown deepened. “I don’t know, Frank. I don’t remember... I don’t remember a lot.”

“Okay. That’s okay. But... David said he had something to tell me. He said he was going to tell me everything. What does that mean, Oliver?”

Oliver’s eyes narrowed in concentration, but his face flushed, as if he didn’t feel comfortable with the question. “I don’t know what it means,” he finally said. “Don’t ask me again, Frank. I don’t know.”

Frank’s brow lifted as he thought that was an odd way to respond. “Oliver, if you just think about it for a second... is there anything David might have told me... maybe your parents wouldn’t want...”

Oliver shook his head, violently now as he pulled his hand out of Frank’s. “I don’t know, Frank! I don’t know. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Frustrated, Frank nodded, making a point to reclaim Oliver’s hand. “Okay,” Frank said, kissing his knuckles. “I’m sorry, okay. I just wanted to know if you knew... we don’t have to talk about it anymore, okay?”

Oliver nodded, seeming to pay more attention to the way that Frank was kissing his fingers than what Frank was actually saying. “It’ll be alright,” Oliver whispered. “It’ll be alright if we don’t talk about it.”

Frank sat up, staring at Oliver hard now. Why? He wondered. What do you know? But, he didn’t ask. Not when he’d just told Oliver that they wouldn’t talk about it anymore. It was only stressing Oliver out, whatever he was hiding. And there was something. Frank was certain of that.

“Oliver? There’s one more question I need to ask you.”

Oliver frowned. After Frank’s last question, it was no surprise that he was regarding Frank warily.

“I’m not supposed to talk about David anymore, Frank.”

“I know,” Frank replied. “You don’t have to talk about him. I want to talk to him.”

Oliver’s eyes widened, and he was in his feet in a moment, looking down at Frank accusingly. “Frank!”

Frank sighed, standing up. “Oliver,” he said, reaching for him. But, Oliver stepped back. “Oliver, please. I’m not sure how this works... but I know David knows something... maybe it’s something that can help you. How can I talk to him?”

“No, Frank!”

Frank frowned, not wanting to push, but not wanting to back down, either. “Let me talk to David, Oliver. “David? David, I need to talk to you.” Just saying it made Frank look like an idiot, considering it was Oliver in front

of him. But still, he was convinced that David was in there somewhere, and he highly doubted that he'd stay silent if someone wanted to talk to him. After all, that's what he wanted. He wanted to be acknowledged. He wanted to exist.

"Why are you doing that, Frank?" Oliver suddenly snapped, right before he turned to walk away.

Frank was quick to get in front of him. Placing his hands on Oliver's shoulders, he held him back. "Damn it, Oliver! Can't you trust me?"

Oliver's eyes turned pleading as he shook his head. "Stop it! Stop it, Frank!" he suddenly gasped, lowering his head as he clutched it in his hands, his fingers searching out his scars as his shoulders shook and a few choked-out sobs escaped him.

Frank stepped back, startled. It was too much. Too much for him. Too much for Oliver. And entirely his fault. "Oliver," he said gently, reaching out to touch the other boy's shoulder, appalled with himself when Oliver flinched away from his hand.

"Why are you doing this, Frank?"

Swallowing hard, Frank forced himself to move forward, taking hold of Oliver, wrestling him until he was firmly against his chest, wrapped in his arms.

Frank held him tight, waiting for the tension in Oliver's muscles to fade away. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, Oliver."

Oliver's head dropped to Frank's shoulders, his fingers digging into his back. "It's wrong, Frank! Everything's wrong!"

"I won't do that again," Frank said quickly. "I promise. I'm sorry. Shh."

Frank could feel the tension in Oliver's back twitch, hear heavy breathing as the other boy attempted to regain control of himself. Frank didn't let go.

Turning his head, he kissed the side of Oliver's neck soothingly as he whispered random reassurance in his ear, and when Oliver finally became still, Frank didn't move for long minutes as he was heavily leaned upon.

"I won't do that again," Frank whispered more to himself than to Oliver.

Oliver lifted his head, his watery, hazel eyes coming to rest on Frank's. They were searching just before they closed and he leaned forward, his forehead resting against Frank's. Frank sighed, his fingers moving through the hair at

Oliver's nape as he tilted his head, his mouth seeking out Oliver's. Oliver's grip on Frank tightened, and he returned the kiss carefully, his lips seeming to need reassurance as much as the rest of him did.

When Oliver pulled back, it was as if he'd lost control of his breath all over again. "I don't know what to do, Frank," he whispered. "It's all wrong."

Frank opened his eyes to tell Oliver that he was out of ideas, too, but became frozen as he caught sight of something in the shadows, no more than five feet away. Just a small movement, black sneakers disappearing behind the trees, but it was enough. "Shit!" he cursed, startling Oliver as he abruptly

y pushed him away, and then he took off running.

“Frank?” Oliver called after him, but Frank didn’t stop. He rounded the trees just in time to see a tall body breaking into a jog. His back was turned, his head covered in a dark ball cap, and a familiar black jacket tied around his waist. Frank picked up his pace, not taking the time to think about what he was doing, and in four strides he was on the guy’s heels, saw that camera in his hand...

“Hey!” Frank shouted, his hand reaching out, but he snatched it back abruptly when the spy suddenly jumped, turned, and tripped on his own feet. Frank’s eyes widened as he looked at the boy on the ground in front of him, who looked just as surprised as he did. “You!” Frank said accusingly.

The boy opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly closed it, narrowing his eyes as Oliver came to an abrupt halt alongside Frank.

“Jeremy,” Oliver whispered, taking a step back.

Frank looked at Oliver, frowning. “What?” he demanded. “Jeremy? Jeremy Flaskis?” He was reasonably confused as he looked back towards the ground, since the guy he was looking at wasn’t Jeremy at all as far as he knew.

It was Jay.

Chapter 10

by DomLuka

Thanks to jim for editing!

“That’s Jay,” Frank insisted, still staring at Oliver. “I’ve met Jeremy.”

“No,” Oliver said, shaking his head as he took another retreating step back.

“Jeremy.”

Jay cleared his throat intentionally, dusting himself off as he stood up off the ground. “Jeremy,” he agreed, not bothering to look at Oliver or Frank as he checked to see that his camera wasn’t damaged. “That was Jeremy Hill you met. We’re in the same class; he’s older, so I got the nickname. Everyone’s been calling me Jay since second grade.”

Frank looked at the panicked look on Oliver’s face, the disgustingly calm one on Jay’s, and realized that it didn’t matter what name should be used as he suddenly lunged forward, grabbing Jay by the shirt and shaking him.

“Why the fuck were you spying on us?” he demanded.

“Hey, watch it!” Jay retorted, shaking Frank off and shoving him away.

“Answer me!” Frank ordered.

“Oh, fuck you!” Jay snapped, then suddenly glared at Oliver. “And you too, you retarded-ass freak!”

Frank stepped in front of Oliver quickly, his temper nearly breaking over Jay’s insulting words. But, he managed to hold it in check long enough to look back at Oliver, who was clearly shaken by the encounter. “Oliver,” he said quietly. “Go home.”

“Frank...”

"I'll be right behind you," Frank said. "I promise."

Oliver frowned, looking torn. It was obvious he didn't want to be anywhere near Jay--or Jeremy--but he didn't want to leave Frank, either. "Right behind me, Frank?" he asked.

"I promise," Frank said again; and then quickly added, "Don't tell your mom about this, Oliver."

Frank was looking at Jay again as he heard Oliver's footsteps fade away somewhere behind him, not liking the way that Jay seemed to be watching Oliver go with some obvious contempt. "Why are you spying on us?" Frank repeated, drawing Jay's attention back to himself.

Curiously, when Jay looked at Frank he didn't appear nearly as hostile as he seemed when it came to Oliver. "I saw you heading over here a while ago. Thought I'd see what you were up to."

Frank's shoulder's stiffened as he took a threatening step towards Jay. He was in no mood for games, but it seemed that Jay was determined to make things hard for him as he straightened and smirked, subtly reminding Frank that they were evenly enough matched, and Jay didn't find him intimidating at all.

"Hiding in the bushes with a camera?" Frank demanded, eyeing the piece of equipment. "What's on the film?"

Frank reached for the camera, but Jay held it back. "Hey, hands off!"

"Fine," Frank retorted. "I'll just let the cops take it after I tell them where to find pictures of my little sister!"

"Hey!" Jay said, looking offended. "You've got it wrong, Frank."

"You were outside my house," Frank stated. "My twelve-year-old sister's window!"

"Yes," Jay said flatly, but then spoke quickly when the look on Frank's face turned murderous. "But I didn't know it was her window. I saw someone moving inside, and snapped the picture. She was never supposed to see me, and I'm sorry if I scared her."

"What were you doing there in the first place?"

"I was curious."

"You attacked us!"

"Only because I was cornered."

"No," Frank said, shaking his head. "You weren't cornered. We were about to walk away!"

"I didn't attack you!" Jay retorted, beginning to sound irritated.

"No. You went straight for Oliver!" Frank snapped. David was right. It was Oliver who Jay had been there spying on; Oliver who Jay had attacked. Frank just happened to have gotten in the way.

"So the fuck what?" Jay finally snapped.

"So the fuck what?" Frank angrily moved forward, giving Jay a hard shove to

the chest that failed to knock him down. "Oliver wouldn't hurt anyone! Why would you want to hurt him!" At the moment, it didn't matter to Frank that he knew there was a side to Oliver that perhaps did deserve a good beating. All that mattered was that Oliver was innocent. He didn't deserve any of this, and it infuriated him. "What the hell's the matter with you? I swear to god, if you don't stay away from him..."

"Hey, that was the first time I ever came close to hurting him!" Jay responded, sounding as if he knew it was wrong, but had no apologies for it.

"But you've been watching him!"

"Yeah. All of them... and you, because you keep hanging out with him! Do you even have any idea what you're doing?"

"I'm more worried about what you're doing! Where I come from there's a word for it, asshole: stalking!"

Jay had the nerve to look offended over that, too. "There's a difference!"

"Why?"

"Because I'm waiting for someone in that house to fuck up!" he shouted, suddenly breathing heavily as he looked through the woods, towards the Martin house. "There's something off in that house, Frank... something isn't right with that family. I can't prove it yet, but when I do..."

Frank swallowed hard, wiping the sudden outbreak of sweat away from his temple. His nerves were causing him to feel nauseous, and for a long, suffocating moment, he tried to figure out what Jay was talking about. Oliver.

If he'd been watching, then Jay knew something was wrong with him. Maybe he'd seen David do something--something terrible--that would cause him to hate Oliver so much. But then, Jay wouldn't know that it hadn't been Oliver. He'd be out to hurt him, anyway, and if he acquired proof of David doing something else... Oliver could be punished. Oliver would be the one who suffered, and faced with this, Frank decided that he'd do anything to stop it from happening. The Martins were right. David had to go. And at the moment, so did Jeremy "Jay" Flaskis.

"Listen to me, Jay," Frank said, attempting to sound reasonable. "You don't know what you're doing. You've gotta leave them alone. I don't know what you think the Martins are capable of... but you've got it wrong. They just wanna be left alone. That's it."

Jay regarded Frank as if he were speaking another language. "I can't," he finally said, and then let out a breath as he met Frank's eyes. "Not until I find the truth. Can you give me that, Frank?"

Frank stared at Jay for a hard moment before he shook his head. "No... but I can give you one hell of a hard time if I catch you sneaking around again."

Jay actually smiled at that. "We'll see." He looked down at his camera, fidgeted with it for a moment, and then slid it into his pocket before he suddenly turned and started walking away. But, he didn't go before he turned to lo

ok back at Frank. "You don't seem like a bad guy, Frank. You don't belong being mixed up with those people... Just don't forget I tried to warn you."

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Frank would have been unable to explain why he felt it was urgent to get back to Oliver. It wasn't as if Jay had headed back towards the Martin house; he'd gone in the opposite direction. But Frank still ran, not sure if he felt better or worse about learning the identity of the person doing the spying.

He didn't even know if he felt better learning that it wasn't his family who was drawing unwanted attention. All he knew was that he was worried, and he had no idea where to go from here.

Involving the local law had been an empty threat when he'd attempted to warn Jay off. He doubted that Howard Crook could help him in any way, and unfortunately, Frank was pretty sure that Jay knew that, too, which is why he didn't seem to care what Frank did in that area. In fact, Jay didn't seem very concerned with a lot of things... except perhaps discovering the Martins' secrets. That's the part that worried Frank. He wasn't sure exactly when it had happened, but it came to mind that he'd made himself responsible for Oliver --for protecting Oliver. He didn't know if it was due to his feelings for the boy, or against Oliver's parents. Perhaps it was a little of both. But either way, Frank didn't like the threat that Jay presented, and he felt like he was on his own to stop it. For the briefest moment he'd entertained the idea of warning the Martins about Jay. But, something in his gut warned him against it--something that he couldn't explain, but became more disturbing each time he thought of Mary and Brian Martin.

Frank wondered if he should warn Oliver when he got back to him. He felt like he should say something, even if Oliver wouldn't provide any insight into the situation. That was the most frustrating thing to Frank. He knew that Oliver wasn't telling him everything that he knew. He just wished that he knew if that was because Oliver didn't want to, or if he couldn't.

"Frank!"

The Martin house hadn't even come into sight before Frank stopped abruptly, turning in circles as he sought out the voice that had called his name. "Oliver?"

"I'm right here, Frank," Oliver said, and when Frank turned again, he nearly stumbled backwards Oliver was so close.

"I told you to go home!" Frank snapped, annoyed even though he had to admit that it was probably good that Oliver didn't. Once inside his house, Frank wasn't sure he'd be able to get Oliver away from Mary again.

Oliver crossed his arms, frowning. "I didn't want to go home," he said defiantly, and then looked worried. "Did you tell him, Frank? Did you tell him it wasn't me that hurt his dog?"

Frank frowned, not sure how to respond to that. If anything had happened with

h Jay's dog, he had a feeling that Jay was almost right to threaten Oliver over it, especially if Jay didn't know about David.

"We didn't talk about the dog," Frank said. "Look... Oliver, have you noticed Jay--Jeremy; have you noticed Jeremy around here before? Anywhere near you?"

Oliver cocked his head. "I see him sometimes, Frank... but then I don't let him see me. He gets mad when he sees me."

True, Frank agreed, but obviously Jay had more control than that. "He said he'd been watching you. You, and your family." Frank looked up to meet Oliver's eyes, wishing that he could see something other than confusion there.

"He knows you have secrets, Oliver... he could find out about David. If he does that."

"He can't do that," Oliver suddenly said, his serious tone surprising Frank.

"He can't do that, Frank."

Frank stared at Oliver for a long moment, deciding that Oliver didn't mean it was impossible. He just meant it would be a seriously bad thing if it happened. Frank took a step closer to him. "So you do understand," Frank said, more to himself than to Oliver. He felt like he'd just discovered something important, but it was short-lived as he was distracted by the way Oliver suddenly grabbed his head, as if he were in pain.

"We can't let him do that, Frank!"

"Then help me!" Frank stated, grabbing Oliver's shoulders, shaking him until Oliver looked him in the eyes again. "I think David knew what Jay was doing. He knew something. Oliver, I think David did something... I don't know if it was to Jeremy's dog, or something else, but he isn't going to let this go, and I think David knew it."

"I know," Oliver whispered.

"What? What do you mean?" Frank demanded. "You know what Frank did, or you know he knew about Jeremy?"

"Frank..." Oliver suddenly frowned, pulling away, but Frank was quick to catch his hand and pull him back.

"Talk to me."

"He wanted Jeremy to know. He wanted everyone to know. But he can't, because it makes my parents mad, Frank. That's why they made him go away, Frank," Oliver said, dropping his voice into a secretive whisper. "He can't tell. No one can. There are things you're not supposed to see, Frank. No one can see."

"Like what? What did David want Jeremy to know?"

Oliver took in a deep breath as his eyes darted anywhere but towards Frank's face, and his red eyes began to water as he shook his head. "The bad things..."

Frank felt a chill work up his spine. He almost didn't want to ask his next

t question. David could be violent. He already knew that. What he didn't want to know, was that David was dangerous. He really didn't want to know that Jay could be right, that he had a real reason for his apparent disdain for the Martins. "The things that David did?" Frank knew the answer as soon as he asked the question; it was written all over Oliver's face. But he wasn't sure he understood. David wanted to tell. He wanted to be caught. It didn't make sense to Frank. But then again, nothing made much sense to Frank anymore. Perhaps David thought that telling someone of his wrongdoings was what he wanted because it would make him real. Maybe he wanted people to know he existed--the Martins were doing everything they could to make him disappear. Maybe telling would be his way of winning. To hurt them. "No one can know, Frank," Oliver said quietly. "If he tells, he'll get in trouble. I don't want him to get in trouble, Frank. He's not bad."

Frank closed his eyes for a moment, unable to face the desperation Oliver was directing at him. It was as if he needed Frank to agree with him. Frank almost wanted to, because in a sense, if Frank said that David wasn't bad, then he was saying that Oliver wasn't bad. He wondered if that was what Oliver was thinking. Oliver had always referred to David as a different person. Frank believed that he saw David as a different person. But, Frank was beginning to wonder if deep down, Oliver understood what he was. Maybe he simply wanted David to exist as much as David did. But, Frank couldn't tell him it was okay. Instead, he reached out and pulled Oliver to him, wrapping his arms around his neck, allowing Oliver to lean on him as he considered what he should do.

The bad things. Those words could have meant anything, but in David's case, they frightened Frank. He didn't want to know. He wanted to forget about David. David hadn't made an appearance since Frank had discovered the truth, and Frank wanted it to stay that way. The problem was, Frank didn't know how long that would last. And he had to know. He needed to know what he was dealing with because the questions were becoming too much, and if he didn't find answers soon, he was afraid that the only place he'd have left to go would be crazy.

Frank took in a breath against Oliver's neck, inhaling the scent of lemons as he held the other boy tighter. "You're right," he said firmly. "We can't let David tell, Oliver." His fingers moved through Oliver's hair for a moment, feeling the scars before he pushed him back to see his face. "I want to tell him that, Oliver. I want to make him understand why he can't tell. We don't want him to get in trouble, right?" He was being manipulative, but Frank wasn't about to apologize for it. His last attempt to talk to David had failed miserably, but this time, Oliver was actually regarding him thoughtfully. Perhaps a little cautiously, too, but he was at least thinking about it.

"Maybe he won't listen, Frank," Oliver finally said.

Frank frowned. "But maybe he will... Does he listen to you, Oliver?"

Oliver frowned as he took one of Frank's hands in both of his and stared down at it for a long moment.

"I'm not supposed to talk to David anymore, Frank. I have to wait."

"Until it's safe?" Frank asked, remembering the conversation that Oliver had had with the David he couldn't see in his own bedroom.

Oliver nodded.

"You know you're safe with me, don't you?" Frank asked.

Oliver looked around them as he used his free hand to wipe his remaining tears away. "Not here, Frank," he whispered. "We have to go to the place."

"What place?" Frank asked. But, once again, he didn't get a straight answer.

"It's a secret, right Frank? You have to promise."

"I promise," Frank said, and then fell nervously silent as Oliver started walking, leading him by the hand. Frank wanted to know where they were going, or why they had to go anywhere at all, but he didn't dare ask. He didn't ask anything, fearing that Oliver would change his mind.

They'd been walking for about five minutes when Oliver abruptly dropped Frank's hand and Frank looked at him, feeling on edge. He almost expected to see some sort of transformation: David's cold stare, or condescending smirk. But the wide eyes and searching glances were still Oliver. The fear was Oliver, and Frank took notice.

"What's wrong?" Frank asked.

"Will you be there again, Frank?" Oliver asked. "If they put me in the dark?"

Frank felt his stomach knot. "No one's putting you in the dark, Oliver...

I thought you said you don't remember how you get there. Do you now?"

Oliver's brow knotted, and he looked ahead. "I don't know if David will talk to you, Frank," Oliver said, and Frank raised an eyebrow over the obvious subject change.

"I'm patient," Frank replied shortly. "But I'm confused, Oliver. About the things you can't remember... Do you forget after bad things happen? Is that why you can't remember? Because you don't want to?"

Oliver heaved a breath, as if Frank was the one exasperating him. "My head doesn't work right sometimes, Frank. "There are things, Frank. The things we're not supposed to see."

Frank walked faster, to keep pace with Oliver's agitated one. Those words seemed to be becoming a theme. "Who told you that?" Frank asked.

Oliver glanced at Frank sidelong for a brief moment, his eyes seeming cautious. "David did."

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Samuel Seaberg stood in front of what he refrained from calling the ruins h

is children lived in, watching his youngest splash around waist deep with her friend. She seemed happy enough. But then, Rudy had always been able to find something to be cheerful about. Frank used to be like that, Sam thought bitterly. And it wasn't Frank who he was bitter towards. The situation, himself... that sounded about right. Of course, it wasn't necessary for Sam to remind himself that it was his own fault Frank had become so insufferable towards him. He had his ex-wife on standby to remind him of that, and everything else he'd done wrong, it seemed. Not that he didn't deserve it. He definitely had it coming after the first thing he did upon his arrival was criticize her and the way she was living. It had been a defense mechanism.

To make himself feel better about his wrongs, he'd tried to point out all of hers. But apparently, Sam had been away from Jessica for too long, because he'd foolishly forgotten that she could see right through all of that, and now he'd unfortunately managed to get on her bad side.

But, it seemed that Jessica's opinion of him wasn't as important to Sam as Frank's was, and he'd completely underestimated how well his son could hold a grudge. All things considered, Sam should have seen this coming. It wasn't as if Frank had given him any hint that he'd be happy to see him. Hell, he'd downright refused to speak to him on the phone, and it seemed that now, every minute that Sam was present, Frank made sure that he was not. Or at least, he was making sure that he didn't have to endure a moment alone with his father, and it was making it rather difficult for the two to have a conversation, Sam noticed.

"I want to take Frank on a little road trip tomorrow... or something like that. I want to get him away from here, where he has fewer places to run away to," Sam said ten minutes later as he walked into his ex-wife's bedroom as she finished tying back her curtains to better keep an eye on Rudy.

Jessica frowned as she faced him, but it wasn't just because of what he was saying. Sam had made himself at home in her house since he'd arrived, despite his initial criticisms of it, something she wasn't so sure how she felt about yet. But one thing was certain: entering her bedroom was crossing the line.

"Well that's something you're going to have to talk to Frank about," she responded as she advanced in a way that forced him to backpedal until he was standing in the hall.

"I want you to talk to him about it," Sam said. "He'll listen to you."

Jessica's mouth curled into a humorless smile. "Not about this, he won't. I can talk to him, but I won't force him, Sam... besides, I'm not the one he needs to talk to. You broke it, you fix it."

Sam sighed as Jessica passed him, and he followed her to the living room. "I'm trying."

"I know you are."

“But it’s not working.”

“That’s because you came here assuming a few apologies would make up for everything else,” Jessica said simply.

“Because he’s angry,” Sam said, frowning; and then in poor taste, added, “I see he’s developed your temper.”

Jessica turned to face him sternly. “He’s hurt, Sam. You’re upset that you can’t get him to talk to you, but don’t forget that you’re the one who stopped talking to Frank first. He doesn’t trust you anymore, and it’s not something you can change overnight. That’s something you have to earn back, and I’ll tell you right now that me talking to Frank won’t make a difference in whether or not he forgives you. Talk to him yourself.”

“Well that’s not exactly easy to do when he’s never here!” Sam said hotly, but then released a breath and calmed his tone. “I don’t want to leave things the way they are now, Jess. I know I’ve made mistakes, and I’ll probably never stop being sorry for them, but... I need to make things right with the kids again. I miss them.”

Jessica frowned. “I believe you, Sam... but you’re saying it to the wrong person. Listen, all of this is going to take time, especially with Frank. If you don’t have that.... This just isn’t something you can do over a weekend, Sam. These are children--your children! If you want it to work, you’ll have to make a commitment to them, and not one that expires as soon as you decide they’re an inconvenience!”

“Jesus!” Sam cursed, dropping onto the sofa behind him.

Jessica frowned. She hadn’t meant for this conversation to turn into a lecture. Although, she did think it was called for. She didn’t like that Frank felt driven away from his own home, and she didn’t like that Frank had a point when it came to staying away. He didn’t want to get hurt again, and the simple fact was, Jessica didn’t want to see him hurt again. “I’m sorry, Sam, but if you ever hurt one of my kids again...”

“I was a father once,” he suddenly cut her off. “I mean...I was really their father. Wasn’t I?”

Jessica sighed and took a seat on a chair across from him. “Not a half bad one, either,” she reluctantly admitted. “But you walked out on them, Sam, not the other way around. It’s going to be up to Frank, whether or not he forgives you for that... and you’d better make him want to, Sam, because the thing is, he needs you. Both of them do... but right now, especially Frank.”

Sam sat back on the couch and studied Jessica for a long moment before he asked the question he should have been asking all along. “How is he, Jessica... I mean, when I’m not around making him like this?”

She smiled. “He’s growing up a little too fast. Ever since we got here...well, I think he’s trying to be the man of the house, you know? Looking after his sister... trying to look after me... But I’m worried about him, Sam. I know

ew he wasn't happy, especially about moving, but you know Frank. He's a survivor, and I really thought that once we settled in, he'd be alright. I wanted to give him and Rudy a chance to start over..."

"But?" Sam asked.

"I think trying to grow up too fast has been pretty hard for him. He doesn't talk to me the way he used to talk to you, and I think he's had trouble making friends."

Sam snorted. "No, Frank's never had trouble with that. He had the kid spending the night..."

Jessica nodded. "Oliver... a neighbor." She paused for a moment, and decided not to mention Frank's paranoid behavior when it came to the Martin family. "But, that's the thing, Oliver's his only friend."

"Well, maybe he likes the kid."

"You haven't really met Oliver," Jessica replied. "I'm not saying he's bad for Frank, it's just... he's a little strange, and I think it would be best if Frank made some other friends. He shouldn't be spending all of his time with one person, anyway."

"Well, if you think me telling Frank to stop hanging around his only friend is going to help..."

"No, that's not what I'm saying, Sam. But if you talked to him... or if you can get him talking to you... He needs to talk to someone, Sam. Even if it's you."

.....
Frank felt too tired to even scratch his head as he watched Oliver duck down as he cautiously made his way through the terrain ahead of him. Feeling mentally drained, and not in the mood for games, Frank walked along normally behind him, looking through the scattered trees casting thin, long shadows over the ground.

"I thought you said we were almost there," Frank complained.

Oliver looked over his shoulder, appearing outraged when he saw that Frank wasn't following his instructions to be careful, and yanked him down by the wrist. "Shh, Frank!"

Groaning, Frank stayed down as he allowed Oliver to lead the way. "What are we doing, Oliver?" he whispered.

Oliver looked back again. "You said you wanted to tell David not to tell," Oliver reminded him.

"Yeah, but can't I do that now?" Frank asked.

Oliver only frowned, and pulled him along another five feet before he came to an abrupt halt, and Frank suddenly found himself flat on the ground, his elbows scraped, and his temper flaring. "What the..." he started, but when Oliver, still looking straight ahead, slapped a hand over Frank's mouth, Frank took a curious moment to pay more attention to his surroundings.

He heard the footsteps before he saw the person making them, and Frank found himself holding his breath as he shifted closer to Oliver and watched Mary Martin pass right by them. Her eyes were focused straight ahead, her pace was brisk; she was a woman who knew exactly where she was going. After a moment of thinking about it, it occurred to Frank that they weren't very far from the Martins' house at all, and he wondered if she'd been out looking for Oliver. But then, he didn't see why she'd do that with an empty laundry basket under her arm.

"We have to hurry, Frank," Oliver said as soon as Mary had passed, and instinct forced Frank to agree as he helped Oliver to his feet and they abandoned sneaking through the trees to running through them, Oliver easily taking the lead as if there was no doubt when it came to which way he needed to go. Frank kept up easily, until Oliver passed under a hanging rope, where Frank paused and stared for a moment. The frayed end of the old rope was dangling from a tall tree, as if waiting for something to be connected to it. At one time, something likely was, he decided, realizing that there was something about the spot that suggested at one time, it had been frequently visited. He looked past the rope to Oliver, wondering if they were headed to one of the spots the other boy frequently visited, and Frank couldn't help wondering why he chose this one as his safe place to talk to David, when it was obviously visited by more than just Oliver.

"Come on, Frank," Oliver insisted.

Nodding, Frank moved past the dangling line and followed Oliver through the brush, holding back a sneeze as random patches of wallflowers irritated his allergies. It seemed sunnier all of a sudden, and he could hear the sound of trickling water as he noticed the moisture somewhere beneath the tall grass he was walking through. Looking down, he wondered if it was completely necessary that his socks were becoming soggy and didn't notice that Oliver had stopped, until he practically ran into him under the shade of a thick tree.

"Is this it?" Frank asked as he looked around, noticing that the spot had definitely had some traffic. In fact, it looked like someone had been dumping just behind the tree as he noticed stacks of nail-ridden wooden posts and a cluttered stack of old boards that were likely infested with insects he'd rather not think about. Oliver only nodded, leaving Frank to stare at him expectantly. "Well? Can I talk to David now?"

Oliver shrugged, frowning. "I guess so, Frank."

Feeling self-conscious, and still frustrated, Frank looked around again. "Is he here?" he asked.

Oliver let out a breath, and sat on the stack of boards, not seeming to care that the wood was soaked through from the last storm. "He's here, Frank."

"Can you...see him?"

Oliver's eyes narrowed. "Can you?"

"No." Frank desperately wished that he knew how this was supposed to work. "So, how do I talk to him, Oliver?"

"I don't know. You just say somethin', I guess."

"Okay..." Frank said slowly, looking at Oliver. "Um... David? Can you hear me?" It seemed like the stupidest question, and Frank felt like a fool standing there asking it, but he supposed he was just following instructions, which is why he didn't at all expect the response he got.

"Not like that, Frank!" Oliver suddenly snapped, rising to his feet. You've gotta be louder! David! David! David!" Oliver passed Frank, red in the face as he shouted out the name, startling Frank so bad that he jumped before reaching out to grab Oliver's arm and pull him back.

"Hey! What're you doing?" Frank demanded, shaking him.

"Talking to David!" Oliver snapped. "That's why you wanted to come, Frank, to talk to David! Why aren't you talking to him?"

"Oliver, I'm trying..."

"Then talk to him, Frank! Make him say something!"

"Make him? Just...are you playing games with me?" Frank demanded in a sudden burst of anger.

"This is not a game, Frank! This is where I talk to David!" Oliver shouted, pointing to where he stood to emphasize his point.

"You were talking to him the other night in my bedroom!" Frank retorted, and Oliver fell silent, crossing his arms.

"But this is where David talks to me, Frank," Oliver said. "He talks to me right here."

"And is he?" Frank asked.

Oliver shook his head, sniffing again. "Mama--my mom says he's just a voice," Oliver whispered. "A voice in my head," he explained, looking completely wrecked over the idea. "I'm not supposed to listen to him anymore, but he still talks... right here."

"Then why isn't he?" Frank asked, attempting to keep calm. He didn't understand. He'd encountered David's personality before. He knew it was there. But, unless Oliver had more control over it than his parents let on, it almost didn't make sense that David hadn't made an appearance yet, especially if what Oliver told Frank was true, and David wanted to be heard.

"I don't know, Frank... he stopped talking. He stopped talking to me."

"What? When? When did he..."

"I came this morning," Oliver explained, his breathing becoming choppy in his rushed words. "But he wouldn't talk to me! Is he gone, Frank? Why won't he talk to me? Make him say something, Frank! Make him!"

Make him? Frank took a step back, stared at Oliver in disbelief, and suddenly raised his hands as a sign of his mental defeat. "I give up... I just, give th

e fuck up.”

“But, Frank,” Oliver pleaded, only to be presented with Frank’s hand again.

“Look, this is too much for me, okay? I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing here, Oliver, and whatever it is, I obviously, can’t, alright? So this thing with David... it’s just gotta stop. With you... and me. No more of it, okay? Shit, I’m sorry I ever brought it up.”

“Are you going to leave again, Frank?”

Frank sighed, but actually considered the question. “No,” he finally said. He already felt bad enough for abandoning Oliver the first time. Doing it again, simply wasn’t an option for him. Not when he knew exactly what that felt like. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going, Frank?”

“I don’t know... but not back to your place.”

“My mom won’t...”

“I really don’t care if she won’t like it, Oliver,” Frank stated. “Look, I think you need help, and I can’t give it to you, so we’re gonna have to go somewhere else.”

Oliver’s mouth dropped open in protest, but he closed it as Frank stepped forward, holding out his hand.

“Do you trust me, Oliver?”

It wasn’t clear by Oliver’s expression whether he had a positive answer to that question or not, but he did take Frank’s hand.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Frank said, and deep down, he really wanted to believe that. “I promised I wouldn’t leave, remember?”

“I remember, Frank,” Oliver said blankly.

Frank frowned, squeezing his hand and pulling him closer. “And I meant it.”

“I know, Frank. But David said that once, too.”

.....
Brian was tired when he walked through his front door. It had been a long day at work, and all he wanted was a hot bath and a fulfilling meal. But, it seemed that his wife wasn’t going to allow him either, when he found his wife in their bedroom, packing suitcases that hadn’t been used in years.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, woman?” he demanded as he watched her shove a few of his Sunday shirts on top of a pile of her undergarments.

She spun around, looking frantic. “We’re leaving, Brian,” she said, matter-of-factly. “There’s no more choice in the matter. We’ve gotta start over. We can go... anywhere, anywhere, Brian....”

“Hold on a damn minute,” he said, grabbing her arm and seating her on the bed. “What are you going on about?”

“That boy was here again--Frank. Oliver’s gonna say something to him, Brian, I just know he is.”

Brian laughed. “So what? He already thinks Oliver’s crazy.”

“Then why is he still coming around here?” Mary demanded. “It’s over, Brian! He took Oliver no more than twenty minutes ago. I saw ‘em both sneaking off in that boat! We’re gonna have to grab Oliver before we leave.”

Mary stood to continue her packing, and Brian watched for several long moments, his expression becoming grimmer with each passing one. “Just grab him, huh?” he finally said. “Why not just leave him here?”

“What?” Mary demanded, stopping with her favorite dress between her two shaking hands.

“It would be easier for you, wouldn’t it? You’re already running away, starting over... Why not just leave him? He’s better off without you, anyway, don’t you think? I mean, hell, you already killed one son. Why not just leave this one?”

Mary’s bottom lip quivered as she looked at her husband disbelievingly. “Why are you doing this, Brian?” she demanded. “You know I never meant...”

“Maybe Oliver’s better off without you,” Brian said, and then snorted irritably. “Unpack your bags, darling. We’re not leaving.”

“But didn’t you hear me?” Mary demanded. “He’s going to say something to Frank! You can’t possibly think...”

“I’m gonna fix that,” Brian promised. “Why don’t you do something useful now, like make dinner.”

Mary’s eyes widened as her husband left the room. She dropped her dress, and followed him so slowly that the front door had slammed before she even made it to the living room. She went to the window and watched him get into his truck, and she felt like her heart had just stopped. Trapped.

Fix that. She’d heard those words before. This time, she couldn’t let him. Things had gone far enough.

Mary waited until the truck’s engine started before she went to the phone, gasping when her foot caught on the floor rug and she tripped. Catching herself on the floor, she pulled herself up and reached for the receiver. There were only a few people in town who she knew would come out and actually help her. Unfortunately, the most incompetent one was the only number she had memorized, and she dialed it.

“Brenda...” Mary said when the other line was answered. “Is Howard in, it’s Mary Martin... Oh, I see. Well, when’s he going to get back? I really need to speak to him. Please. It’s an emergency... yes, that would be great, if you could, Brenda... like I said, it’s urgent, and I don’t know...” Mary gasped as a large hand came down gently on her shoulder, which stiffened under the contact.

“Put the phone down, Mary,” Brian said quietly from behind her. “I told you , I’m gonna take care of everything.”

.....
“She’s not gonna hurt you,” Frank said quietly as he watched Oliver stare down at the unwanted intruder in his lap. No sooner had Oliver seated himself on Frank’s bed, one of the dark, scraggly stray felines had turned him into furniture. Oliver objected to the treatment.

“Get it off, Frank.”

Frank slowly sat down next to Oliver, and as requested, removed the cat from his lap, placing it gently on the floor before he looked at Oliver again. “

Are you alright?” Frank asked.

“I just don’t like cats, Frank.”

“No... I mean about everything else,” Frank said. “What we talked about.”

Oliver lowered his eyes. “What’s gonna happen to me, Frank?”

Frank released a shallow breath. He wished his mom was home, but he and Oliver had arrived to an empty house, and he had no idea when she’d get back , let alone what he’d say to her when she did. He already knew that it was n’t going to be easy. But what he did know, was that it was right. He couldn’t handle things on his own anymore, and obviously, the Martins couldn’t , either. Whatever they were doing seemed to be destroying Oliver, and Frank missed his smile.

“I don’t know,” Frank admitted. “But look, I know my mom will help. You have to trust her, Oliver. I promise, she’d never do anything to hurt you, and she’s really good about this stuff... I know your parents won’t be locking you in that basement anymore.”

“Will she help David, too?” Oliver asked.

Frank tried not to frown. “I don’t know what’s going to happen with that... but no matter what, you’ll have me, okay? I promise.”

Oliver nodded, if a little reluctantly, and as he leaned into Frank’s shoulder, Frank placed a consoling arm around him. “My mom should be back soon,” he said quietly, and even as he finished saying it, he heard a door open and close, followed by his sister’s cheerful voice as she entered the house. “See,” he said. “There they are. Are you ready, Oliver?”

As soon as Frank asked the question and looked at Oliver, he knew he’d call the whole thing off if Oliver asked him to. After all, he was afraid of what was going to happen next, too. But, when Oliver gave him a nod, Frank felt relieved as they stood together and he led the way out of his room, following the sound of Rudy’s voice to the living room.

“I want to watch a funny one,” she was saying.

“I vote for horror, lots of blood and guts...” The second, joking voice gave Frank pause in the hallway. Unfortunately, it seemed that his dad was still there. But he moved forward, anyway, deciding to brave it.

Sam and Rudy looked up as Frank entered the living room with Oliver behind him, Rudy seeming pleased, and Sam looking nervous as he spotted Frank first. Frank decided to avoid his father's eyes completely and turn his attention to Rudy.

"Where's mom at?" he asked.

Rudy shrugged. "Don't know. Hi, Oliver."

Oliver gave her a small wave.

"She said something about running out for groceries," Sam said, answering Frank's question. "She should be back soon... Do you guys wanna watch a movie with us?"

"Not really," Frank replied. He turned to Oliver. "Come on, we can wait for her outside."

"Is everything okay?" Sam asked as he watched his son and his friend head towards the door.

"Just great," Frank said tersely.

Sam frowned. There was a time when Frank wouldn't have dared to talk to him in that tone, and he could feel some of that old parental frustration rising to the surface. "Frank, hold on a second, okay? I just want to talk to you real quick."

"No thanks," was the crisp response.

"Rudy, why don't you go make some popcorn," Sam said as he began to follow Frank towards the door. Rudy, knowing a warning tone when she heard one, nodded and headed for the kitchen. "Frank, will you just stop?" Sam demanded as soon as she was gone, beating Frank and Oliver to the door.

"Do we have to do this?"

"I don't know," Frank retorted, crossing his arms. "Do we? Get out of my way."

"No," Sam said sternly. "Not until we talk."

"Look, this is a really bad time," Frank said, glancing back at Oliver, who was looking more nervous by the second.

"I'm sure your friend will understand if we take a few minutes," Sam said sternly.

"Just get out of our way," Frank demanded.

"Fine," Sam replied. "Have it your way." He stepped aside, but then took Frank completely off guard when he blocked him in and opened the door only enough for Oliver to get out. "I'm sorry," he said to Oliver, "you're going to have to come back some other time."

"What?" Frank demanded. "No, Oliver!"

"Frank will call you when he can," Sam continued, putting an arm up to block Frank when he tried to get closer to Oliver, who looked like he was about to cry as he slowly began to move out the door, looking at Frank as if he didn't know what else to do.

“Oliver, don’t!” Frank stated. “Dad, stop it! You don’t know what you’re doing!”

“Go,” Sam said to Oliver, raising his voice to match Frank’s. The way Frank saw it, that was a mistake, since it was just enough to spook Oliver right out the front door.

“Oliver!” he shouted, but Sam was already shutting the front door. Without giving it a second thought, Frank was shoving the larger man right into it. “Idiot!” he snapped.

“Hey!” Sam shouted, reaching for him. But, Frank was already out of reach and running through the house, moving towards the back door. Before Sam caught up to him he was outside, and halfway around the house, watching Oliver run down the shoreline to where they’d left the boat.

“Oliver, come back!” Frank shouted, but it was as if Oliver didn’t hear him.

“Frank!” Sam shouted. “You might not like it, but I’m still your father, and don’t think for a second I can’t ground you!”

Frank whirled around, temper flaring. “Go ahead!” he shouted. “Like I care about anything you do or say, anyway! God, I hate you! Why can’t you just leave me alone? If you cared about me at all you’d figure out that I don’t want you!... And for the record, you’re not my dad!”

Frank spun around, more angry words still on his lips, and he ran. Oliver had a good amount of distance between them now, but he was determined to catch up. He didn’t want Oliver getting back across the lake--to his parents.

Frank called out Oliver’s name again, but as he moved around the lake heading towards the bridge he’d lost all sight of him, until he saw the small motorboat moving over the water--with Oliver in it.

Cursing, Frank all but stomped his foot as he watched Oliver become smaller in the distance, and wondered how long it would take to get to him now.

But, before he could come up with a solution to this new problem, something ahead caught his eye... someone.

Jeremy Jay Flaskis had definitely picked a bad time to go out spying--especially on Frank. Frank moved directly towards him purposefully. He was in a fighting mood, and it seemed that he’d just chosen his target.

.....
Brian Martin stood near the Seaberg house, contemplating his next move as he watched Frank flee his father. It seemed to be a recurring theme: sons running away from their fathers. Just before he saw the Seabergs running out of their house like a couple of crazies, he’d seen his own son come out the front door, right before Oliver had taken one look at him and took off running. He’d pay for that later.

Brian ran his hand through his thinning hair to straighten it as he approached Frank Seaberg’s father, and smiled pleasantly as the man turned and spo

tted him there. "Having trouble with your boy there?" Brian asked. "I know exactly where you stand. I've been there myself."

Sam frowned at the stranger, unaware of who he was. "Just a small argument. He'll be back soon... Can I help you, Mister..."

"Martin," Brian replied, extending his hand to shake Sam's. "Brian Martin. I'm Oliver's dad. Came over to give him a ride home, but it looks like I just missed him."

"Oh, hi," Sam said, smiling more easily now. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I didn't realize you were on your way to pick him up."

"Don't worry about it. He'll find his way home. So, Frank mentioned that you were visiting from out of town."

"I'm surprised Frank mentioned me at all," Sam said, nervously wondering what kind of impression this man had of him. "I mean, listen, whatever he said, he probably has a point or two, but..."

Brian laughed, placing a friendly hand on Sam's shoulder. "Your boy'll come around sooner or later. They always do. You know, what always works for me is a nice father-son outing. Something that really bonds ya."

"You know, I was just thinking about that today," Sam replied. "I mean, doing something like that."

"If you're interested, I know just the thing," Brian offered.

Sam regarded the man curiously. "What's that, Mr. Martin? To be honest... I'm willing to try just about anything at this point."

"Well, if you're looking to spend some real one-on-one time with him, I'd say a nice trip out on the lake is just for you, Mr. Seaberg. Ever driven a boat before?"

.....
Bad idea. Bad idea. Really bad idea. Jay, convinced that Frank was going to hit him first and ask questions later, threw up his hands as the angry-looking blond approached. "Hold on!" he insisted.

"I told you..." Frank started as he advanced and Jay continued to step back.

"Look, no camera!" Jay said quickly. "I just came to talk to you, swear to god!"

Frank paused, his expression demanding an explanation while his offensive posture kept Jay on guard.

"I want to show you something," Jay explained. "Just give me a little bit of time, hear me out, and if you don't like what I've gotta say... then I swear you won't see me around no more."

Frank raised a curious eyebrow at that, but then turned his attention back to the lake, where Oliver was heading home. "I don't have time for that right now."

"Frank, please," Jay said. "You wanna know why I've been following the Martins, don't you?"

Frank looked back towards Jay, frowning. It seemed as if he'd been looking for answers since he'd first encountered Oliver Martin by the old shed in the woods, but so far, all of his questions only led to more questions. He'd given up. He needed help. The best thing he could do, would be to figure out how to get Oliver away from his mom again, and then wait for his own mother to come home. Forget about everything else. Just get Oliver some real help.

"I told you they're a bad bunch," Jay continued. "I'll show you why I think that."

"Does it have to do with your dog?" Frank asked.

Jay cocked his head. "No. Why?"

Frank sighed. "Never mind. Show me... just make it fast."

He could go with Jay for a few minutes, Frank decided. Any answers were better than no answers at all. His mom wasn't home yet, anyway... But when he thought about Oliver...

"I'm serious," Frank said. "We've gotta hurry."

"Fine, it's this way," Jay said, and Frank frowned when he realized Jay was going back towards his house.

"Wait... we can't go that way. I can't really let my dad see me right now."

Jay looked curious, but only shrugged as he turned and headed through the woods instead. "The Martins are the ones who told you no one missed Odetta Grover, aren't they?" Jay said as Frank followed him at a rushed pace.

"This is about her?" Frank asked, annoyed. He wasn't very interested in learning more about a deceased woman at the moment.

"She wasn't as bad as people said," Jay replied quietly. "You wanna know how I met her?"

"If I say no, are you going to tell me, anyway?"

Jay glanced over his shoulder. "I killed one of her cats," he said flatly. "When I was first learning to drive, I wasn't paying attention, didn't brake fast enough, and hit it... I would have just forgotten about it, you know? I figured that no one needed to know--it's not like most of those animals weren't really strays, anyway... But the thing is, my mom was with me. She's all about doing the right thing, so she made me tell Odetta what happened... She freaked me out as much as she did everyone else, you know? But I went anyway... figured she'd scream at me... act a little crazy. Nothing I couldn't handle. But, when I told her what happened to her cat, she thanked me for being honest and asked me if I'd come over again. I didn't think I was going to do that, either, but I did... I started helping her with things around her house, and I talked to her. She was the best listener... she even helped me with a few things for school."

"And now you don't like the Martins because she didn't?"

"There was more to it than that, Frank. They tormented her. Those cats, they

were like family to her... It might not be something you or I can understand, but they were all she had. The Martins were always hunting--especially the old man. Mr. Gun-happy prick that he is...she was always afraid they were shooting at her cats. They started disappearing, so every time she saw a Martin, she kinda freaked. Finally, she confronted Brian, told him to stay off her land, or she'd let everyone know he wasn't the stand-up citizen he pretends to be."

"What does that mean?" Frank asked.

"He's been cheating on his wife," Jay explained. "Odetta said she'd tell Mary about it if he didn't keep off her property and away from her cats... But the thing is, it wasn't much of a threat, 'cause everyone already sorta knew about it. In town, people always talk, and they figured Mary already knew, too. But, Brian figured that he was clever enough to keep it hidden. Had no idea that everyone was already talking... I think he took her threat seriously, because things just got worse. The Martins were always sneaking around her property, throwing shit at her windows..."

"Like the rocks she threw at Oliver?" Frank remarked.

"No--actual shit," Jay said. "As in feces... They splattered her door with blood a few times, claimed it was from a kitten... it just escalated. I tried to get Odetta to get some help from the law, even brought my parents into it.. . But she didn't like dealing with cops, even the fake ones around here, and my parents figured that she was just getting senile, since no one actually saw the Martins doing any of this, except for Odetta...but I believed her. She was terrified of them, and then that night of the storm... she called me up, screaming about something. I couldn't understand her, but I swear I heard a gun go off, Frank. I got my dad and the two of us headed over, but by the time we got to the house... her boat was already overturned in the lake. It didn't make any sense. She never went out in that boat."

"And you think the Martins had something to do with it?"

Jay paused to look at Frank. "She didn't get in that boat on her own."

"How do you know?"

"Because she was more like those cats than anyone knew--she was terrified of the water, Frank. Couldn't swim. She didn't get in that boat--not in that storm."

Frank frowned. "Then why not tell the police? If you thought it was the Martins..."

"We did tell," Jay insisted. "The problem is, no one would listen. Everyone wanted to believe that Odetta Grover was just some crazy old witch. Lots of people thought she was dangerous because she was different, and figured she was better off gone... but I don't buy any of it. I don't know what happened that night, but I know the Martins were there. I saw Brian when they fished her out of the lake--he looked proud. Like, he was really getting away

y with something special.”

“And you follow Oliver because you think he had something to do with it, too?” Frank demanded, knowing deep down that Oliver wouldn’t have been capable of inflicting harm on anyone else... but then, he didn’t want to think about David.

“Someone knows something, Frank. I’m just waiting for one of them to mess up.”

Jay turned ahead, moving towards a drop off in the terrain, and Frank frowned as he stared at it for a moment. He knew where they were.

“What are we doing here?” he asked Jay.

“Because what I want to show you is right down here,” Jay said as he turned and began to climb down the steep terrain.

Stepping closer, Frank could see water, and felt a strong sense of déjà vu as a fluffy white Persian looked up at him from below, swinging its tail before it disappeared in the brush upon Jay’s approach.

“Are you coming?” Jay asked as he reached the ground and looked up.

Frank felt a knot developing in his stomach as he remembered Rudy standing in the very spot he was now, and Oliver pulling her back strongly insisting that they never go down there. It had to be more than a coincidence that this is where Jay was leading him now.

“You afraid of heights or something?” Jay asked when he saw Frank hesitate.

“No,” Frank said shortly as he took a deep breath and moved to climb down the drop, where Jay was waiting for him at the bottom.

They were right at the edge of the water in a narrow cove, shaded by the trees. Jay headed down a path and Frank followed him about ten feet until they stopped, both staring at what was in front of them. For Jay, it seemed to be a place that deserved a certain amount of respect as he removed his hat. For Frank, it was realization as his hands shook at his sides and he realized exactly why Oliver hadn’t wanted to come down here.

Stuck in the mud, halfway submerged in the dark water, the small wooden boat was in ruins, but still where it had been when they towed Odetta Grover’s body out of the water. Frank passed Jay, moving closer as he tried to come up with every explanation he could when it came to why Oliver was afraid of this place. Maybe he thought it was haunted. Maybe he’d heard stories. He did not kill Odetta Grover. He couldn’t have. Frank refused to believe it.

But, as he moved closer, taking in the details of the boat, the chipped green paint on the old wood was unmistakable, and he felt his breath catch. “Oh, God.”

“I keep coming here, trying to figure out what happened,” Jay said quietly.

“This boat... it’s not in much worse shape than it was in when she died in it... she wouldn’t have gotten in on her own. She wouldn’t have gone out there

e.”

“I believe you.”

Jay’s eyes snapped to Frank, looking bewildered. “You do?”

“I mean... there is the question of how she paddled herself out there, since the oars for this boat are in my shed... but that doesn’t mean the Martins killed her,” Frank said quickly. “She could have gone out there without them.” Jay stared at Frank for a long moment, digesting what he was hearing. “The oars? Show me!” he demanded.

“No. Wait... you can’t just...”

“Look, Frank, I know they had something to do with it! Just show me!”

“You can’t just accuse someone without proof!” Frank shouted. “I don’t believe it, okay! Oliver wouldn’t... he just wouldn’t!”

“I never said it had to be Oliver, but maybe...”

“You think Brian did it?” Frank asked, finding that to be an easier theory to swallow if there was foul play involved.

“Maybe,” Jay said. “He probably had a hell of a lot to do with it, but the boys had to be involved, too. I mean... shit, David comes down here all the time. It’s like he’s obsessed with this place.”

Frank’s head snapped up. “What did you say?”

“I’ve followed David here before,” Jay said. “At least once a week, but he probably comes more than that. He just stares at it... like, he’s waiting for something.”

“No,” Frank said, taking a step towards Jay. “You know about David?”

“What about him?” Jay asked, frowning.

“Jay...”

“Look, Frank, I get they’re your friends, but if they had anything to do with this...”

“Will you just shut up for a second?” Frank snapped, his head spinning. “I need to ask you something... just answer the question, alright?”

“Okay, what?”

“Oliver and David... have you ever seen the two of them together?”

“Well, it’s kinda hard not to notice twins, especially around here. Kinda head-turners, you know?”

Frank gripped his head, thoughts spiraling as he tried to comprehend what Jay was telling him. “Are you sure?” he asked hoarsely.

“Of course I’m sure,” Jay responded irritably. “Hey... are you alright?”

“When?” Frank demanded. “When did you see the two of them together?”

“Umm... oh, about a month ago I got shots of both of them sneaking around Odetta’s place, just before you moved in.... Frank?”

Frank had already turned to head back, and Jay rushed to catch up.

“We have to go,” Frank stated.

“Okay, well, look, I need those oars, maybe if I show them to...”

“No,” Frank cut him off. “I have to get to Oliver. Now.”

Chapter 11

by DomLuka

The air was getting cooler as a hint of a late afternoon storm clouded the sky and Jay picked up his pace again, trying to ignore the way that his lungs were beginning to burn from running. It was all he could do to keep up with Frank, who'd seemed to be hit with an unmatched rush of adrenaline. Jay didn't know where he was going, but he knew he couldn't lose him. Frank did know something; although, somewhere during their conversation, Jay had lost track of what that was. But, Frank wanting to go to Oliver worried him. If Frank planned to warn the guy that they were onto him and his family, Jay wasn't exactly willing to let that happen.

“I going to call the police!” Jay shouted from behind him, but Frank didn't slow his pace, or object like Jay suspected he would.

“Go ahead,” he called back.

Jay groaned, pushing himself harder until he was on Frank's heels. “Do you wanna tell me what's going on?”

“I have to get Oliver away from his parents... he'll be home by now.”

“Why? Can't we just call someone first... Frank!” Jay came to a stop, placing his hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath. “Frank, if they had anything to do with Odetta...”

Frank stopped just ahead of Jay and looked back, his face flushed from running. “Look, Odetta's been dead for, like, a year. I'm pretty sure she can wait a little while longer. I need to find out what happened to David before the same thing happens to Oliver.”

Jay frowned. “What are you talking about?” he demanded.

Frustrated, Frank shook his head and kept running. “Keep up and I'll tell you everything.”

“Frank, wait!”

“What?” Frank shouted, spinning around again.

“Can we at least take my car?” he replied. “It'll get us there a lot faster, and there's no way I'm running all the way around the lake.”

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“How could you possibly fall for that?”

“Will you watch the road!” Frank snapped, pointing out the front window to the road ahead of them as Jay swerved recklessly over the gravel. He hadn't really been in danger of hitting anything. Frank simply wanted to avoid answering the question since he'd been asking himself the same thing and couldn't quite come up with an answer that didn't make him feel like the world's largest idiot. “It was believable... and Oliver talks to himself--I mean, he talks to David, when he's not even there. Look, it doesn't really matter now. The point is, the Martins are trying to convince him that David does

n't even exist... probably because they don't want anyone to figure out what they did with him."

"What do you think they did with him?" Jay asked.

Frank swallowed against his dry throat. "I don't know," he said. And he certainly didn't want to speculate. The sudden silence in the vehicle suggested that neither of them did, since it was difficult not to think the worst.

"Okay," Jay said calmly. "The last time I saw David... it had to be about two weeks ago, when he went to see the boat. So, we know he was okay then, right? Unless it was Oliver--sometimes it's hard to tell, unless one of 'em's talking."

"It wasn't Oliver," Frank said. "He wouldn't be near that boat... I think it scares him."

"Okay, so sometime in the last two weeks..."

"Nine days," Frank cut him off.

"What?"

"Whatever happened, happened exactly nine days ago."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's the last time I talked to David," Frank explained. "I got this weird phone call... He said he was going to tell me something, but before he got the chance the line went dead... I went over there and they had Oliver locked up under their house. That's when they fed me that story." Frank paused, releasing a shaky breath. "Fuck, and I bought it all...I've been seeing it like... God, I've probably got Oliver's head as fucked up as his parents do. He just wanted me to listen to him and I..."

"Hey. Like you said, that's not what's important right now. "We need a plan, Frank. These people are dangerous; if you wanna get Oliver we can't just walk right in there..."

"I can get him out," Frank said confidently. "I mean, if his dad isn't home yet... I can get him out."

"And then what?"

Frank sighed. "We can get the oars from my house and go to the police... but I don't really know if that's going to be enough proof, Jay. Our best bet is to prove something happened to David."

Jay nodded. "That won't be as hard as you think if he's really missing, Frank. No one really saw much of Oliver and David, but we knew they were there--both of them."

Frank sighed, looking out the window. He wished that someone would have mentioned that before. Hell, he wished that he would have paid more attention to what Oliver was trying to tell him. At the very least, listening to his own instincts about the Martin parents would have been helpful. Now, Frank felt like it was too late. At least, for David. For Oliver, it was a different story, and Frank swore that as soon as he got to him, the Martins never would

again.

Jay took the road to the Martins' house slowly as they came closer and both boys took a good look around. It had just started to sprinkle, and as the small water droplets hit the windshield things appeared to be quiet.

"I don't think Brian's home," Frank said, finding that he was whispering, even if it wasn't necessary. "I'm just gonna knock on the door... we probably shouldn't let Oliver's mom suspect anything just yet."

Jay nodded his agreement. "Okay," he said as he turned off the engine and pocketed the key to his car. "But I'm gonna go with you."

Frank frowned at that idea. "I don't think so."

"Look, I'm not gonna freak out if that's what you're worried about. I do have some control over my temper."

"You scare Oliver," Frank said bluntly.

"I'll be nice."

"Jay..."

"Fine, I'll stay here... but as soon as something doesn't look right, I'm coming in."

Frank studied the other blond for a moment. "Thanks."

Jay only nodded, and Frank left the car, heading towards the Martin house.

Outside of the vehicle the raindrops felt particularly cold on his warm skin, and he found himself approaching the front steps more quickly than he cared to. Shaking inside and out, Frank wasn't sure how he was going to keep up pretenses with Mary Martin after everything he'd just learned. And, while he was more confident when it came to handling her than Brian Martin, he didn't underestimate the woman for a minute. She'd been the only one there the night that Frank had found Oliver in the basement. He didn't doubt that she had something to do with David's disappearance... although, remembering how Brian had mysteriously run out in the middle of the night was worth worrying about now, too. For all Frank knew, Brian's errand could have consisted of the disposal of a body. David's body. Trembling, Frank didn't want to think about it. He felt like he was putting the pieces together a little too quickly, and didn't quite care for the picture they were creating.

At the door, Frank knocked. He waited, telling himself he'd make it quick.

Mary would likely answer; he'd tell her he needed to tell Oliver something, grab him, and they'd run. At least, he hoped it would be that simple. Maybe it would have been, if Mary Martin had answered the door. If anyone had.

Frank glanced back at the car to find Jay watching intently. It was a comfort having him there, even if a small one, and Frank knocked again, louder this time. When no response came again, he frowned to himself, and reached for the doorknob, looking back at the car again, this time to make sure Jay saw what he was doing. Apparently, Jay didn't miss anything, because before Frank even swung the front door open, Jay was standing next to him on the

porch.

Together they looked into the Martins' living room cautiously, their eyes adjusting to the darkness of the house slowly. "Hello," Frank whispered, as if he didn't really want anyone to hear him as he slid his hand against the inside wall in search of a light switch. He found one, flicked it on, and yanked his hand back as if the lid to the cookie jar was about to close on it.

Silently, Frank looked into the orderly living room, wondering if Mrs. Martin was going to pop out at them at any given moment. He opened his mouth, deciding that he should call out again, but before he followed through with that, Jay's hand was between his shoulder blades, pushing him forward.

"What are you doing?" Frank demanded.

"Go in," Jay urged.

"You go in!" Frank hissed.

"Sure... I'll be right behind you."

Frank rolled his eyes, and forced himself to take the first step into the house. Since the last time he was there, he didn't notice anything different, or strange... but then, he wasn't sure if he was supposed to. It wasn't as if the Martins would be hiding their secrets, or the body of their apparently missing son--if there was a body--in plain sight.

"I don't think anyone's home," Jay said, following Frank in. "Maybe we should just go."

"No," Frank stated. "Oliver's gotta be around here somewhere."

"You don't know that."

Frank looked back at Jay, frowning. "He has to be, because I'm not leaving here without him."

The clanging sound of a pan dropped somewhere in the house caused them both to jump, Jay going so far as to grab hold of Frank's arm. "Okay, someone's definitely here," Jay admitted, leaning forward to sniff the air. "And I think... something's burning."

"Kitchen," Frank whispered, and together they headed towards it. But, before they got there, Jay paused to unplug a table lamp before he lifted it up, and Frank stopped to regard him with a mixture of curiosity and annoyance.

"What are you doing?"

"Self-defense," Jay informed him and nodded for Frank to continue.

Frank frowned at the reminder that they might actually have to defend themselves, but didn't ask Jay to put down the lamp as they continued slowly towards the kitchen, each of them attempting to keep their footsteps as silent as possible. But as soon as Frank reached the kitchen, and saw who was making the noise, he turned and grabbed the lamp right out of Jay's hand, feeling that it was a reasonable precautionary measure before he stepped past the hallway, placed it carefully on the floor, and looked over his surroundings.

"Oliver? What are you doing?"

It was a good question. Looking around the kitchen, Frank found it, unlike the rest of the house, in disarray. The refrigerator door, cabinet and drawers were open, cans of non-perishable items opened, littering the counters along with an assortment of chopped vegetable and raw meat. There were pots and pans smoking over the stove, the empty bottoms burning as Oliver stood over the kitchen table, appearing to be setting it, adding the forks next to the plates. He seemed slow in noticing that Frank was even there, and when he did look up he seemed pale, his eyes dark and heavy.

“Hi, Frank.”

“Oliver... what are you doing?” Frank asked again as he walked around the table to get to him, while Jay took it upon himself to go to the stove and turn off the burners.

“I have to cook dinner, Frank.”

Frank frowned, knowing that he wouldn’t think this was strange when it came to Oliver if he wasn’t aware of the fact that Oliver did know how to cook without causing the kitchen to explode.

“More like destroying it,” Jay remarked, and Oliver spun around, looking alarmed like he’d just noticed Jay was there. He backed up until his shoulder was touching Frank’s.

“Jeremy Flaskis’s in my house,” he whispered.

“It’s okay,” Frank told him, reaching for his hand. “He’s gonna give us a ride. Come on, we’ve gotta get out of here.”

Frank headed towards the door, but when he tried to take Oliver with him, Oliver yanked his hand back, looking unreasonably upset. “No! I have to cook dinner, Frank! I have to cook it for my mom!”

“Oliver, listen,” Frank responded. “I know about David--I know the truth. I’m sorry I didn’t believe you, and I want to talk about it some more, but right now, I’m worried about what’ll happen if I don’t get you out of here. Please ...”

Frank held out his hand, and as Oliver bit at his bottom lip when it began to quiver, he stared down at the offering. But, he didn’t take it. Instead, he turned back to the table, rotating the plate in front of him. “I have to make dinner,” he said again, his voice sounding uneven.

“Hey,” Jay said roughly, moving towards him. “What kind of idiot...” he was silenced when Frank placed a hand on his chest and placed himself between Jay and Oliver.

“Oliver, please,” Frank said. “If you’re mad at me right now, I really can’t blame you... I would be, too. But we have to go now. We’ll get help, alright, like we talked about before...we’ll tell everyone David’s real.”

Oliver slowly shook his head as he lifted his eyes to meet Frank’s. “But he’s in so much trouble now, Frank.”

Frank bit at his tongue, reminding himself to keep his words calm. “I know.

.. your parents did something to him, didn't they?"

Oliver sucked in a breath, choked on it. His hand slid over the plate in front of him and it fell from the table, shattering on the floor and causing everyone to jump, and as Frank lifted a hand to steady Oliver, Jay stepped away, frustrated.

"Frank."

"Hold on, Jay," Frank gritted out.

"No--fuck this," Jay snapped. "I'm gonna find a phone and call for help... then I'm outta here, with or without you. I swear it, Frank."

If Jay had intended to provoke a reaction out of Frank that would get them out of there faster, he was soon disappointed as he came to conclude that every bit of attention Frank had was on Oliver, and frustrated, he left the room, wishing he'd never agreed to go there first.

"Oliver, do you know what happened to David?" Frank asked, giving him a gentle shake to draw his attention. "I think you do...where he is? What happened to him?"

Oliver defensively wrapped his arms around himself. "I don't know, Frank. He stopped talking to me!" Oliver suddenly knelt down, his hands shaking as he struggled to pick up the larger pieces of the broken plate, even as Frank followed him, grabbing his hands to stop him. "I have to make dinner now!" Oliver snapped. "I have to! It has to be my job now! I can't... I can't talk about David anymore. I don't know why..." Oliver frowned, wiping his face on his sleeve before he looked at Frank again. "I don't know why he won't talk to me anymore."

Frustrated, Frank pulled Oliver to his feet, wondering if he should use a more forceful approach. But, as he took a moment, and Oliver's words sunk in, his eyes slowly widened in realization. "Oh god..." he whispered, studying Oliver closely for several long moments before he swallowed hard and tightened his grip on the other boy's hands. "You already told me, didn't you?"

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"... and if you idiots are going to have an emergency line, then at least one of you lazy sons-of-bitches should be around to answer the damn thing!" Jay concluded irritably. He was running out of people to call. That was the third time he'd called the police after being unable to reach his parents, or even Jenny and her parents. Frustrated, he slammed the phone down on the receiver, cursing as the force caused it to fall.

Habit caused him to bend down to pick up the mess, but as he reached for the phone, he paused as the rug at his feet caught his attention. The corner was turned up: nothing that seemed out of the ordinary. But there was a small detail there on the carpet beneath that had him forgetting about the phone as he stepped aside and slowly pulled back the rug. Cocking his head, he stared at the stain on the floor curiously. A rusty-looking ring, it wasn't very large

, but still, there was something about it that had the hair on the nape of his neck prickling, and his instincts knotting his stomach as he slowly reached out and touched it with two fingers.

The carpet was soft, and as he looked closer, he could see that the stain looked smudged. The place had definitely been washed. Again, nothing so out of the ordinary. Accidents happened. People cleaned them up... But, then he was reminded of last winter, the evening his father and grandfather returned from their annual hunting trip to Colorado with an antelope that would help feed their families, and others in need over the next months. His dad had taken a break from cleaning the animal, walked into the house to use the restroom, and was promptly scolded by his mother halfway across the living room when she realized that he'd stepped in part of the mess outside and tracked it across the floor. They'd discovered that blood wasn't the easiest thing to get out, and despite numerous cleanings, his mother had finally given up and thrown down a rug until they could replace the carpet. The Martins hunted, but he doubted that the stains on the carpet had anything to do with it. When it came to these people, Jay was most definitely one to jump to conclusions, and the fact that Frank had told him he'd received a call from David before he disappeared was all he needed to suspect foul play. If he was right in his assumptions that David was going to give up a few family secrets to Frank, and one of his parents found out, then Jay could easily picture him being attacked from behind before he got around to it.

"Hey, Frank, come look..." Jay paused as he looked up, his eyes getting a clear shot down the hallway.

He could have kicked himself. Silently, slowly, he moved back against the closest wall, annoyed and terrified that they had made the mistake of not making sure that Oliver was the only one in the house before they'd become distracted. Leaning forward, looking back down the hall, Jay stared at what had rattled him. Hanging off the visible corner of a bed was a foot: small, dressed in a white shoe. He'd hoped that it had been nothing more than his imagination, but there was no mistaking it. Someone was in the back room.

Jay supposed it was lucky that he and Frank hadn't been discovered, even when he'd raised his voice to call out only moments ago... and that was weird. Too weird.

Jay reached for the phone to call for help again, only to remember that it wasn't going to do him any good until someone got his messages. He paused for a long moment, breathing deeply as he looked towards the kitchen. He wanted to call for Frank again, but no longer had the nerve to. He could go get him. It was a good idea. A reasonable idea. Cautiously, he stepped away from the wall, meaning to head towards the kitchen, but with his eyes trained down the hallway, Jay's feet carried him in another direction.

Jay had always wondered what he'd find inside of the Martin house. He'd always imagined it to be a little home of horrors, but then, that could have been wishful thinking on his part. There were still several times in the past when he was tempted to find out, though. Maybe he would have, if Jenny hadn't drawn the line at breaking and entering. She put up with a lot from Jay, but had always been the first to stop him short of any major illegal activity. He wished she was with him now to tell him to go back to the kitchen, not to get any closer to that bedroom, because he wasn't stopping on his own. Not until he reached the bedroom door where he had to stop, his body falling heavily back on the door frame as he forced himself to recover from the blood rushing to his head as a result of what he was looking at.

Jay'd only ever seen one body before. And even then, seeing Odetta Grover being pulled out of that lake wasn't the clearest of memories. The image had been distorted by tears before his father had pulled his face against his shoulder and repeatedly ordered him not to look. He wished he had his dad's shoulder now, and it was strange, because the sorrow he felt didn't feel genuine.

Jay didn't know Mary Martin. What he did know, he didn't like. But the parted lips still open from her last breath, and lifeless eyes focused somewhere far away, were like Odetta Grover all over again. His arms flailed and caught the edge of the bed near Mary Martin's feet as he forced himself forward around the bed until he was looking down at the delicate features of her face. He avoided her eyes, finding that had he had to resist the urge to close them, even as the idea of touching her at all made his skin crawl.

Stepping back for a moment, he held his breath as he rubbed his hands over his face, forcing himself into detached concentration before he looked again, this time focusing on Mary Martin's throat, and the cause of her death, which Jay would have said wasn't an accident even before he'd found the proof.

He wasn't sure how long he looked. It couldn't have been for too long. The discovery had him wanting to get out of there even more than he'd wanted to upon stepping into the house. But, he was feeling strangely calm as he walked out of the Martin parents' bedroom, pausing at the end of the hall to frown at the front door, still wide open. He didn't feel safe with it like that all of a sudden, but at the same time, he feared feeling worse if he closed it. The back door, he decided. He'd get Frank, and they'd go out the back door. They simply couldn't wait for help to find them. They needed to get to it. Only now, as Jay headed back to the kitchen, he began to think of Oliver. The boy was a problem.

Jay no longer wanted to bring him along. Leave him here. Let the law deal with him. He could be a murderer. After all, Oliver was the only one there in the house. He was acting strangely, even more so than usual. He obviously

knew there was a corpse in the back room. The question Jay had was whether or not Oliver had put it there.

The thought frayed his nerves, and he found himself moving faster, wanting to get to Frank. He was disappointed when he reached the kitchen and didn't find what--or more specifically who--he was looking for.

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Confused. Numb. Terrified. These were all familiar feelings for Oliver Martin, but feeling them all at once, so strongly that it shook him, made it difficult to determine if he wanted to run away, or hide where he was. And he was so alone. He wasn't exactly sure how it all had happened.

He was supposed to be at Frank's house. He'd wanted to believe that Frank was right; that it would be safe. If Frank said it was okay to ask Mrs. Seaberg for help, then Oliver wanted to believe that. He wanted things to go back to the way that they were before, when David's bed had been in their bedroom, and they could talk whenever they wanted. Before Oliver wasn't allowed to call David his brother anymore. He'd believed that Frank could fix it.

... but then everything got messed up again.

Oliver remembered being with Frank, when they were supposed to make everything okay again. But then he was afraid. Bad things would happen if he told. He'd known they would, but hadn't listened to his instincts, so when he saw his dad outside of the Seaberg house waiting for him, he'd run. He had to. He had to get home and prove that he could be good. Bad things would happen.

But then, they did happen. Blackout. It was like hitting his head every time that it happened, only without the pain. Like walking towards an open door, only to hit a wall once he got there. And it was unsettling. To not know. Minutes unaccounted for, but worse, more often than not it was hours. Before, he'd always had to trust his family to account for that lost time. He'd counted on David to reassure him that everything was alright, that nothing was amiss. That he should smile and move on. You have nothing to worry about, Oliver. David had said those words on more than one occasion. But, this time was different.

The last time it had happened, Oliver had woken up in the dark with Frank at his side. At the time, things had seemed so distorted in his mind, and he'd been unable to recall exactly what the last thing he remembered before the blackout. But images had begun to flash in his mind during his lonely moments. David, like the ghost their parents had been saying he was. That night seemed to be coming back to him in small pieces, but he couldn't put it all together. He didn't want to. Too scary. Oliver didn't like scary.

But then, he found himself in a living nightmare now, one that didn't vanish within his blackouts. Maybe that was because it couldn't. There was no escape this time, not even into the darkness that protected him as much as it

terrified him. One moment he'd been running from his father, the air pumping through his lungs until it burned his chest, and the next he'd been wide awake, oddly calm as he found himself sitting in his parents' bedroom. He'd felt soft, cool skin beneath his right hand before he turned his head and discovered his own hand at his mother's throat, her lifeless eyes staring at him accusingly. He could hear David's voice over the ringing in his ears, remembering the last time he'd spoken to him. I wish she'd stop breathing, David had said vehemently of their mother. And now she had.

Oliver seemed to hear the footsteps before he actually saw the body standing in front of him, drawing him out of his trance. He jumped upon looking up into Jeremy "Jay" Flaskis's glaring face. Oliver didn't have time to react much more than that before Jay barked something at him, the tone causing him to recoil, unable to answer because he hadn't actually made out the words.

Leaning closer, Jay rolled his eyes. "Well? Where's Frank?" Jeremy asked again, waving a hand in front of Oliver's face. "Are you fucking listening to me?" Oliver managed a nod, but it didn't seem nearly enough for Jay, who suddenly reached down and yanked him up out of his chair. "Where is he?" Jay snapped, shaking him until Oliver suddenly pulled away, his breaths coming heavily.

"He said to stay here," Oliver managed to get out.

Frowning, Jay gave him a long, measuring once-over before he suddenly grabbed one of Oliver's hands and slammed it down painfully on the table, causing Oliver to gasp. But, Oliver's attempts to pull it back were thwarted as Jay held his wrist tight and stared down at his flattened fingers for several long moments before suddenly releasing him.

Oliver jerked back, rubbing at his wrist before he looked at Jay accusingly, only to find that the other boy was staring at him in an oddly inquisitive manner, hiding thoughts that he obviously didn't want to share. "Does Frank know?" Jay finally asked, his voice void of emotion. This time, Oliver wasn't confused, and he felt a tear slip down his cheek as he shook his head. Jay's frown only deepened as he suddenly stepped forward and gave Oliver a shove. "Let's go," he ordered.

"But Frank said..." Oliver started to say, even as he was forcefully led from his house through the back door.

"I don't care what he said," Jay stated. "Where'd he go?" He obviously wasn't in the house. If he had been, Jay was mostly positive that he would have stormed into the kitchen by now, objecting to the rough way Oliver was being treated.

"I don't know," Oliver insisted as Jay led him around the outside of the house.

"Well where do you think he went?" Jay demanded, his voice sounding increa

singly hostile as he attempted to hide his own panic. He didn't want to, but damn if he wouldn't leave Frank there if he had to. There was a goddamn corpse in the house for crying out loud!

"I don't know," Oliver said again, but this time there was something uncertain in his voice that Jay didn't quite like, and he spun him around by his shoulder. Oliver backpedaled quickly. "I don't know!" he shouted.

"You're lying!" Jay snapped. "What did you do? Did you say something to him? Oliver!"

Jay advanced, but stopped short as the other boy's chin began to quiver. "I'm sorry," Oliver whispered. "I had to."

.....
Frank didn't pause as he ran past the frayed rope hanging from the tree this time. He didn't stop until his shoes began to stick in the soggy terrain beneath his feet, and he was staring at the tall tree surrounded by old litter. Closing his eyes, he ran both hands through his sweat-dampened hair and took a deep breath. It was getting dark now, the sun casting blue shadows over the woods, and he tried to remember anything that might have been important. Anything he'd dismissed before. This is not a game, Frank! This is where I talk to David! Oliver's voice was practically pounding in his head, and suddenly Frank opened his mouth, and he screamed.

"David!" It was a far cry from how he'd called out the name earlier in the day. Frank could hear his voice echoing off the hills, and then he opened his mouth and did it all over again, his eyes wildly searching the area for anything he wasn't supposed to see as he listened.

Nothing in the trees. Nothing in the shadows. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Frank closed his eyes again, this time picturing Oliver there. His body language. It had been in his body language. Frank took a few steps forward, until he stood in the exact spot Oliver had been in as he hopelessly pleaded his case. Pointing to the ground.

His eyes widening in realization, Frank looked to the ground as he remembered the way Oliver had spoken to David in his bedroom. A ghost. Could that be it? Frank wondered. Oliver really hadn't been talking to David after nine days ago... maybe he'd just imagined it, made up his brother's voice as a sense of comfort. No. Frank didn't want to believe it. It had been devastating enough to think that David had stopped talking to Oliver that morning, and he'd known that the odds of finding him safe had to be slim... but now that he was there, in this spot, Frank didn't want to believe what he was putting together in his head. But he had to know.

Sinking to his knees, his hands searching the mud beneath the tall grass, he began to crawl forward slowly, and then to his right... to his left, and back again. He wasn't sure if what he expected to find, or if he really expected to find anything at all. If it was a grave he was looking for, he couldn't fi

nd a spot in the grass that seemed to be disturbed enough to be one. But that didn't stop him from looking for loose soil, anything that might give him a clue. And whatever he'd expected, he hadn't been the sudden sharp sensation cutting through his palm.

Jerking his hand back, Frank looked at the small cut below his middle finger; the blood dripping down to his wrist. He only allowed the indignation he suddenly felt towards the ground itself to distract him for a moment before he looked down at the spot, and then very quickly, began to push the grass back, out of his way.

For long moments he stared at the rusted metal pipe sticking only a few inches out of the ground, unsure what to make of it, but noting that it looked to run deep. It was just wide enough to stick his arm down, and lacking a brighter idea, he did so, pulling back when he found that there was no bottom that his fingers were capable of reaching. Cautiously he lowered his face towards the dark tunnel, and he blew. His breath echoed back at him, and he found himself moving even closer. "David!" his voice echoed in the same dull, way, and for a long moment, he listened for a response that didn't come. But this was something. If Oliver had heard David's voice at all, there was a good chance that the hidden pipe had something to do with it, and as Frank's attention turned to finding out whatever was down there--to getting down there--his eyes drifted no more than four feet away at the pile of old boards beneath the tree. Forcing himself to his feet, he was in front of the rubble in seconds, pushing aside everything he could, and pausing only when he uncovered a short ladder. Maybe he wouldn't have taken much notice of it--if it hadn't looked new enough to have been hanging in someone's garage just over a week ago.

.....
Jessica shifted into park, and turned to reach into the back seat of the Subaru, tugging at the four plastic bags holding her groceries, and pulled them with her as she left her car. She closed the door with her hip as her gaze drifted towards a boat not far from their house, anchored close to the shore. She could hardly see it in the dark, but it looked a lot nicer than the small boats manned by old men and their fishing poles that she'd seen around the area. Thinking nothing of it, her eyes drifted to Sam's car. He and Rudy were home. Good. She would have hoped that Frank had managed to come home, too, but she didn't want to let herself down. She knew when it wasn't her place to force it, and when it came to Frank and his dad, she knew that they'd have to work out their problems on their own... just like she was working on her own problem when it came to her ex-husband invading her home. It was true that she'd told Sam he could visit the kids at the house; she just couldn't help feeling somewhat intruded upon. This was her home. Her life. Or at least, the one she was trying to build. But, at least one of h

er children was happy about their visitor, and seeing Rudy smile about something again was worth all of it, she decided as she headed towards the front door. And, maybe there was a chance--a remote chance--that Frank would come home early for dinner, and all of them could have a nice quiet evening. There were board games in the attic. She'd get one of those out. "Hello?" she called as she reached the front door, juggling her groceries. "Does someone want to open the door?" She wasn't all that surprised when there was no response, but frowned anyway as she managed to open the door. Sighing as she stepped into the house, Jessica found the living room dark, and the television on. It wasn't unusual. What was, however, is that when she saw her daughter sitting stark still, alone on the sofa; Rudy wasn't smiling at all. In fact, there was a terribly stricken look over her pale face as she turned, her eyes wide and watery as they took in her mother. "Rudy?" Jessica asked as she moved forward, concerned. "What's the matter, sweetie?" Silently, Rudy's gaze drifted somewhere behind Jessica. Feeling suddenly startled, Jessica spun around, having no time to scream as her groceries scattered over the floor and the door slammed behind her.

.....
Andrew P. Dron was sixty-seven years old. By all means, too old for this shit, according to him. But there he was in the rustier of his three pickup trucks, adjusting his wide hat in the rearview mirror as he pulled out of his driveway.

He knew it had been a mistake to get involved with his neighbors. For over forty years he'd lived a relatively peaceful life in this town--the last twenty, on his own. But, there'd been something about Jessica Seaberg when she'd moved in to town. He respected her; nice woman on her own trying to raise her kids. She'd reminded him of the daughter he'd buried the same year as his wife after losing them both to cancer. So when Jessica Seaberg looked like she needed a hand every now and then, Mr. Dron didn't mind giving one. Besides, the fresh baked cookies she'd dropped off last week had been the best he'd had in a long while. He considered himself a man's man, but if Dron had a weakness, it was most definitely baked goods.

But then Jessica had to go shining up his reputation around town. He was sure it was all in the best of intentions, but suddenly people seemed to think he was such a nice guy that he'd get involved in everyone else's business, and it seemed that was exactly what had led to a phone call from Brenda Crook.

The woman was in one hell of a temper, too; all angry with her husband for running off again with the drunken stooges that called themselves a gentleman's club. Meanwhile, Brenda was concerned over a call she'd received from Mary Martin, and Mr. Dron had finally agreed to go make sure everything was alright, just to get Brenda off the phone. He wasn't happy about it,

either. The Martins, dastardly people. He'd never cared for any of them. He'd been put off to find that the Seaberg boy was spending time with the Martin kids, but didn't feel it was his place to say. The kind of man who minded his own business, that's who Andrew P. Dron was. Until, he thought g
rudgingly, now.

.....
Breathing heavily as he wiped the sweat from his brow, Frank pushed aside the last wide piece of plywood at his feet, his eyes straining in the dark as he looked towards the ground. There wasn't enough light to properly see what he was doing anymore, so he sank to his knees again, his hand reaching out and pausing as it came up against a cool metal surface at ground level. His spark of determination renewed with the discovery, Frank quickly dusted it off, shaping it out to be something that reminded him of a sewage drain cover found in the city. Forcing his finger into the cracks, he attempted to pull the object up, releasing a frustrated grunt when he found that something was holding it tightly in place before his hand found a lock. Cursing as he discovered it required a combination, he found himself calling out David's name again, if anything so he wouldn't feel so alone.

Looking towards the pile he'd just struggled to move out of his way, he staggered towards it, groaning as he lifted an old chunk of cement out of the rubble. He carried it back to the cover and dropped it on the lock, to no avail. Sinking to his knees, he lifted it again, this time holding it tight, allowing the ragged surface to tear at his hands as he aimed carefully and began to pound, hoping that he was actually hitting the lock as much as he thought he was. It wasn't until his arms had given out and his shoulders burned that he heard a forced click and shoved the cement aside. Pulling away the broken pieces of what was in his way before, once again Frank slid his fingers between the cracks and he lifted.

For several moments all he could hear was his own heartbeat as he stared into the dark drop at his knees, struggling to catch his breath. His knees felt wobbly as he got up to retrieve the ladder, but he managed to slide it into the hole, his whole body freezing as it hit bottom.

.....
"Will you knock that off?" Jay snapped, and in the passenger seat of Jeremy "Jay" Flaskis's car, Oliver flinched, and quickly wiped away the tears that Jay obviously objected to.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Jay frowned over at him, looking somewhat annoyed, but it was unclear if Oliver was the cause of it.

"Look," Jay said. "I'm a little tense right now. I think we're gonna stop at Frank's first. It's closer than everywhere else." And as if it would help, he placed more pressure on the gas, taking the winding dirt road at a speed tha

t would give his mother a heart attack and had Oliver reaching to brace himself on the dash.

“Maybe you should slow down, Jeremy,” Oliver said nervously. It was so dark that he could see nothing beyond the trees the headlights hit. “Jeremy?”

“Your mom’s dead, Frank’s missing--and you want me to slow down?” Jay demanded. “God, you’re such a fuck.”

“I want Frank to be okay, too,” Oliver objected, but his words came out more like a whimper, and it only seemed to set Jay off further.

“Like you fucking care at all!” Jay snapped. “You’re all out of your minds, you know that? You really think you can play God? You think for a second that you’ll get away with it?”

Oliver felt his eyes narrow, his blood pressure rise. He didn’t like talking about things that led to where he sensed this was leading to. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Jeremy,” he said quietly.

Jeremy scoffed. “Tell me something. Were you there when Odetta died?”

“No!” Oliver said forcefully. A little too forcefully.

Jeremy glared over at him, his foot pressing harder on the gas as he took a turn that had him gripping the steering wheel and Oliver’s knuckles turning white on his seat.

“Slow down!” Oliver screamed.

“How’d you get her in that boat, Oliver?” Jay pressed. “Did you push her in? What was it, huh? She didn’t get in by herself! Did you watch someone else do it? Tell me who!”

“Stop!” Oliver demanded, holding his head. He closed his eyes, but promptly snapped them open. Too scary to close them.

“Was it your dad?” Jeremy demanded. “Your brother? Maybe both of them together... personally, I don’t think you’d have the nerve. Unless she was already dead. Did ya kill her and then put her in there? Just tell me!”

Bright light caught Oliver’s eyes as he turned them away from Jay’s, and they widened as he looked straight ahead. A horn blared, Jay cursed, and Oliver screamed just before the vehicle swerved, bouncing as the front right bumper hit a tree, shooting the back end of the vehicle back onto the road. Attempting to control his balance as Jay struggled to control the car, Oliver saw another thick tree truck coming right towards his door... or perhaps it was the other way around as his body slammed hard into the passenger door and everything went black.

One. Two. Three. Moments. Mere moments that felt more like eternity passed before Oliver blinked heavily, lifting his head from the back of the seat. There was a horrible, blaring sound in his ears, and wanting nothing more than for it to stop he reached out slowly and grabbed Jay’s shoulder, pulling his head off the steering wheel; off the horn.

Several moments later, Oliver was looking around slowly, holding his neck w

hen he found that it hurt to move it. There was glass in his lap and at his feet from a window, and it took him minutes to put together what had just happened. Looking out into the dark, Oliver attempted to open his door. He had to force it, but it swung open, and as he stepped out on wobbly legs, he held onto the vehicle as he took a long look at the way the back end was embedded into a tree.

Down the street, it seemed the other driver hadn't had luck that was any better than theirs; the headlights were still on, shining into the forest while the front end of the truck was nose first against a tree it had actually managed to knock sideways. Oliver's attention returned to Jeremy's car. His instincts were urging him to run, and he wanted to listen to them. Jeremy Flaskis was mean; plain and simple. But, Oliver couldn't leave him there. Wouldn't. That would be bad, and that was one thing that he didn't want to be.

Oliver walked around the car and opened Jay's door, frowning as he looked down at the boy he'd tried to steer clear of whenever possible. He didn't look so tough now, Oliver supposed. Not with the bridge of his nose split open and his eyes closed. But still, he reached down cautiously to shake Jay's shoulder, pulling back quickly when Jay's eyes snapped open, seeming disoriented as he looked up at Oliver, and then around them.

"Shit," Jay cursed. He hurt. Everywhere, it seemed. "Get me out of here." He reached for Oliver, meaning to get out of the car, only to be pulled back as his seat belt restrained him. Oliver moved into action then, reaching for the buckle, unfastening it.

"Is the car gonna blow up?" Oliver asked. He was genuinely concerned. "They do that sometimes in the movies."

Jay looked at him oddly, but ultimately only shook his head. "Are you okay?"

Oliver thought it was an odd question, not only because he thought it impossible Jay could care about his safety, but also because he was the one helping Jay out of the car. But, maybe that was because Oliver was unaware of the bleeding gash at the side of his head. "I think so, Jeremy. But my neck hurts. Won't turn right." Oliver tested it, and winced.

"Don't try it again," Jay ordered, and then ground his own teeth when he found it nearly unbearable to put his weight on his left ankle, and was forced to hold onto Oliver. But, the pain they were in didn't seem to be his primary concern as his attention turned blurrily to the other vehicle, and he cursed again. "Come on, we have to see if they're okay."

Seeing as how Jay wasn't going anywhere in his current condition without Oliver, Oliver wrapped an arm around Jay's back, and together they headed towards the vehicle, where Jay finally let go of him to hold onto the truck as he made his way around to the driver's side door, where he let out a whole new string of curses that had Oliver stepping back.

“Like I fucking need this!” Jay complained to no one in particular as he looked over Mr. Dron. The old man was unconscious, his seat belt holding him into his seat as an open wound oozed down his forehead. When all was said and done, Jay was pretty sure that Mr. Dron would make sure he caught hell for this one. “We’re gonna have to leave him here... send help back.” Catching on, Oliver moved to help Jay again as he limped away from the vehicle. Frank’s house wasn’t that far from them, and at this point, Oliver just wanted to get there, since according to Jay, that’s what they needed to do, and then maybe Frank would come back. Oliver wished that Frank was there now, as the two made their way carefully down the winding road, tiring quickly.

“Come on, we’re almost there,” Jay urged, when Oliver’s pace began to slow.

“It hurts,” Oliver mumbled.

Instead of yelling at him for the complaint, Jay’s tone was gentle. “You’ll rest soon. Look, we have to...”

“I know, Jeremy,” Oliver interrupted. “We have to go to Frank’s.”

The only sound they heard for the next half mile was each other’s breathing, and Jay released an obvious sigh of relief when the shadow of the Seaberg house came into view. Urging Oliver to move faster, they made it to the front door where Jeremy collapsed at Oliver’s feet, catching his breath as he looked around. There were cars. The parents were home, and for a second, he felt only relief as Oliver began to rap hard on the door.

It was when they heard footsteps on the other side that Jay took note of a thirty-one-foot luxury boat on the lake that looked a lot like the ones rented out in town, and something about it seemed out of place. At least, here. Wincing, he pulled himself to his feet and took a step away from the door as he stared at it, still on the water. “Oliver?” he said, unsure of the question he meant to ask as he turned back around, pausing when something around the side of the house caught his eye. It was a vehicle, but it took him several moments to make out the shape of a familiar truck that he was sure didn’t belong to the Seabergs. And as he squinted his eyes, the color popped out at him like a sucker punch and he bolted towards the door, ready to drag Oliver away from it. “No!” he shouted. “It’s your da--”

But it was too late. The door swung open, and Oliver clutched Jay’s shoulder in his sudden panic. Jay’s breath hitched as his eyes focused solely on the rifle pointing at his belly before he looked up into Brian Martin’s eerily cheerful face.

“Hey, boys,” Brian said, looking at Oliver. “I’ve been wait’n for you.” But, as his attention turned to Jay and looked him up and down, his smile faded and his eyes narrowed. “But not you.”

.....

Uncomfortable goose bumps rose over Frank's arms as he descended into the darkness, feeling claustrophobic. The air reeked of a rotting muskiness that made him feel dirty just breathing it, and he clutched the ladder as if he were afraid of falling, even though logically he knew that the drop couldn't be that far. And it wasn't.

He felt a chill run up his spine as his feet reached the bottom and sloshed in what had to have been at least three inches of water. Feeling a drop hit his nose, he jumped before realizing that whatever he was standing in was leaking in water from above. There was a muted light coming from somewhere ahead of him, likely from the vent, but it looked a lot further away than four feet. He closed his eyes tightly for a second. He felt disoriented as he took a blind step forward, wishing above all else that he had a flashlight as his shaky voice called out once more, softly this time, knowing that there was only one thing he really needed to know about this place.

"David? Are you here?"

Thanks to Jim for editing!

A little boy with newly cropped dark hair and wide, attentive hazel eyes looked across the table at the other six-year-old, who happened to be his mirror image. Only, the hair was a little messier, the eyes somewhat absent, and the biggest difference noticed by the little boy--the bowl of strawberry ice cream his doppelganger was eagerly lapping down. He felt particularly jealous over that last thing, but still, when the messy-haired boy suddenly looked up and smiled at him, he was inclined to return it.

"It's real good, David," the boy said. It wasn't a taunt. David, even at his young age, understood this about his brother. But the words certainly did nothing to dull the jealousy.

With knots forming in his small stomach, David looked to his right, where his mother stirred her tea. Sensing him, she paused without looking up and a frown creased her brow.

"Mama?" David said, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. He was pretty sure that everything he did or said annoyed her. So he tried. He tried not to be a bother.

His mom shifted her gaze towards him, but only for the briefest second. Sometimes, it was as if she was afraid to look at him. And more often than not, when she addressed him, her words were shorter than her glances. "Just, don't."

David opened his mouth again. "Mom..."

She dropped her head into her hand, obviously irritated with him, but it was the sound of a fist hitting the wooden table that made him silent as he looked across the table, where his father was sitting next to Oliver. "Will you just answer him, Mary?" he asked gruffly. "I'd like some peace around here."

“Fine,” Mary snapped. “What is it?”

David lowered his eyes, no longer wanting to ask his question. But he could feel his father watching him, and something told him it would be worse if he didn’t. “Can I have ice cream?”

“No,” his dad answered, despite his demand that his mother do it.

“But I did my chores today,” David insisted. “And I’ve been good, too... it’s not fair. Oliver...”

“You know why Oliver gets ice cream and you don’t,” Mary cut him off, actually seeming proud of her cruel tone. “Oliver’s been a good boy, but he needs our special attention. Ain’t that right, Brian.”

“Of course it is,” David’s dad responded, looking in his direction stonily.

“And we all know whose fault that is, too--don’t we, David? You know, why don’t you go ahead and explain it to us, boy. I think you could use the reminder.”

David twisted his hands together beneath the table as his gaze moved over it, this time at his brother. Oliver was looking around, seeming confused by the exchange as he licked the strawberry mustache from his top lip. When Oliver looked at him, David felt something heavy welling in his chest drop as he said what was expected of him. “It’s my fault.”

Chapter 12 - Part One

by DomLuka

Frank covered the bottom portion of his face with his hand, in part to keep his fingers from shaking at his side, and in part to smother the stench. He could hear the crickets somewhere above, making him feel small within the darkness of the hole.

“David?” he whispered. He stepped back towards the ladder, looked up to the sky and took a deep breath. Fresh air. Clean air. He couldn’t quite decide what exactly it was about this place that made him feel so... filthy.

But he’d shower later, he swore. Later.

“David?” he called again, louder this time. He could hear an edge of panic in his own voice, and realized that it was one he truly felt, but still he moved forward again, faster this time, a hand out in front of him as he headed towards the dim light coming from the ceiling. “David, please answer me. I know you’re here.” Frank didn’t realize that he really believed that until he’d said it out loud, and immediately it made him wonder just how much of David he was going to find. “David, please, just ans--”

Frank’s breath hitched as his fingers unexpectedly came up against the back wall, moisture touching his fingers with rough cement. But, any thought he might have had of cockroaches crawling along that same wall seemed to fade away as he grew more disturbed over what he felt at his feet. He knelt slowly, reaching down, and paused when his hands came against a shoe that wasn’t his. Swallowing hard, Frank slowly slid one hand upward, over

under a wet sock covering what was undoubtedly someone's ankle.
Someone who wasn't moving.
Someone who felt cold.
"David? David."

9 days earlier....

The stars always seemed brighter sometime in the middle of the night. Perhaps it was the cool air, the silence--except for the sound of rustling leaves and crickets adding to a peaceful atmosphere; or maybe for David Martin, it was just that during those few hours when no one else was awake, he was actually able to take notice of the things capable of creating childish dreams and fantasies. Just like the stars. He was at peace beneath them, just like he'd been this night before returning home. But as he looked up past the shadows to the glowing night above, he knew that something had gone horribly wrong.

Nothing was working right. His movements felt sluggish, his body like dead weight that somehow managed to move. There was a familiar voice in his head, screaming at him to move, a dull force pushing him forward...

Where was he? It was dark, the world spinning. It took him too long to realize that he was at his home, behind the garage. His mother. She was there. She was the voice. It came to mind that he didn't like her or her screaming, and in a desperate attempt to make the nightmare go away he raised up his arms and shoved... catching only air before she grabbed his wrists, spun him around, and forced him forward again.

Why was he so slow? David wished that someone would tell him as his body gave out and he collapsed to his knees in front of a dark shadow. She didn't yell at him for that. Good. He needed a rest, a moment or two to collect his thoughts. "What's happening?" he asked. The words made sense to him, but something was wrong with his tongue. The words weren't right, nothing more than a strange slur.

Blinking rapidly, he stared straight ahead. His mother was up to something. He could see her moving around the shadow, looking frantic... uncovering it.

The car. Yes, the car. He understood a little better now. The old Volvo she used to get to work on the days she couldn't do it from home. Ran like crap. So mostly it just remained covered behind the garage. Maybe given the chance, David would have wondered why she was playing with it this late at night, but in the next moments, he was resisting her attempts to get him in the back seat of the car. It shouldn't have been so hard, he thought numbly. He was bigger than her, end of subject. All he had to do was lie down and let her wear herself out trying to lift him up. And he did. But she didn't play fair.

Grunting at the sharp kick to his ribs, David rolled over in a hopeless attempt

empt to shield himself. What was wrong with him?

More screaming. He hated the screaming. He wanted it to stop so he could close his eyes. Peace. He wanted peace. But instead, someone found it fitting to give him more pain. More? Yes, more. Something wasn't quite right, besides the way he felt like lead. There was pain, too. It was suspicious that he hadn't noticed it before. He noticed it now, right along with the new pain. Horrible pain. His ear. She was doing something to his ear. Tearing it off? No. Not even she would be that vicious. Would she? Not liking the answer he came up with, David opted not to think about it as he turned what little attention he had to defending himself, lifting an arm, using every bit of his meager strength to lash out until he was certain that he'd hit at least some part of her with a painful amount of force. That was better, he decided when he was certain that she'd stopped. But, in the few seconds it took for the pain to fade away. David had reached to touch his abused ear, finding it wet and sticky. Frowning, he brought his fingers just in front of his eyes and squinted at the blurry image of them, shadowed by night.

Blood. David was certain of it. Well, shit on him! Maybe the bitch had torn off his ear... but there was more. Twisting his arm, he tried to recall when he'd managed to injure himself with the long scrapes that became more visible the longer he looked, or how he'd managed the rip in the knee of his jeans, which weren't all that old. He didn't have as much time as he would have liked to figure it out. The sharp pain in his ribs following his mother's meager--but effective--blows to his ribs with what had to be her foot, brought his attention right back to her demanding voice, which was becoming clearer now--and not fortunately, as far as David was concerned.

"Up!" she shouted. "Up! Get up now!"

He knew what she was saying, but he didn't understand. Why the fuck would he get up? It hurt to sit. Standing was out of the question. But then she was pointing at the open car door, yelling some more... and then his ear! What the hell did she think she was doing to his ear? If David had been able to reach her throat, there was no doubting that he'd have his hands wrapped around it as he strangled the life from her. And maybe that's what he actually thought to do when he did force himself up, but somewhere in the middle of all of it, attempting to reach for her, he'd forgotten. It seemed ridiculous a moment later when he remembered what his intentions had been--but he'd actually forgotten, and by then, he was in the back seat of the Volvo and she was closing the door, and he...

David took in a deep breath as his head fell back against the seat. He winced. That hurt. What was wrong with him? He would have wondered what was wrong with his mother, too, as she moved into the driver's seat and the engine grunted to life, but he figured that the list would be too long to figure it all out in one night. So, he tried to focus on the last question that se

emed important at the moment. Why on earth did she want him in the car? And where would she actually have the gall to take him in the middle of the night. It was the middle of the night, wasn't it?

Where would they be going? His mom never did leave the house in the middle of the night. Maybe...he thought about an infinite amount of maybes. Counting the injuries he knew he had, and the ones he suspected that he had, it was as possible that he'd gotten into a more violent than usual confrontation with his father. Maybe his mom had finally taken pity, and she was taking him into town to see a doctor. No. She'd do that for Oliver--maybe. If he were dying. But not for David... unless she'd somehow mistaken him for Oliver--not likely, despite his frightening ability to produce a convincing imitation of his brother. But maybe.

No. That was stupid. Think. Think. Think! Ouch! David's head fell back against the seat again, and again it hurt. He was fairly certain that that injury had come first. He had no idea why, just a gut feeling, and the dull, bruising pain of it bursting through his skull, but he was certain...

Frank. Not Frank, but the little Subaru that he'd gone to town in with Frank not so long ago... it was sitting in front of his house, the door ajar. His head turned as his mother drove right past it, and suddenly, he found clarity.

It was horrible. He wondered if this was how Oliver felt when he woke up from his spells, but lacked the sympathy for it at the moment, or even a second thought.

Frank. That was it! Frank, Frank, Frank! He remembered calling Frank. That hadn't been an easy decision to make, or rather, it had been a little harder to bring himself to dial the number than he'd thought it would be. He'd been considering calling all day. Ever since Frank had shown up all riled about the pictures he'd been taking. He'd said just enough to get to David... to push him towards the slow decision he'd been coming to about which family secrets shouldn't remain a secret anymore.

But he hadn't called. Not right away, at least. What he had done, was go for a very long walk to think about things. He'd known from the start that he'd catch hell from his parents if he didn't make his outing brief, but he really hadn't cared. They'd gone out with Oliver to a favorite fishing spot, and as usual, he hadn't been invited. He didn't much care about that, either. It was something he was used to. What bothered him about it, was that he knew that his parents did it to bother him. To hurt him. To punish him. What was worse, was that they knew that they were bothering him, and it ate at David that he'd never really gotten past that because he wasn't supposed to crave their attention, or love for that matter. Not anymore.

That was their only power over him and everyone knew it. The way they denied him... everything. But, somehow, somewhere, everything had changed. David wasn't sure exactly when it happened, or how he'd even changed enough to

to do it from the weak, obedient boy he'd once been, but somewhere over the last years he'd made a decision. He'd done his best to make his parents as miserable as they wanted to make him. And it was wonderful. The scolding, the beatings, the punishments... all of it. Even his father's twisted mind games no longer mattered because David was numb--he'd won. Maybe they'd crushed who he'd once been, but they were no match for who he'd become. Who they'd created, he thought ironically. But then, they had to bring his brother into it...and that was part of the reason why he'd finally called Frank. Well, that and what had been waiting for him once he'd finally gotten home, somewhere past two in the morning.

He remembered now. It shouldn't have turned as ugly as it had gotten. His father was gone, likely out with one of the sluts who saw... well, David wasn't sure what they saw in the man. It was all very disgusting to him, but beside the point. Brian Martin hadn't been there, and therefore, he wouldn't have to put up with the interrogation over where he'd been until morning. Or so he'd thought.

He hadn't bothered being too quiet sneaking in through the window of the bedroom he shared with Oliver. On the nights that David was gone for one reason or another, his brother always made sure that it was unlocked before he went to sleep, and with his father out of the house, he expected no resistance. But then again, he hadn't expected Mary Martin.

David knew that his mother often checked on Oliver, even after she'd gone to bed. He remembered lying awake in bed at night when he was young, watching her pull the covers up over Oliver's sleeping body so he wouldn't catch a chill, and the way she'd kiss his forehead at the same time she'd ruffle his hair. And then David would wait. He'd wait for her to turn around, and come to his bed. He'd wait for her to make certain that he hadn't slipped off somewhere in the night, because he'd been pretty sure that that's what mothers were supposed to do. But she never did, and as he grew older, David made a point to slip away into the night as often as possible. Most of the time--when his father wasn't waiting to torment him--he never had any trouble slipping back in, either. He'd certainly never found any trouble when it came to his mother. Even if she'd caught him, and she had a few times, she'd leave it be if her husband wasn't there to take care of any disciplinary action. Never had she been stupid enough to attempt tangling with David on her own. Until tonight.

It had happened fast. In fact, it was so fast that it was all a blur to David, and not just because of his current state. The only way he'd be able to explain it would be that his mother had quite obviously lost her mind. Not even halfway through the window, and she was all over him: her nails, her hands, her voice chirping in his ear about how he was disturbing Oliver. How everything was his fault. How he made her miserable. But none of it really

y bothered him. Only made him think some more as he shook her off. Made him think about calling Frank. How miserable she'd be then, if...

And then she'd slapped him. It was openhanded, right across his face. He'd hardly noticed the sting it had been so brief, but it was enough because suddenly he'd reached a boiling point of sorts, and while it wasn't the first time, and hardly worth mentioning if someone had asked him, David Martin snapped. In the instant it had taken him to blink he'd drawn back his fist, and then he'd hit her, knocked her clear to the floor crying out in agony.

And he smiled. Only because this was the part where his father usually intervened and made him pay for his violence. It wasn't often that he got to watch, and for a moment it was... nice. Yes, nice to see her on the ground in obvious agony. He wanted to do more. Make her hurt more. He'd taken a step forward, ready to do his worst, ready to lash out in every single way he felt she'd provoked him to. And if Oliver hadn't been awakened by the disturbance they'd created, he would have. David found it unfortunate that his brother's interruption had managed to draw his anger in an unlikely direction instead. He'd never done physical harm to his brother before. Not intentionally. But then again, Oliver had never attacked him before.

"David! Stop that! Stop it, David!" Oliver screeched, jumping on his brother's back in a way that reminded David that they were equally matched when it came down to sheer size. "Don't hurt her!"

"Damn it, Oliver!" David snapped. He was quite simply, outraged. He knew that his brother had difficulty when it came to going against their parents, but Oliver sure as hell wasn't supposed to go against him. And if he was going to go against him...

"What the fuck is the matter with you?" David demanded, rounding on his brother to grip the neck of his nightshirt, the fear crossing Oliver's face not registering in his fury. "Idiot!" David shouted, and before he could think about it, or even think to stop himself, the back of his hand had made contact with Oliver's face, the force snapping through the room before he shoved Oliver away hard enough to cause him to trip backwards. And David watched. He watched his brother's arms flail as he tried and failed to catch his balance, and he watched his head snap forward as the back of it hit the windowsill before Oliver ultimately ended up on the ground, looking no less than shocked as he clutched his injuries. It had only taken moments for it all to happen, and even less time for David to regret it. Because that was one thing he didn't do. He did not hurt Oliver. Not like that. Not when he'd spent a lifetime learning that hurting his brother was the very reason his existence had become something akin to torture. "Oliver, I'm..."

David barely had a foot forward before his mother was grabbing his arm, forcing him around. "You stay away from him!" she screamed. "Stay away! I won't let you..."

“Shut up!” David shouted, effectively reminding her that she was in no position to control him, because she immediately removed her hand. But he found that it wasn’t enough. Not even close. He began to advance, forcing her out of their bedroom. “You stay away! Stay away from both of us! Why do you do it? Why do you act like I’m the one who hurts him when... when you know! You know it’s you!”

“David, your father could be home at any minute!” Mary Martin said urgently, still backpedaling down the hall. “Please, David, please; we don’t want to cause trouble now, do we?”

David took one more aggressive step towards his mother, forcing her to step backwards into her own bedroom. And then he smiled humorlessly; amused without finding anything funny whatsoever. “Actually, Mama,” he said quietly, “I think we do.”

And he did, just as soon as he’d slammed the bedroom door in his mother’s face. When he walked to the phone to call Frank, he’d felt unstoppable. It was strange really. He knew what he was doing, but at the same time, he wasn’t thinking about it. If he thought about it... he’d have to think about the consequences. Consequences that he knew his parents likely wouldn’t be alone in sharing. But for a few minutes, David just didn’t care. Until he’d heard Frank’s voice. Frank’s voice made it real. It scared the hell out of him. He was no longer doing this to hurt his parents. He was doing it to help himself, and it was shameful.

David didn’t ask for help. Not ever. He was strong enough, he had to be. But there he was, on the phone with someone who didn’t even like him--reaching out for... what? Help. He’d wanted help. He didn’t know what kind of help exactly, but in that moment he knew that he didn’t want to wake up for the rest of his life knowing...he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life being. Not what he was. Because he wasn’t anything at all. Just the bad one. Nothing more. They’d made sure of that.

David had tried to tell Frank. Tried to reach out. He’d never done that before, so there’d been concern that he wasn’t getting his point across... or didn’t get it across at all when he was interrupted by his mother, who’d apparently deemed it necessary to strike him in the head with an excruciatingly heavy object... right before she dragged him out to the garage.

He remembered now. Narrowing his eyes at his mother’s shadow in the rearview mirror, he remembered. She had to have cracked his head. Knocked him out. It explained the way he could feel his entire skull pounding every time she hit a bump in the road, but the rest...

She’d dragged him to the barn, across the gravel. Not alone. He remembered Oliver’s voice now, asking her not to take him--but he’d helped. The realization sparked a moment of resentment for David towards his brother, but it was quick to fade. Oliver was just doing what he was told. He always di

d what he was told. But why? Not Oliver. Why was his mother doing this? Why was she taking him? Something still didn't make sense.

"Why do I feel like this?" he asked. His words were slurred, but he recognized that they at least made sense this time. Something about that made him feel... safer. For a whole second before his mother answered.

"I can't do it anymore," she said, making a strange, sniffling sound. Crying? Probably. She cried a lot. "I have to make it better, don't you see? Have'ta fix it all...I'll make it better. You'll see."

Frank nearly choked on his own bitter laughter. "It's.. too.. late.." he said sluggishly. "Too late."

"Not if you go away."

And suddenly, the hair on the nape of David's neck prickled in alarm as he reached for the door handle, knowing that nothing was more important at the moment than getting out of that car. But as the Volvo took another bump in the road and his head was forced against the cool glass window, all he found the capability to do was hold onto his injuries as the dull agony pulled him deeper into the darkness fogging his mind.

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"Swallow it!"

David Martin would have done anything for a more sensitive gag reflex. The thick pill his mother had managed to force halfway down his throat was leaving a bitter taste in his mouth, and as she pinched his nostrils shut he found it increasingly difficult to breathe. Closing his watering eyes, he reluctantly swallowed.

And instantly regretted it. But it explained so much--the way he was feeling. Slow. Tired. Sluggish. Drugged. It wasn't the first time. But this time, he knew that he wasn't going to sleep it off in a dark basement, and that made it all the more terrifying, especially since as his mother grabbed his arm with both hands and pulled him from the car, he knew where they were.

The wind had picked up along the narrow dirt path which they were parked on which was just wide enough to pass for a road. But even with the cool air fanning his face, David felt as if he couldn't breathe. His mother's small hands clamped around his wrists, pulling him forward, keeping him moving, one foot in front of the other--it was constricting. He tried to pull away from her, but found that he didn't have the strength as she led him right off the road and into the trees, and when he couldn't pull away from her, he stopped moving his feet, as if he'd just remembered that he could do that.

Mary spun around, the shadows cast over her face masking desperation and creating a ghostly appearance that had David once again attempting to pull away. "No, we have to keep moving!" she insisted. "David, walk! David. David!"

But, he wasn't hearing her now. He'd already dropped to his knees, uncooper

ative as she tried to pull him up. He was unaware of the slap to his face t his time, oblivious to his mother's tears as she went from acting out furio usly to trying to reason with him because she knew he had to move before hi s second dose of sedatives for the evening took effect. If that happened, s he wouldn't have a chance. Maybe if David had known what she was thinking h e would have laughed at her, and outright laid down. But he couldn't know, because he was already somewhere else. In the same place... just a differen t time, where it was light, and the air was warm, thick with humidity. Near ly three years ago, when his brother accidentally found...

Oliver Martin shielded his eyes as he looked up at the tree his brother was perched in, expertly holding a muzzle loader. The sun was behind him, maki ng him seem nothing more than a shadow within the bright lights shining thr ough the leaves, but Oliver could make out his posture, which was all busin ess as he took aim at something in front of them. Oliver quickly turned his head to see what it was, and frowned when he discovered that David's targe t happened to be their father, who wasn't that far ahead of them with his f avorite rifle.

"David!" Oliver started to scold, quickly turning back to his brother, but by the time he met David's eyes, David was already out of the tree, lazily lean ing on the trunk and smirking at him.

"Relax, Oliver. I ain't gonna shoot him with his back turned... I'd wait 'till he was lookin' at me."

Oliver cocked his head, obviously unsure of whether or not his brother was teasing him. But, when David smiled, he smiled, even as David turned seri ous a moment later.

"Come on," David insisted. "We can't fall too far behind or he's gonna get mad."

At this, Oliver sighed. "Can we go home now, David? I don't want to shoot an ything. I don't like it, David."

"Well, people gotta do stuff they don't like all the time, Oliver, now come o n."

David turned away, lifting his feet high as he trudged through the high, da mp grass at his feet to catch up with his father. But he'd made it less tha n ten feet before he stopped, and let out a breath. Oliver wasn't following . David didn't have to turn around to know that. He could feel the distance of each step he'd taken between them. It had always been like that for him . Strange, perhaps, but he always knew when it was Oliver walking down a ha llway towards him instead of his parents, and sometimes, when they weren't even in the same room; he didn't have to get up and look to know which one Oliver was in. Neither of them had ever really had much fun playing hide-an d-seek for this very reason.

"Oliver," David said quietly. "You don't have to look. I'll tell you when to

close your eyes.”

“I don’t want to close my eyes, David,” Oliver insisted. “I want to go home.”

David turned slowly, and Oliver could see the muscles in his brother’s jaw flex as he clenched his teeth. It was always a sure sign that David was becoming irritated, but Oliver persisted, anyway. “Closing my eyes doesn’t work, David. It just makes it dark, and I can still hear it. I don’t like it, David.”

David closed his eyes, as if it would hide what he was feeling from his brother. Frustration. Exhaustion. But mostly, trepidation. He felt guilty for it, too. He knew that if Oliver told their dad he wanted to go home, it wouldn’t be a problem. Oliver knew his way back to the house, and their dad would tell him they’d be home in time for dinner... Oliver would leave. He wouldn’t have to see anything that he didn’t like. Simple. Except, when he left, David knew...

“Oliver, he’s been drinkin’,” David said. “I promise I won’t let you see nothing you don’t like, let’s just...”

“Hurry up, boys! Your mom’s looking forward to fresh meat tonight!” Brian Martin suddenly shouted, and David raised questioning eyebrows towards his brother.

“Please don’t make it harder,” David whispered. “Just for a little while longer, Oliver... then we’ll go home. I promise.”

Oliver sighed. It was obvious that he didn’t understand why he had to be there at all. His dad liked hunting. David liked hunting. He didn’t. But, ultimately he shrugged, and started to move forward. “Only for a little while longer,” he agreed.

David allowed himself a small sigh; a moment of relief. Back then, he liked to think that he would protect his brother when he could, but it was moments like these that reminded him that in a way, Oliver protected him, too. Just by being there.

“Good. Come on... maybe later you can help me take some pictures.”

Oliver smiled at that. “Can we go in the boat?”

“I don’t know,” David said honestly, looking back at their father again, who was beginning to look impatient. “We’ll try. Come on.”

David turned, satisfied that Oliver was following him again. But he’d only taken a few steps before he heard his brother make a strange sound beside him --a surprised burst of air rushing from his lungs--and the hair at the nape of David’s neck prickled as he spun around, and froze to find that Oliver wasn’t behind him at all.

“Oliver?” he demanded, his eyes darting towards the trees in search of his missing twin as panic rose in his chest. “Oliver!”

“Ouch. David?” Oliver’s voice was muffled, but definitely there.

“Where are you?” David asked, moving forward cautiously.

"I'm right here," Oliver said, sounding put out. "I hurt my butt."

Feeling relieved, and a little amused, David put down his gun and knelt down towards the ground as he proceeded forward, following the direction of his brother's voice. "Keep talking to me...I can't see you."

"I'm down here, David. I can't get up. It's too high."

David's head snapped to his left, and he moved towards the thick trunk of a tree where a hole in the ground was barely visible through the tall grass. Kneeling, he looked down, expecting to see Oliver, but... the warm spring air suddenly felt cold against David's skin and a peculiar ache stirred his gut as all he saw was darkness below him. Day turned into night, the sky sparkling with stars that had grown faint in the last half hour, and looking over his shoulder, his father had also vanished.

No. This wasn't how it had happened three years ago. Now...the place hidden in the woods, not very far from their house was littered with debris, and the plate his father had secured over the opening of the hole his brother had fallen into was open.

For several long moments, David stared into the entrance, sorting the past from the present, jumping when he felt a cool hand on the back of his neck.

"I loved you once, you know," his mother's voice said quietly, and David turned his stiff neck to look over her shadow behind him. "My perfect little boy... both of you were perfect."

He closed his eyes, unsure if it was her words causing his nausea, or the earlier blow to his head. But, even with the way his tongue seemed to stick to the roof of his mouth, and the weakness he felt every time he used a muscle, he found it in himself to respond. "I hate you...bitch."

Mary Martin sighed behind it as her hand on his neck became a little tighter, not enough to hurt, just enough to make him nervous.

"You've just made it so hard, David..." She paused to laugh to herself, although it was void of all humor. "And to think, you used to be the good one. Everyone noticed, too... around the time you started walking. I remember you were just the sweetest little thing, so...sensitive to others. You never cried, did you know that? And when someone else did, you'd just sit with them... like just being there could make all of their troubles go away. That's what you were... my perfect little boy."

Mary's fingers moved further up David's neck, sending a cold chill through him as he involuntarily convulsed. "Whatever I am now, you made me," he whispered, dropping his hands to the ground in an effort to keep himself up. He felt like the world around him was spinning, like balance never existed. Heavy. He felt heavy.

"But you were a wolf in sheep's clothing," Mary continued, as if she'd never heard him at all. "After what you did... after... no little angel could have been capable of hurting his own brother the way that you..."

“Liar!” David suddenly cut her off. He closed his eyes and allowed his head to fall forward. He was tired. Ready to stop, but not before he said it. “I know the truth. I remember it. You can’t lie to me anymore, because I know.”

He paused, working hard to turn his head and look at his mother, who was suddenly frozen in the dark, her expression barely visible, but readable. It looked like shock, stuck there on her face. “And I’ll tell everyone.”

Mary gasped as if she’d been slapped, her eyes snapping to her son’s face. It was a strange variety of things that David found in her expression then.

Shock. Anger... but mostly sadness. “Oh, David... things don’t have to be like this anymore.” She suddenly smiled, unnerving him as she knelt at his side. He wondered if she had even heard anything he said. “I’m gonna make it better again.”

“Again?” he repeated, frustrated when he found that he was slurring again. “It was never...”

“But that means you can’t come home with me,” she said thoughtfully as she knelt at his side, and David watched in horror as she reached for one of his ankles, dragging it towards the drop. “But don’t worry... it’ll be better for you this way... and maybe soon, you can come back. When you’re ready. When we’re all ready.”

A strange whine sounded in the air, and it was full moments before David realized that it had come from his own throat when he couldn’t find the strength to push his mother--such a little woman--away. And he felt himself falling, his body leaning forward, and as his eyes widened on the open space in front of him, all he could see was darkness. He hated the dark. But as he continued to stare, a shadow formed below him, a face looking up, hands reaching...

“Get me out, David! It’s too dark down here, and it smells funny!”

“Oliver?” David opened his eyes... or maybe he’d closed them. But his brother was waiting for him again. Down there. And as David clearly recalled, Oliver had been a rather impatient fourteen-year-old.

“And my pants got all wet, David! It’s wet down here!”

David resisted the way his lip wanted to curl up into a crooked smile as he stretched his arm out, down towards his brother. “Are you hurt?” he asked when Oliver grabbed his wrist. “I mean, nothing broken, right?”

“Don’t think so. Pull me up, David, please.”

David tried once, let out a frustrated breath, and then let go of Oliver. “I can’t pull you up that way,” he explained as he threw his legs over the edge of the opening. “Here, look out.”

Oliver stepped back, and David lowered himself down. The drop was higher than it had initially looked, and he landed hard on his feet, catching himself against what felt like a filthy cement wall. Groaning, he wiped his hand off on his pants before retrieving a lighter out of his pocket. Flicking it, he held

d the flame up to better view their surroundings.

“Where are we?” Oliver asked as he followed Frank around the small space.

“Don’t know,” David replied as he held the flame up towards the ceiling where a long piece of drainpipe ran, torn in places to reveal some metal and copper piping within it. “Looks like a cistern... or maybe it was a cellar. I think there used to be a house around here. This was probably part of it.”

“Can we go now, David?”

David looked at his brother as he lowered the lighter and allowed the flame to go out, leaving them only with the light shining down from above. “Sure,” he said, lacing his hands together and lowering them for Oliver. “Come on, I’ll boost you out first.”

Oliver looked uncertain. “I don’t know, David. How will you get out?”

This time, David did smile. “I’ll get out. Now come on.”

Oliver stepped up onto David’s hands and used his brother as a ladder to climb out before looking back down the hole, still seeming concerned. “Are you sure you’re coming out, David? Do you want me to get Dad, he’ll get you out, and...”

“I’m fine, Oliver, I’m comin’ out right now... stand back, alright?”

David looked up as he waited for Oliver to step back, and once the opening was clear he jumped, catching the ground above to hoist himself out. But, as his head came through the opening, he came face to face with the last thing he expected.

“Boo!” his father bellowed so close to his face that David was treated to spit hitting his eye, and startled, he let go, falling firmly on his backside before he topped over, the moist bottom of the old cellar soaking through his pants and shirt.

Cursing, David righted himself and stood up, frowning as his father laughed down at him. “Get out of there, boy!” Brian shouted. “We’ve still got supper to catch.”

David only shook his head as he watched through the space above as his dad clasped Oliver on the back and led him away, but he remembered the moment clearly, just as he remembered the rest of the day. They’d spent another two hours in the woods before they found a deer. David was almost sorry when it happened. Oliver really didn’t like hunting, especially this part.

“Hurry up and take your shot,” Brian hissed over David’s shoulder as he took aim at the doe sipping from a puddle not more than twenty feet ahead of them. And he had a shot. He just wondered if he should miss this time as he glanced at Oliver, who had his back turned and his eyes covered. Brian must have seen David’s concern, because he was quick to take advantage. “What’s wrong? You aren’t getting scared on me, are you? Huh, little coward? Take the shot. You know you like to kill things.”

David felt a heavy frown crease his brow as he looked ahead again. "No I don't," he whispered.

"What was that?" Brian demanded, raising his voice as much as he dared, not wanting to frighten their prey. "You listen to me, if you don't shoot that animal we're having chicken for dinner! You've already done enough to your brother, do you really want him to find out if a chicken really does run a round with its head..."

David pulled the trigger, and moved in to claim his kill.

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It was the sickening kind of pain that starts in one place; in this instance, it was at the ankle, setting his nerves on fire as it shot up his leg and eventually reached his gut. And David hadn't even broken anything. At least, he hadn't heard a disturbing snap, and when he reached for the ankle he'd managed to roll in the fall, he was fairly certain that everything was where it was supposed to be... if he didn't count himself.

Looking up, he felt uncomfortably shocked as he stared at the night sky visible behind his mother's shadow looming over the hole above, and in that moment--only in that moment--as he lifted his hand, as if to reach for her, he wished. He wished that for the slightest second she would just be his mother. A real mother. One who'd climb down into the vile space that was to be his prison and just... do whatever it was that mothers were supposed to do. He sensed her sealing the metal plate over the opening before she'd even reached for it, and he tried to call out, but nothing more than a startled gasp escaped his lips even as he struggled to say his words. "Don't leave me here!" he choked out, even as it became too late, and as he struggled to his feet, wincing as his weight reached his ankle, he was left in darkness. "You don't know what you're doing," he whispered, reaching out to hold himself against the nearest wall, and fighting off the revulsion he felt as his hand came into contact with the slimy surface. He closed his eyes, as if it would help him adjust to the dark faster, but even with the mild glow coming from the vent, it seemed impossible... just like the basement at home. In the dark. He hated the dark.

David forced himself to be careful as he reached into his pocket, his entire body, inside and out finding a certain calm as he felt his lighter. His thumb felt sweaty, his actions unstable, and it took him several times to ignite the small flame, but the light was a welcome intrusion, even as it revealed exactly what he was facing.

The area was tall enough for him to stand in, as he knew it was, but so...closed. It felt crushing. Fungus. Mold. He didn't have to see it to know it was there. The stench was overpowering. But, he didn't dwell on these things. Couldn't. He could feel his eyes growing as heavy as his body felt, and as he looked around for a dry place on the floor he became frustrated to see the

shine of moisture all the way to the back wall. So, his focus came to the spot where the mulch at his feet looked the deepest. Kneeling in it, he held his lighter safely out of the way and moved his free hand into the puddle, searching the stone floor with his fingertips until he felt a grated surface and began to clear whatever mud and other obstacles there were away from it until he heard the drain swallow.

It wouldn't be long until it backed up again. He knew that. And while the situation was hardly what he'd describe as good enough, he also knew that he'd have to make do, and do it in a hurry. Forcing himself up, to move towards the back wall where the moisture wasn't quite ankle deep, he propped himself up in a corner as he looked around groggily, and then taking a deep breath, he allowed the lighter to go out as his hand searched the surface of the wall until his thumb came up against a crack that was just big enough for what he needed. He forced the lighter in, hoping that when he woke it would still be there before he crossed his arms over his chest, closed his eyes and wondered how bad the pain would be when the numbness wore off. Rest it away, he told himself. Rest it away, and then... get out. Get out before he began to look around the dark walls... before he remembered what had happened the last time he was trapped between them.

"Did you have to kill it?" Oliver's voice whispered in his ear.

David jumped as his eyes snapped open, and he looked to his right. David was kneeling next to him, running a finger over the dead doe's long ear.

"She was so pretty, David," Oliver said.

It was either her or that damn chicken of yours! David hardly prevented himself from snapping. He took a deep breath as he roughly ran his hand over his face. "If you didn't want to look, you could have gone with Dad to bring the truck closer," he pointed out.

"We shouldn't have to kill things, David," Oliver said quietly. "We could get stuff at the grocery store..."

"Dad's cheap!" David snapped, deciding not to add, and he likes to kill things. He hated conversations like this. Especially, the way that Oliver looked at him during conversations like this. He'd never really understood how he and his brother could have practically the same face when Oliver could make his look so... vulnerable. "I'm sorry, okay? But you knew what was going to happen when you came out here, and I can't take..."

"I said I wanted to go home, David," Oliver reminded him.

David stood up, grinding his teeth. "Just... shut up, Oliver," he snapped. "Don't make me...I don't..."

"You're turning red, David."

"That's because I don't want to argue with you!" David responded, genuinely ready to tear his own hair out. It was times like these that he found it entirely too difficult not to voice his frustrations with his family--especially

y with his father. But back then, he'd made a point not to say too much to Oliver. It was a fear, really. Oliver loved their parents. And why not? They loved him back, David thought. If he started saying bad things about the two people who Oliver called Mom and Dad... well, he couldn't help but wonder if something like that would cause his brother to turn his back on him... and that, David wouldn't handle well. Sometimes--more often than not, actually--he felt like Oliver was all he had in the world. "Listen, let's just go figure out where he's parking the truck so we can..."

David felt his voice drop down to nothing as he stared straight ahead, his body becoming frigid as the muscles became almost afraid to move... afraid to startle the big brown eyes no more than eight feet ahead of him. The fawn was so young that its spots hadn't even begun to fade away, and it seemed almost too small to David to be out there in the woods. Too innocent. And while he waited for it to dart off at any given moment, something in his instincts told him that it wouldn't. It was there, in the way it was looking at him--there was caution, but not that expected fear. And it was cute. If David were to move at all during that moment, it would be to scratch his head because the notion of finding something--anything--completely adorable was just... weird to him. Kittens and puppies and even the family of raccoons that had frequently come by their house the spring before--he'd seen it all. They were just animals. Not cute. Not cuddly. Just individual lives passing him by; but the fawn--it was cute. The smile, the pleased one tugging at the corner of his mouth felt abnormal to him, causing the muscles in his face to quiver, but he liked it. For a moment, he liked the feeling of being...

It didn't really matter. The moment passed as soon as he heard his brother gasp behind him, and then Oliver whispered, "You killed its mother, David."

Dropping his eyes towards the ground, David found that he really didn't want to look at the fawn anymore.

"But you didn't know it had a baby, David," Oliver quickly added, as if he sensed the darkening of his brother's mood as he moved to his feet. "I didn't mean to... I'm sorry, David."

"It's fine, Oliver," David replied quietly. "It's not like you're wrong, anyway." He reached down slowly as he glanced at the deer again, lifting a stick. Oliver watched, his eyes steadily widening as his brother began to move towards the fawn. "What are you doing, David?" he demanded, quickly running forward to grab for the hand in which David was holding the thin, fallen branch. "Don't."

"Oliver, we've gotta scare it away," David responded, as if it was supposed to be common knowledge.

"No!"

"Yes!" David snapped. "Look, we've gotta scare it away before he comes..."

David groaned. It was the way that Oliver was looking at him. Again. “Oliver... it should be afraid of people, anyway!”

Oliver looked at the fawn, and then frowned at David. “But it doesn’t have a mother anymore,” he said. “What’ll happen to it if it’s out here all by itself?”

David didn’t answer that question. Truth be told, he didn’t want to think about the answer. “So what do you want me to do about it?” he grumbled, knowing what his brother would say before Oliver said anything at all.

David could remember the rest of that day clearly: the way he helped his brother approach the fawn until they’d caught it; the way that the small animal didn’t seem to mind being handled at all... and he remembered Oliver begging their father to let them take it home. It hadn’t taken much convincing. And then there was dragging the fawn’s mother to the truck, which Brian had parked on a road closer to them than he’d originally stopped on. But that’s where things became strange for David, because Brian hadn’t told him to help carry the carcass, he’d had Oliver do it, leaving David to carry the fawn.

Something had changed. David had been unable to explain it at the time, but as he watched his father moving ahead with Oliver, joking with his brother as if they were old friends--because they were friends, in a way that David had never been invited to understand--David simply knew. It was what exactly he knew, that seemed to be in question. But it was there in his father’s face, every time the old man looked over his shoulder and met David’s eyes with his own deceptively friendly ones. There was something there that told David that things were going to change. He didn’t know how, and if he cared to take the time to think about it, he likely would have concluded that life could get no worse, therefore it didn’t matter. But it was still there--the silent warning he remembered creeping into the back of his mind that day. And while he didn’t know if life would change, something told him that he would. He held the fawn a little closer, as if the innocence of the creature could shield him from something that decidedly, was not.

Day One

Oliver Martin sat on the front steps in front of his house, resting his chin in the palm of his hand as he looked across the lake. He couldn’t see Frank’s house with the trees in his way, but that didn’t stop him from staring in the direction. Waiting.

Oliver knew that there were a lot of things that he didn’t understand. Like, why his head hurt, or why there was an uneasy feeling in his gut--a feeling that told him something was wrong. Not necessarily physically, either. And he knew that he’d forgotten something important, too. It happened like that sometimes. David always told him that it was because he didn’t want to remember, but Oliver didn’t understand that, either, and this time he wishe

d that he did, because exactly three hours ago, Frank Seaberg had left with out saying goodbye to him, and he didn't know why. And Frank had told him.. . down there in the dark, he'd told him that everything would be alright. Maybe Frank was confused, too, though, Oliver thought. He remembered waking up in the basement, finding Frank there with him. Frank had said some things that... Well, as much as Oliver wished that he could remember what had happened before he'd woken up in the basement, he didn't want to think about the things that Frank had said down there. Bad things about his parents, and Oliver did not want to think bad things about his parents. But the way Frank had left...

"Oliver..." His mother's voice was gentle, but it still made him jump when she took a seat beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "Why not come inside now... you must be hungry, and you'll feel so much better if you take a little nap. Don't you think so?"

Oliver shook his head. "I don't wanna take a nap."

"Well, then come eat something then; how 'bout..."

"I don't want to eat," Oliver cut her off in a startlingly firm tone. "I want to sit here, so when Frank comes back he knows I waited for him."

Mary fell silent next to him. For a moment, even her breathing ceased to exist as she looked at her son as if he'd said something particularly peculiar. "But Oliver, you don't need to..."

"Why did Frank leave, Mama?" Oliver suddenly asked. "Why did he go like that?"

Mary pursed her lips for a moment, and then looked at Oliver, even while he turned away from her. "He's not coming back, Oliver."

"Yes he will," Oliver replied, just as quickly.

Mary felt her frown deepening. There was something in his posture, his voice ... it wasn't right. Not right for this son. And she found it frightening, and maybe a little surprisingly infuriating as she suddenly grabbed his chin and forced him to look at her. "He's not coming back, do you hear me, Oliver? He's not!" Mary released him when she saw his eyes widen, that familiar uncertainty in them that she often saw cross Oliver's face, and she forced herself to calm down as she smoothed the reddened spot on the side of his face that she'd created with her tight grip. "I'm sorry, Oliver, but it's true..."

Frank's not going to come back. He told us."

Oliver balked. "Why?" he demanded.

Mary swallowed, straightened her shoulders, and looked him in the eyes. "You know why," she said quietly. "David... he's misbehaved again, and Frank ..."

"Frank said David wasn't bad!" Oliver responded, his voice beginning to shake. "Frank said... he said..."

Oliver stopped, staring at his mother as if he expected everything she'd just

t told him to go away, and she continued to watch, waiting to see if he was going to continue. When he didn't, she simply smiled in such a way that had the hair on Oliver's neck prickling in a way he didn't understand.

"Come inside and eat something, baby. You'll feel better."

But Oliver didn't move, not even as his mother stood and left him there. He heard the squeak of the screen door open and close, her footsteps fading a way inside--quiet voices as she encountered his father somewhere in the house.

David wasn't bad. Frank had told him that. David wasn't the reason why Frank had left like that. He couldn't have been, because David wasn't even there. But still, Frank had left... but he'd come back. He had to come back, because they were friends. Frank cared. Frank liked him. He'd come back.

But why had he left at all? Why had looked at Oliver like... like his mother was right. Oliver didn't understand. He hated it when he didn't understand!

And he hated that he was sitting there alone, that Frank had left, that David wasn't there to tell him why... David would know. If it really was his fault, like his mom said, David would know, and he could tell Oliver how to make Frank come back, and...

Why wasn't David there?

Oliver swallowed hard as a thick knot rose in his throat, and an eerie feeling took over every nerve from his head to toes as his muscles froze up, like he was experiencing the feeling of a disturbing nightmare that had woken him in the night... just without any of the frightening details, except perhaps an image or two, promptly pushed from his mind.

When Oliver stood, his movements were slow, but he felt as if he'd moved in to his house in an instant, where he followed his parents' whispers to the kitchen.

"We can tell him something else--anything else," his mother was saying, although he was too focused on the question running through his mind to completely absorb her words. "Just think about it, Brian, it's madness! And people around here, they'll start to talk as soon as they hear..."

"They never paid enough attention to talk," Brian replied. "It'll work... and you're gonna help me make it work, unless you want the truth to come out."

Mary was silent for a long moment. "I can't do this to Oliver, he's fragile enough; if we..."

"He's a complete moron, Mary," Brian cut her off. "That what he is, it's what he's always been. No one's gonna pay any attention if he starts talking like a crazy person; besides..."

"Oliver!" Mary said, sounding startled as she suddenly looked up to find her son staring at them, bewilderment in his expression. "Oliver..."

“Mom,” Oliver said, as if he hadn’t heard a single word either his mother or father had just said. “Where’s David?”

Mary’s jaw dropped as she looked at her husband, an old habit she’d acquired from years of not knowing what to say. Not knowing what lies to tell. And if ever there was a time she wished she would have broken it, it would have been now. But then, it was too late before she knew it.

“David’s not here, Oliver,” Brian answered.

Oliver frowned. “But I wanna talk to him, Dad. Was he bad? If he’s in the basement I’ll stay in there with him... and...”

“He’s not in the basement,” Brian interrupted.

Oliver fidgeted with his hands as he diverted his eyes to the old tile covering the kitchen floor where they wandered until he finally focused on his father’s thick, black boots. “Where is David?” he asked again, this time sounding, and feeling, much too uncertain.

“Son,” Brian replied. “You know better than to ask such silly questions. There is no David.”

.....

He wouldn’t disappear. He’d get out of this, and whether or not they liked it, he existed. He’d show them. He wasn’t just going to disappear.

But god, it hurt. His eyes snapping open, David Martin pushed the upper half of his body from the moist, hard floor he’d been lying on for... well, he wasn’t certain how long. Less than a day, he imagined. The light still hadn’t faded from the drain opening, unless it had and he’d managed to sleep through it... but time didn’t seem to matter as he felt the painful tightening in his gut right before he retched.

It wasn’t the first time, and now he was almost used to the foul stench of his prison mingling with his own vomit. He was used to the pain, inside and out, and he had decided six times that his mother hadn’t simply subdued him with drugs--she’d poisoned him. But also six times, he’d also decided that she couldn’t have. Of that, he was certain. He supposed that if Mary Martin were to purposely kill anyone it would likely be by poison. Less confrontation that way, and she hated confrontation. But still, he doubted that this was the case. If he was going to die now, his parents being responsible, David came to the conclusion that it would be there. This hole. This place, and with no aid from poison.

But, he reminded himself as he moved slowly, and painfully to a sitting position, propping himself against a corner further away from his most recent mess--he wouldn’t die. Not yet, anyway.

David couldn’t remember the exact moment when he’d realized that his parents hated him. Hated him. Because they didn’t simply disapprove of him, or dislike him. They hated him, and he was pretty sure that they liked it that way. And while the matter of why had run in and out of his mind for

as long as he could remember, something about this place made him wonder how. How did things ever become... this way?

Whatever it was, it was their fault. He'd made his peace with that years ago, no longer willing to carry around whatever guilt he thought he was expected to feel. Because really, as far as David was concerned, he hadn't done anything wrong. Not really. It had taken him some time to get there, though. Because really, when you were hardly out of diapers and your parents insisted that there was something wrong about you--something bad--then you believed it. And this was how David Martin was introduced to himself, how he'd learned to think of himself. For a very long time. It hadn't mattered that he remembered. Remembered and knew that the things they told him weren't true. It hadn't mattered until later, when he'd become angry. When he'd had enough.

Looking around the darkness, attempting to avoid the foul visual that the meager amount of light that the drain offered him, David tightly closed his eyes. He'd definitely had enough. And how? Maybe the why still didn't matter so much, but he supposed that it was a damn good question, too. But the problem was, there were no answers for it. No reasonable answers, because his parents always gave him the same answer. He was evil, you see. Cruel. A wicked child, who not even God would have the sense to forgive. And it was because he'd taken his brother's life. Or rather, he'd taken the life that Oliver might have had.

Oliver had been intelligent, strong. Born a full three minutes and eleven seconds ahead of David, there was a time when Oliver had done everything first. He'd been the first able to roll over, to crawl, and to stand. He'd even started to talk a whole year before David moved past the only word he ever managed to say: his brother's name. But, it hadn't mattered back then. They were happy, or so David was told. He and Oliver were the best of friends, and everyone was happy.

Until he ruined it. His grandmother's house. David didn't remember her now, but he remembered the house. There'd been a window in the room he and Oliver shared while they were visiting, and he remembered looking out it. Not very clearly, but he remembered some things. Like, the park across the street. He and Oliver would wake up after their naps and just watch the other kids, wishing that they could go play, too. He was positive that he remembered looking out that window. He even remembered it being opened a crack, the cool air hitting his face, refreshing him every morning as the sun warmed the sky. But what he did not remember was the one thing that his parents talked about every time that window came up in conversation. What he absolutely couldn't remember, was pushing his brother out that window. Because it hadn't happened. And if it had, David was damn sure that he would have remembered it. He would have remembered it, and it would have been

n an accident, because, Christ--he'd been three. Not that that even mattered, because it hadn't happened.

"I didn't do it."

The sound of David's own whispered, coarse voice startled him into opening his eyes as he wrapped his arms more tightly around his chest and drew in his knees, fighting off a cold chill.

"You're the ones who're fucked up," he continued, taking in the darkness in front of him, allowing his mind to conjure shadows that weren't there.

David knew that there was no one there to hear him. He wasn't so far gone that he thought otherwise. But nonetheless, in his mind he was very pointedly saying these things to two very particular faces, as if they were actually listening. Saying it out loud was just a way to make himself feel better. Or, at least he hoped that it would make him feel better. Calm. After all, talking to one's self always seemed to work for Oliver. Why not him, too?

"You can't keep talking to Mom like that, David. Dad's not gonna like it, and you'll be in trouble. I don't like it when you get in trouble. I think we should hide for a while. Like when we go camping. No one ever sees us. Can we go, David?"

David remembered the day he'd walked in on that conversation. Walked in on, because he hadn't exactly been a part of it. Oliver had been around the back of the house, raking up what was left of the leaves littering the ground. They'd seemed out of place there on the ground, like Christmas lights that had never been taken down; they were what was left over from winter, now overshadowed by green trees and warm, humid air that smelled like the raspberry pies their mother had been baking all morning. He'd moved right up behind his brother, smiling as he lifted a finger to tap Oliver's shoulder.

"You know I can't agree to that if you're not even talking to me, don't you?" David remarked.

Oliver turned, frowning, and it caused David to sober. "You know you were talking to me a second ago, don't you?" David asked, just because sometimes Oliver really didn't know. But, Oliver's sheepish shrug told him that this was not the case... this time.

"I was just...I'm sorry, David."

"That's okay, Oliver," David replied, and then he left it at that, mostly because he didn't want to be involved in that conversation anywhere outside of what Oliver considered reality.

David had suspected that Oliver was becoming uneasy with the way he and his mother had been getting along lately, and walking in on the one-sided conversation had confirmed it. David imagined that Oliver would have liked to say those things to his face--ask him to stop being so argumentative. So difficult every time their mom told him to do something. But, the thing was, David didn't want to. In fact, lately he rather enjoyed being difficult. Of

course, Oliver didn't need to know this, so there was no need to talk about it, as far as David was concerned.

Oliver was of a different opinion. "David? Can we?" he asked, dropping his rake to follow his brother past the house, towards the back of the garage.

"Go camping?"

"I want to go before Dad gets home, David," Oliver said. "Maybe Mom'll forget if we're gone."

Forget he told her fuck herself when she ordered him to finish cleaning up the yard on his own so Oliver could have pie? David doubted it.

"Maybe another time, Oliver," David replied, and then smiled as he added, "Don't worry about me getting in trouble, alright?"

"But David..."

"There's pie--go have some," David cut him off. "I'll see you inside after I feed the deer." And finish cleaning up the yard, he silently added. Maybe David had recently discovered that annoying his mother amused him, but he wasn't a fool. He was already in trouble, and if his chores weren't finished before his dad got home, it would definitely be worse than it already was.

"I'm gonna ask Mom if we can camp tonight," Oliver said determinedly.

"You do that."

David heard Oliver sigh heavily behind him, the kind of annoyed sigh that told him Oliver didn't like being patronized, so he stopped walking and turned to face his brother. "Camping sounds like fun," David said sincerely. "Go ahead and ask."

Oliver smiled. "Do you want me to help you feed the deer, David? I already fed my chicken."

"I've got it covered," David insisted. "But thanks, anyway."

Oliver seemed to accept the answer, and David felt grateful when they parted. It wasn't that he wasn't in the mood for his brother's company. That was rarely the case. But, feeding the orphaned deer they'd been keeping in a pen behind the garage was something that he found he liked doing on his own. In fact, while David would have never admitted it to anyone, he was rather fond of the animal.

When they'd first brought it home, months ago, Oliver had been more interested in the fawn than he'd been in his chicken, so his parents had allowed it to stay, treating it as the newest family pet, even allowing it to stay in the house on colder nights. Of course, it was David who'd been responsible for caring for and cleaning up after the animal. Maybe he should have resented that. Maybe he was expected to... but it hadn't happened that way. As it turned out, David had liked getting up like clockwork every night to bring the fawn its meals of goat's milk and feed. He liked holding the bottle, watching those trusting brown eyes always so focused on him when the creature fed. He liked that when they let it out of the pen he was the first the little d

deer sought out, and it would follow him around as if it were actually interested in what he was doing.

Now, the white spots covering its coat were gone, and it was a little bigger, but the eyes were the same, and as David approached the pen he watched the deer nudge at the inside of the gate, impatient for him to open it. He did, and knelt down to greet the animal, which seemed more interested in his hands than anything else. Hands meant food, whether or David actually had anything in them.

He knew that he'd eventually have to teach the animal that it should be less friendly when it came to people. In fact, he knew he should be doing that more sooner than later. His parents had always made it clear that they'd have to let it go in the forest one day, and David knew that it wasn't going to change the first time his father had caught him hugging the animal. The old man had seemed pleased... pleased that he'd get to take away something that David cared about.

But for David, it hadn't really mattered. He knew he'd miss the deer when it did go, but at the same time, he was looking forward to releasing it. Because David had decided that they were alike, he and this little deer. Perhaps not in any way that was obvious, but as far as David was concerned, they were both trapped. The fawn in the raggedly little pen behind the garage, and he in his life. Neither of them really knowing what they were missing, but still knowing that there was supposed to be... more. And they were both alone. Maybe David had Oliver, and the fawn had David. Maybe it should have been enough, but it wasn't. David thought that they both should have a mother that looked at them like... like... they mattered. David's didn't do that by choice, and the fawn... well, he figured the fawn's mother should have kept her offspring closer. After all, if David had seen them together he never would have shot her, and there was nothing his father could have said about it, especially with Oliver there.

David couldn't change the past, but he could look forward to the future, especially where the fawn was concerned, and that gave him something. He had plans to take his little friend away from its prison, back to where it was free, and preferably back to somewhere where his father didn't like to hunt. When this deer left his family, he was certain that no matter where its life took it, it would be better than what it had there. And when he wasn't insanely jealous over the prospect, he was looking forward to the day when it happened. And it would happen soon, he thought sadly as he made sure the animal had enough food and water before he continued to pet it. Soon, but maybe not too soon. He'd wait. At least until he was a little more ready to say goodbye.

Unfortunately, what David didn't know back then was that he'd be saying goodbye a bit sooner than that. It was fated the moment Oliver called him from

the house. He'd scratched the fawn behind its long ears one more time, and then made one of the worst mistakes of his life when he forgot to latch the gate.

It seemed that deer startled easily, and it didn't matter if they were wild or domesticated. At least it was true of this deer. But, common or not, David doubted that it usually happened after an animal wandered right through your front door and managed to break everything breakable--and some things that weren't supposed to be--on its way out.

He blamed a lot of the damage on his mother's screaming.

"She was just scared; it's not her fault, it's mine," David had told his father, and the she he was referring to was definitely not his mother. "I forgot to lock the pen."

The look on Brian Martin's face told him that his poor attempt at an apology wasn't good enough. Maybe he would have tried harder if he thought it would have done any good. But he already knew that it wouldn't, and it didn't matter that between Oliver and their mother the house was almost cleaner than it had been before it was invaded by a pet deer, and it didn't matter that the fawn was safely back in its pen, currently looking up at him as innocently as ever, and it really didn't matter, perhaps to anyone but David, that he knew that the next words out of his father's mouth were going to break his heart... and please the old man to no end.

"It's time for it to go," Brian said. "It can't stay here anymore. Your mother's had enough. Figure out how to get it in the truck and we'll take it now."

David thought about arguing, but then decided to skip it. "I'll take her myself, you don't gotta get the truck."

David tried moving past his father, hoping that there wouldn't be a response to that, but when Brian dropped a hand on his shoulder, his entire body tensed with dread.

"Put 'er in the truck. We're doing this together."

The look on Brian Martin's face was one that David was accustomed to. It was the kind of look he knew how to obey, and part of him even knew that he would obey, because that's what he did when his father looked at him like that. Because if he didn't, things got worse. And most of the time, making things worse with his father was something David avoided at all costs. That's why this time, he didn't fully understand why he was still standing there, narrowing his eyes when he should have been trying to figure out how to get a deer--a small deer, but still a deer capable of kicking--into the bed of a yellow pickup truck.

"I don't want to."

Brian Martin looked surprised, and then amused as he cocked his head and spat, his saliva landing inches from David's feet. "Boy, when have I ever asked what you wanted?" he replied, and then he laughed. Laughed. Perhaps David

d shouldn't have expected anything more than that, but for once, he wasn't simply disappointed with his father, or even frightened. He felt something else... he felt like... he was small. And for the first time, he was angry about it. Not because his father had the ability to make him feel this way, but because he allowed it. He felt similar whenever his mother made a point to tell, or even show him that he didn't matter as much as Oliver. As much as anyone. But with her, he'd learned to play along. She was hurtful, so he was hurtful. Sometimes he felt like she wanted to hate him, so he'd made it an objective to make it easier for her, because it was so much easier than wanting her to love him. It was bad enough when she did say it--out of nowhere, like it was supposed to mean something to him, because they sure as hell didn't mean anything to her, the way she could say them so freely to anyone but him.

But with Brian Martin, David didn't know how to fight back. Then again, he'd never really wanted to before now. He'd never felt like he really needed to before now. And, it was because he cared, he realized.

He'd learned not to. Care. Not about his toys as a child, or the kind of food he ate, the television programs he liked, or the books he read. He didn't even care about the pictures he took past the moment he took them, because all of it... these were all things that could be taken away. Things that would be taken away, the moment anyone suspected that they meant something to him. So he'd learned from a very young age, to simply not care. Not care about anything except for the one thing they couldn't take away from him. Oliver.

They couldn't take his brother. And not for lack of trying, either. David couldn't even count how many times they'd tried to turn Oliver against him, but it had never worked. Oliver loved him, shared things with him, and even needed him. Just like the fawn. And, while David suspected that the fawn didn't do any of this intentionally, he wanted to believe that the creature cared about him in a way. It liked him. And he didn't want to part with it. Not this way, at least. His terms. He needed it to be on his terms, because his father was about to take something he loved, and while David couldn't stop it, he knew that he couldn't tolerate being... helpless. Not this time. Not small.

"No guns."

"What was that?" Brian demanded.

David swallowed, realizing that he had, in fact, spoken aloud. And then he did it again. "No guns. I don't wanna take no guns with us... or I'm not putting her in the truck," David added, deciding that his voice was just firm enough. And then, as if something had possessed him, he took a step forward and straightened his posture in a way that hardly made him notice the whole foot that separated his eyes from his father's. "No guns. We're not gonna hurt her...you're not."

Brian's eyes widened. Good, he was surprised, David thought. A small victory, because Brian Martin was rarely surprised. But Brian was also amused again, and it worried more than offended David. "Whatever gave you the idea we were gonna shoot it, huh? Alright, boy. No guns." And slapping David hard on the back, Brian left his son there to feed his pet the last meal it would receive at the Martin house.

David leaned against the pen, sighing before he opened it up to approach the fawn slowly. She still seemed spooked by her ordeal, but she didn't seem to have any trouble accepting food, and when she lowered her head into her bucket David knelt down to rub her neck, resisting what he considered a very silly urge, to wrap his arms around it to hug her.

"Are you sad, David?"

David didn't bother looking over his shoulder. He'd only see his brother there, looking on with sympathy, and he wasn't in the mood for sympathy.

"No," he replied, after thinking the question over.

"But you have to..."

"It's okay, Oliver. She won't be here anymore and it's okay... cause she'll be somewhere better." Because anywhere was better than here. "It'll be better for her."

"Will you tell me about it when you get back?"

"Yeah. Sure I will."

.....

"Liar!" David shouted as he charged forward, and at the time, even if he would have known that going after his father would only get him a hard fist in the face and a bruised ass, he likely wouldn't have changed a thing. But still, when he fell to the ground he never attempted to get back up and fight. Instead he held his cheek, believing that it had to be shattered. But that's not what mattered. He rolled, crawled. Ignored his father's footsteps getting closer, the way the sun burned the top of his head, assaulted his eyes even when he wasn't looking up. He crawled until his fingers wrapped over the edge of where the earth below him seemed to drop off, and he stared down into the dark hole that his brother had fallen into months before. And below it was a struggle he saw. Struggle to stand for the little fawn who'd broken its legs in the fall.

Covering his mouth with a shaking hand, David released a small, anguished sound that he couldn't quite believe came from him, and he closed his eyes tightly, as if not seeing what was happening could actually change it. He should have known. Should have been ready. Should have figured out that something was wrong when his father had taken the road less than a mile from their house before he stopped. And the fawn, with the thin rope around her neck, she'd been pulling, wanting to run. David hadn't let her go right away, though, not like he should have. He wanted her further away from th

e road. He wanted more time to say goodbye, whether or not his dad had insisted upon following, and when he'd grabbed her... when his father had grabbed her, she'd startled, kicked. But she was so small, and he'd been determined, and David hadn't seen that he was dragging her towards the cistern until it was too late, and now...

"Why?" The word felt ripped from David's lips. Such a useless question, why. The kind that always led to more questions.

"Stop whining, boy," Brian said gruffly. "It's what has to be done. It's what's best."

David turned his head, looked over his shoulder and up into his father's face. And he felt dumbstruck. Brian Martin was staring straight ahead, his dark eyes having a beady effect as they drifted to a far-off place, perhaps somewhere where what ran through his mind actually made sense. And there, things were frightening because the man truly believed in what he was doing. And, as if he could sense that his son was attempting to figure him out, his eyes snapped down to the boy on the ground, and it sent David reeling.

"You didn't have to hurt her! She wasn't bothering no one! I...I..."

"You what?" Brian demanded as David went back to staring into the hole.

"I love her."

And Brian laughed. And David closed his eyes, hating everything. It was his fault. His confession made him vulnerable to his father, and to himself.

"You don't love anyone," Brian replied. "Not anything. You aren't capable of it! I know... I know you, and you're not gonna fool me. Been like this since you were born. Ya really think God woulda wasted a soul on you, boy? No. You're nothin', and while you're still in this world, I'm gonna help you remember, and when you leave it, you'll burn. Mark my words, there's no better place for you out there. Now get up, and..."

David opened his eyes, the rest of his father's words lost as he sat up, and in one quick motion, he lowered himself into the hole, prepared for the drop this time, his feet catching him at the bottom. There, he could see the fawn, its small shadow struggling in the dim light provided from above, and he stood, his eyes moving to his feet at the sound of a small thud where something had fallen after him. Reaching for the silver gleam, he wrapped his hand around the handle of the knife he himself had butchered and skinned many animals with in the past.

"Go ahead and finish it," he heard his father say. "Then go on and tell me how much you think you love that thing."

David didn't look up, or otherwise acknowledge his father's words as he moved slowly towards the frightened animal towards the back of the dark trap. He could hear the sound of the fawn's hooves, struggling against the concrete as it continued its struggle to stand, and for a long moment he stood over it with the knife of his hand before finally sinking to his knees, reaching o

ut with a gentle hand. It was no surprise when she lurched away from him, but David was persistent and calm as he cornered her against the wall until he was able to get an arm around her neck. He hugged her close, drawing her head against his chest as he sank down to the floor, and rubbed her ears the way she liked until he felt the tension begin to leave her body.

“Shh,” he whispered. “It’s okay. There is somewhere better... maybe I’ll be there someday... but I gotta send you first.” He released a deep breath, placed a kiss over the top of the fawn’s head, and then did just that.

She didn’t go peacefully, but David expected nothing less. He hoped that when his own time came he’d be the same way. And it was strange for him, because while he’d killed before, nothing had ever made him feel more mortal. Mortals had souls, didn’t they? No matter. There were always things that he couldn’t have, and he’d learned to get by without, and when he couldn’t, he relied on Oliver. He was the only one left now, just like before. The only one who loved him. David had always wondered if that was the reason why he hadn’t followed his fawn to that better place he so desperately wanted to believe was there, because he sure wanted to.

But he climbed out of that hole. He did, his clothes bloodied, particularly his shirt, where he’d tucked the fawn’s heart into his pocket. He’d come back for the rest of her later, but something about leaving her heart in that place..

David had been surprised how much he needed to catch his breath when he reached ground level and took the time to do so on his knees. After all, he was feeling otherwise calm. Almost too calm, as if there was something in him waiting... just waiting. He could feel his eyes lifting more than he was aware of lifting them, watching as his father knelt down in front of him, wearing a friendly smile on his face that wasn’t actually friendly at all. Proud, David decided. It was a proud smile, but there was no sense in trying to figure out which part of this tragedy the man was actually proud of.

“You feel better now, don’t you boy?” Brian asked.

David cocked his head, looking at his father strangely for a long moment as he tried not to think about the way the blood was causing his shirt to stick to his skin. He drew back his head, as if to think about the question, but only for a moment before he brought it swinging back down, and when his father’s nose collided with his forehead, he smiled through his dad’s cursing as he slowly stood and walked away. And then, when he was ordered to come back, he kept walking. Later that night, when he went home, he’d receive the beating of his life followed by two days in the basement without so much as a drop of water touching his tongue, but it didn’t matter. Not when he remembered that day, crawling out of that hole. He’d felt different then, changed.

He wondered if he’d change again when he got out this time. He thought of hi

s better place. Maybe he'd go there. Maybe after he sent a few select people there first.

Thanks to Jim for editing!

Chapter Twelve: Part two

Day Two

He had a dream that something heavy, violent, was trying to climb its way out of his chest, and awoke to his own violent coughing. Poison. It's how he thought of the filthy water covering his prison floor, and even while he'd managed to get a lot of it to drain, he'd also managed to inhale more than he wanted to think about in his restless sleep. Twice now. And his skin itched.

He'd clawed at his own arms, his neck, his face, trying to make it stop. Completely saturated, he felt infested. Crawling... but crawling with what? Gasping, David sat upright, his hand moving roughly along the wall as he desperately searched for the lighter, swatted at his own face with his free hand in an attempt to relieve himself from some unseen, unbearable pest. And then it was there, cool in his hand; he closed his eyes tightly, hoping it was n't too wet. Flick. He opened his eyes to a warm flame, and sighed. It seemed somehow bigger, hotter each time he used the lighter. And as he looked down over his body, he felt relief. He was damp, and filthy, sore and scratched up, but there was nothing he could see that was crawling. And the light made him feel better, but there was no excuse to keep using it. No need to waste. It was day again. He could tell from the small amount of light coming through the vent. It wasn't as good as the lighter, but after all the nights he'd spent in the basement--in the dark--even a little light was something. And David hated the dark. He hated how it isolated him until he disappeared, how it had sometimes taken a full day to see clearly again after being allowed out. Even all the times that Oliver had insisted on staying with him, if only for short periods before their parents would fish him out and leave David alone had never soothed his fear of it. But now he had some light, so he let the lighter flicker out.

And a moment later he was holding the flame out in front of him again, moving to his feet as if startled.

David winced. His ankle was still tender, and his head swam from the motion, but he was up, and too distracted to care about discomfort as he stared across the room, somewhere below the steel plate that served as a locked door. He blinked a few times, as if the red and white lunch box--the hard kind that served as a mini cooler--was a figment of his imagination that could disappear if he didn't act with caution. He took a step. And then another. It was still there. He smiled like a fool for a brief moment, like he'd won some sort of game. But, the happy face was soon replaced by one of suspicion as he eyed the lunch box, and moved closer. He didn't see it as a relief for his growling stomach for several long moments, but as an intruder instead, the k

ind that showed up while he was sleeping. Not paying attention. Holding the lighter lower to the ground, he took a quick look around, wondering if there was anything else he missed. By the time his eyes reached the tall bottle of water his light only lasted long enough to remember where it was before the flame went out and he was on the ground, reaching, lifting... drinking. He didn't realize that water could actually taste good. It had always been just water, and it wasn't as if it were the first time he'd been deprived of such a basic necessity, but this... it was perfect, soothing, and cold against his dry throat, washing away the foul taste he'd been unable to wash from his mouth from his earlier vomiting. But, as soon as he thought of pouring some over his head to wash away the grime he stopped, catching the error in his actions. Coughing, catching his breath, he weighed the bottle in his hand, cursing himself when he'd decided that he'd already drunk down nearly half without knowing that there'd be more coming. But still, he was tempted enough to give in and take one more sip before sealing the bottle and tucking it under his arm.

David reached for the lunch box next, intending to take it back to his corner, which he'd decided was the warmest part of the room. But, he didn't make it that far before that, too, was open and he was reaching in, finding what felt like two plastic-wrapped sandwiches, which he found no interest in once he felt the small thermos. And it was warm. He lifted it in both hands, held it to his chest... to his neck, his face, and he closed his eyes, imagining for a brief moment that the small amount of heat he felt was everywhere, warming him, like being in his own bed covered in the electric blankets that Oliver was so fond of in the winter. And for a moment, he imagined that he was comfortable. Comfort would have meant everything to him just then, which was why he made a point to not waste too much time wishing for it as he opened the thermos and sniffed at the contents. Soup. He couldn't quite tell if it was chicken broth or some kind of beef stew, but either sounded good, and he sipped without caution, oblivious to the way that the hot liquid scalded his tongue before slipping down his throat. He chewed a soft potato between his teeth, and lifted the mug higher in search of more.

And then he heard something. Something that he imagined he wasn't supposed to hear from in there. David closed his mug and placed it carefully back in to the cooler before he stood and moved closer to the vent where he strained to hear. His right ear sounded muffled, waterlogged, and so he turned his head to listen with the left. One. Two... One. Two. Three. Four. Footsteps in the grass.

"Hey!" His voice cracked, his throat ached, but he made it work again, anyway. "Hey! Who's out there?"

"I hear you, David."

David took in a breath, let it out slowly, and closed his eyes. He almost cried

d, but didn't, of course, because David Martin just didn't do things like that . "Oliver!"

"I hear you, David!" Oliver repeated, louder this time, feeling laced in his voice. "But...but..."

Oliver's words trailed off, and David struggled to be patient. "I can hear you, too, Oliver," he called up. "But only when you talk loud... and you've got to hold still, alright? It's easier to hear when you're not movin' around."

Apart from the sound of his own breathing, David heard silence for several moments, and began to feel uncertain.

"Oliver?"

"I'm not moving now, David... and I can still hear you."

David sighed. "Good, so listen, okay?" He found himself leaning against the wall, suddenly feeling exhausted, and eyed the lunch box. He'd eat more, he decided. Regain his strength... talk to his brother. "Right... I need you to find out how long they plan on keeping me down here...It's different this time, I don't know if I can..."

"But, David, I'm not supposed to," Oliver interrupted, his voice sounding absent in a way that seemed familiar to David. "I'm not supposed to hear you anymore. And I'm not supposed to see you. I don't, David. I don't see you, so I'm good, right? Right, David?"

David found himself slowly looking up, picturing his brother sitting somewhere above, not noticing the wet grass seeping through his clothing... and he went numb inside. He didn't become frustrated or confused, or even angry that Oliver didn't seem to grasp the severity of his predicament, because David knew better. He knew Oliver.

"Oliver... why aren't you supposed to hear me anymore?" he asked, and when he found no response from his brother, he shouted the question. "Why aren't you supposed to hear me, Oliver?"

"Because you're not real, David."

"What?"

"But I know the truth," Oliver continued. "So I told her... I told her it's a lie. You're my brother, David. I told her you're my brother."

David could have asked many questions just then, but he found himself staring straight ahead, darkness swarming his vision as he swallowed against his sore throat. "What did she say?" he finally asked.

"It's a secret."

"What she said is a secret?" David asked, perplexed. Oliver didn't keep secrets from him.

"No, David... it's a secret. Dad'll get mad... he can't know you're real... and Frank got mad. He left, David."

"What do you mean, he left?" David demanded, once again thinking of his call to Frank Seaberg, remembering his car in front of the house.

“He won’t talk to me anymore, David,” Oliver said, sounding strained. “He won’t come see me if I talk about you, David.”

“Because I’m not real?” David mumbled, unsure of whether or not his brother even heard him this time. Not real. Didn’t exist. It was the same thing, wasn’t it? But what did it mean? His father couldn’t know. Frank couldn’t know... They didn’t know. But his mother knew.

David started to pace, thinking harder. What had she done? If his dad didn’t know where he was... something was wrong. If he didn’t know where David was, he couldn’t hurt him... but something was wrong. What had she told his father?

David wished that he could remember that night. How long had it been since she’d trapped him here? A few days maybe, he didn’t know. It felt longer. And what had she said to him?

I’ll make it better. You’ll see.

If you go away.

David froze, his fists clenching at his sides.

“Oliver!” he suddenly shouted. “You have to get me out of here! Hurry!” It wasn’t a demand he would have made minutes ago. He’d thought of it, but never would he have asked, not if it would get Oliver in trouble. But the game had suddenly changed, and now he knew. He wasn’t supposed to get out. His mother had lied to his father, and while David didn’t know exactly what she’d said, he knew well enough that she’d have to keep her secret now. Because it wasn’t safe. None of them were safe if caught in a lie to Brian Martin. But, unfortunately for Mary Martin, David couldn’t have cared less if she was caught.

“But I can’t, David!” Oliver suddenly said. “Mama says it’s not safe! It’s not safe, David. She said it’ll be alright if we just wait... if we just...”

“Damn it, can’t you see she’s lying to you?” David screamed. “Do you think I’ll live down here? I won’t! I won’t Oliver! She’ll die before I do! Do you hear me? I’ll make her stop breathing! Get me out of here! Get me out of here!” David’s voice rose to a screech in his panic, his blood rushing to his head so quickly that he barely heard a thing as his brother fled, leaving him alone once again before he deeply inhaled the stale air, and then collapsed.

.....

He felt betrayed. David told himself that it wasn’t Oliver’s fault. His brother was just afraid. Oliver had been manipulated by their parents, and if David knew anything, it was that Oliver was easily taken advantage of. He’d do what he thought was best for anyone; in this case, he’d leave David down there based on the belief that everyone would be safe, and perhaps ultimately happy that way. And David had played right into his mother’s hands when he’d threatened her to Oliver. But he still told himself that it wasn’t Oliver’s fault. He knew Oliver, and his brother wouldn’t have walked away if he hadn’t.

't believed that doing so would be good for David, too. But then, telling himself this was true, and believing it, were two very different matters for David Martin because... he felt betrayed.

He was in a damn hole! Hurt, tired, and for all he knew, dying. And his brother had left him there. Even more distressing was that he didn't know if Oliver was even going to remember it... and if anyone had the right to forget the last days, David strongly felt it that should be him.

And while he might have had many things to be jealous of regarding his brother, this was the one thing he felt strongly about. Oliver lived in a world where he got to pick and choose the moments he lived in. Perhaps he didn't have the control over it that David was imagining at the moment... but Oliver still got to forget, and often did. It had always been difficult for David to hear Oliver tell him how much he wished he could remember the moments that he blacked out, but it had never been because David sympathized with him, but because more often than not, David knew what Oliver had forgotten, and found his brother's talent for wiping unpleasant things from his memory something to be envious of indeed. And when he wasn't jealous of it, David had been grateful for it, for Oliver's sake, and his own. He'd never abandoned his brother. He'd never betrayed him. He'd failed him, though. But Oliver couldn't remember. Oliver didn't remember, so why the hell did it feel like he was trying to get even now?

He's not trying to hurt you, David told himself. That's not what's happening. Oliver just needs time. He'll think. He'll come back. He'll save you.

Because David was quickly doubting his ability to save himself. After Oliver had left, David had quickly come to the conclusion that his mother would be back again. Perhaps with more food, or words that didn't make sense. He didn't understand what her plan was just yet, but he knew that she hadn't left him there to die, and if she was going to come back, this time he intended to be ready. He forgot about rationing what little food and water he did have, and ate until he was full, and while he felt as if there wasn't enough water in the whole town to quench his thirst, he used what he had, even sparing a small amount to clean the wound at the back of his head, which had swelled beneath his hair, the broken skin becoming increasingly irritated by the filth he found himself in. He'd even removed his wet shirt, and while it didn't make him feel any warmer, his skin started to dry, and that was a comfort in itself.

All of this was supposed to help him get stronger, be ready. But as the first few hours passed, David developed a strong sense that something was wrong. Because he didn't feel stronger at all. If anything, he felt even more drained than he had when he'd awoken to the lunch box. And it felt like more than just the bitterness that his brother's abandonment had left with him.

His feet. They'd been numb before, cold. But now his toes felt strange, as

if they were falling asleep, and the same sensation was in his gut... but admittedly, that could have been the knots, the anxiety he felt over being alone. Without Oliver. That seemed to bother David more than anything because Oliver had always been everything he had. And maybe Oliver didn't know it, but David was all that he had.

David closed his eyes, deciding that he should rest for a few minutes before he had to be alert, waiting for his mother to come back. Just a small rest wouldn't hurt anything, he decided. He needed to calm down, anyway, before his stomach decided there wasn't enough room for the food he'd consumed alongside all of his grief. He tried to think of things that were good, things that gave him comfort. Unfortunately, when David closed his eyes, the only place he ever found himself was back in the dark.

He remembered when he first started spending most of his nights in the basement. Before he'd killed the fawn, it had always been hours at a time, mostly during family meals when his father said he couldn't stand to look at him. But after the day that David had found himself crawling out of that hole with the blood on his hands, things had changed.

He'd rebelled against his father, and he'd been punished for it. He knew that was the reason when they'd locked him in the basement. But it hadn't been the one his father had given him when he'd unlocked the door and allowed bright, blinding light in for a few moments as he inflicted one of his long-winded speeches upon David's poor ears. The words hadn't had any effect. David had heard about what a terrible burden he was so many times that words like that had lost all effect. But when his father had mentioned that David was being punished for being evil, a cruel boy who'd slaughtered one of God's helpless creatures, as if he'd made the decision to do so on his own, David had known that his days spent in the dark would likely be increasing.

And he was right. He just hadn't realized that his brother would be sharing the experience with him, even when he didn't volunteer to do so.

Cats. In the year since David had sent the fawn to somewhere better, there had been many cats. Sometimes, when he was out hunting with his father they'd come upon one of the scraggly creatures, particularly when they were close to the old shack across the lake. And the woman who had lived there then had given David something in common with his father. Neither of them liked her.

The first time it was supposed to be a joke. They'd taken one of her cats and hung it in a bag on her front porch--after they'd gotten it riled up, of course. The point was to make sure the witch-lady got scratched up real good when she went to the trouble of getting it down. But that hadn't been the way that it had happened.

It was a Sunday morning, and while Odetta Grover never went to church, it was the morning she went into town for her supplies. Oliver had been with th

em as they watched, waited, and for the first time David could remember, it had been Oliver angering their father as he whined about what was happening to the cat. David remembered the spark of protective fury towards his father that had arisen in his chest when their dad had told Oliver that he was stupid, a baby, that he should just shut up.

But he'd kept quiet... and Oliver didn't. It was when Oliver suffered a strong hand to the back of his head that David had had enough. Instead of attacking his father, though, he'd walked right out into the open and up to the front porch. The cat's claws had come right through the cloth sack to scratch up his hands as he took it down, but looking over at Oliver, he'd known that he was doing the right thing. Which is exactly what made his next decision one that likely would have been difficult for any normal person to understand.

Odetta Grover was a large woman. The kind that easily had the old floorboards in her house screeching, or her old little car sinking an inch closer to the ground when she sat in it. So inside the house, when she'd moved towards the door, David had heard her, and made a quick retreat, taking the cat with him.

But, he couldn't go back to his own family. They were practically hiding right in front of the door, and as soon as it opened, she'd see him, so he'd moved behind her car instead, hoping to duck away once she got in. In the bag, the feline started growling, hissing. He dropped his hand over its head and squeezed hard. It struggled, but the sound was muffled suitably enough. He could hear Odetta Grover getting closer... and then she stopped. Turned back.

David's head popped up and he saw her looking in her purse as she headed back towards the house. She'd forgotten something. It didn't matter what. She was headed back towards her house, which meant that David could get himself into a more suitable location. He stood, stepped away from the vehicle, and then froze when he saw the faces of his brother and father watching him. Oliver looked frightened, and along with a familiar, soft look in his eyes there was something else. Anxiety. He watched his brother's eyes shift from his face to the bag the squirming cat was trapped in. The cat. That's what Oliver had been nervous about. He didn't think the animal was safe yet. And, David realized, it wasn't.

Looking at his father just then might have been a mistake, but that's where David's eyes wandered next, and with one look, he received a promise. Not just one that threatened something worse if David continued his present course of action. Sure, there were plenty of other ways that his father could play the "David's evil" game if David let this one cat go for his brother, but that didn't bother him so much. Not anymore. It was the way that their father was looking at Oliver that happened to be a bother, and David had a feeling

that if he made the wrong decision now, Oliver would be the one suffering later.

David heard something in the direction of the house, and a quick look told him that Odetta was on her way back, if the way his father and brother hadn't lurched back hadn't already told him. But, David didn't move. He looked down at the sack hanging from his hand, and then back at his father, smiling when the old man's head looked ready to explode as he wondered if David was purposely going to get caught. And David thought of doing just that, too. If anything, to watch his father try to explain when he pointed out exactly where he was to Odetta.

But, David decided, that kind of fun was just going to have to wait. Oliver looked as if he'd reached his maximum stress intake as it was, and unfortunately, David was going to have to cause just a little more for him before this was over. He waited until the last possible second before Odetta might have seen him, and walked away from the car, towards the side of the house. But, he didn't do that before dropping the sack that the cat was trapped in. Right behind the rear tire of Odetta's vehicle.

By the time the engine roared to life, David was out of sight. But he saw it all. He made sure of that, watching with wide eyes. The bag moved. He heard the cat, and then he didn't anymore. Just the engine as the car backed up, the cloth sack disappearing under the first tire, and then the second. And then it didn't move anymore.

He cocked his head, looked harder at the sack, the little lump in it, and stomped down the urge to go peek inside. But his attention was turned when the vehicle came to an abrupt halt, the front bumper facing the cloth sack, the motionless lump within. He moved stealthily alongside the house, closer. Probably closer than he should have come. But he was watching Odetta, feeling interested in the curiosity he saw on her face as she left her car and approached the thing that didn't have a place on her drive. And then as she knelt down, he saw it on her face before she even opened the bag. Realization.

David somehow knew that there was no doubt in her mind when it came to what was in that bag, and he couldn't understand why she was reaching out, acting as if she needed to see it, anyway. She cared. About every one of those strays that he saw as nothing more than an infestation that kept breeding, populating the woods. She cared about the dead cat, like he'd cared about his fawn, and he was troubled by this. He didn't want to believe that it was the same thing because then, he'd done to Odetta Grover what his father had done to him, and he wasn't sorry for that because he sympathized with the witch-lady, but because that made him something that he couldn't be. It made him like his father.

It was Odetta Grover's sudden sobs that pulled David from his startling thoughts, and for what felt like impossibly long minutes he watched her with

a growing curiosity, trying to understand what he was feeling as it occurred to him that other than his mother, he'd never heard a woman cry before. And when it came to his mother, her tears had given him a sense of accomplishment. That's why he was confused when he couldn't determine how he felt about Odetta's.

"Why'd you do that?" Nothing could have surprised David more than his own brother at the moment, because he couldn't have been anything but surprised when he found Oliver suddenly grabbing him from behind, gripping his shoulders, pulling, shoving until he was on his back and looking up at a face not unlike his own. Only, Oliver's face was undeniably furious at the moment, more so than David had ever seen it. "Why'd you do that, David? You didn't have to!"

David started to sit up, his frustration current outweighing his shock. This wasn't supposed to be his fault. "Oliver, I had..."

"No!" Oliver was suddenly over him, attempting to hit, scratch. It wasn't very threatening, David was quick to decide, and opted to shield his face rather than risk harming his brother. "You don't have to be bad, David! You don't have to hurt things! Why did you have to hurt it? Why, David?"

"Oliver, you've got to be quiet!" David hissed. "It was just a stupid cat! And I did have to, didn't you see the way he was looking at me, can't you get it, Oliver, it's always been..."

"Who's there? Who's over there?" Odetta's voice suddenly shouted. "You bunch of murderers, y'are! I know you!"

David's eyes widened, and he was quick to stop Oliver's nonsense as he grabbed his brother and hauled him to his feet, seemingly undeterred when Oliver continued to fight him. But ultimately, it was Brian Martin who put an end to the scuffle when he grabbed the back of both of the boys' shirts and hauled them back through the woods before they were discovered.

That morning Brian Martin had led his boys home without dinner, but a hidden smile at the corner of his mouth; Odetta Grover buried her cat before getting rid of her car for good; David was sent to the basement to pay for his crimes, believing that Oliver hated him; and Oliver...Oliver did what he always did when his heart was hurting.

David remembered that later that night, when the basement door opened, he wanted to stay trapped in the dark for the first time in his life. It seemed far less threatening than having to face Oliver, because while he was stuck in the basement, he'd done something that he'd always tried to put as little effort in as possible. He thought about what he was supposed to be being punished for.

Not just hurting his brother. Making Oliver that way. David had long since come to accept that there wasn't anything he could have done, or could do, to change that. But today, when his brother had begged him to let that cat go

with one little look... David could have done something about that. Or at least, he considered the possibility. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad to just let the cat go. It would have made Oliver happy. He certainly would have found himself punished for it later, but he could take it, and besides, as it was, he was being punished for doing exactly what his father had wanted him to do... But it could have been worse. He was sure of that, and unfortunately, the fact that Oliver shut down whenever he felt traumatized wasn't helping at all. It meant that their father was being less careful with Oliver, and David was growing concerned that if things continued as they had been, Oliver would end up suffering much more than mental tragedies. And that wasn't something that he was willing to let happen. It was better if he kept his father's negative focus on himself. He could take it.

And in the end, he had to believe that his brother wouldn't hate him. He had to believe that they had each other, because without Oliver, David didn't have anyone else.

He left the basement that night, considering how he wanted to convince Oliver that he wasn't a monster--how he could make the day's deeds somehow right. Or at the very least, right for his brother.

That night after leaving the basement, David wandered through the kitchen, feeling disoriented, as he often did while reacquainting himself with the light, and half heard his mother tell him that he'd missed dinner. He'd also missed lunch, and he was hungry, but food hardly mattered. He'd always taken what he wanted from the kitchen on nights like this. He'd killed most of it, after all. But that could wait until later. Now, he wanted to see Oliver, even if part of him hoped that his brother was already asleep. He couldn't hate him while he was sleeping. Or at least, David hoped that was the case.

But, as David silently entered their room, cracking an ache from his neck in the process, he found the light on, his brother half tucked into bed with a children's story book in his hands. But, Oliver didn't seem to be very focused on the pages as he blinked his red, puffy eyes and scratched at the scars hidden beneath his hair.

"You were crying," David heard himself say, feeling bad about it in the process. But instead of responding affirmatively, Oliver surprised David with a smile.

"I was waiting for you, David. I saved some dinner for you, see?" He nodded towards the small stand between their beds, where there was in fact a plate of food. It wasn't steaming hot, but at the moment, it looked perfect to David's stomach, which growled in protest when he didn't make it over soon enough.

"Thanks," David replied, although he felt cautious even as he lifted a long green bean from the plate and brought it towards his mouth. "So... I guess you're not mad at me no more?" The way that Oliver's brow knitted as he

put his book down and looked up was all David needed to know that Oliver being upset with him was currently the last thing he needed to worry about. "You don't remember, do you?" Oliver's frown deepened, his expression becoming something mixed between guilt and shame, and David was quick to sit at the edge of his brother's bed and force a smile. "Hey, it's okay. Probably better that..."

"Mom was hugging me, David. And I was crying, but I don't know why. I'm not a baby, David."

"I know you're not," David said quickly.

"I'm not stupid, either, David."

"And if anyone says otherwise, send 'em to me," David responded loyally, but it didn't provoke the smile from Oliver that he'd hoped for.

"When I forget... when I forget..."

"Oliver, it's alright... I think... I think sometimes it's better that way. I know it doesn't feel like that, but believe me, there are some things you're just not supposed to see."

Oliver fell silent as he studied his brother, weighing the meaning before he finally said, "But you see it, David. You'll tell me..."

"I tell you the good things," David said. "All the good things you miss." Which, David would admit wasn't very much. In fact, he doubted it was anything at all. But still, he conjured a reassuring smile as he reached out to pat his brother's ankle beneath the bedsheets. "I won't let you forget nothing important...it's you and me, okay? You and me. I'll remember for you. Like I always have, haven't I? It'll be okay... I know you hate it, but I think one day, you'll stop forgetting."

"When, David?"

"When it's safe to. When things are right... just you and me."

Oliver suddenly frowned. "You're doing it again, David."

"What?"

"Pretending, David. Like they're not going to be there. Mom and dad."

David actually smiled. "Because they're not, Oliver. Not now.... not then. It's you and me, and some day it's gonna be better for us, you'll see. I'll get us there, Oliver. I will."

But over a year later as he closed his arms around himself and breathed in the stale air of the cistern, David wondered how that was even possible now ...how was he supposed to get them anywhere better when he was stuck in a hole, and Oliver was too afraid to let him out?

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It was the food. Maybe the water, too. There was no other explanation for why David felt so... heavy. Sleepy. It was more than just the obvious exhaustion. His eyes felt heavy, his chest warm, and the shaking had stopped, not because he wasn't cold, but because his body seemed too relaxed to sha

ke. And most noticeable, was that the aches and pains over his body had become nothing more than a dull throbbing ache. And it had all started happening after he'd eaten the damn food. That bitch had drugged him again, and he'd fallen for it. But, as David discovered upon opening his eyes from a far-away dream, that wasn't even the worst part. The worst of it was how she'd gotten right by him, and any opportunity he'd hoped for to take her by surprise had snuck by him, too. Now his mother was there. There. There! And much too close.

It was night, fresh humid air coming down from above, where his doorway was open, and mingling with the stale air he'd been forced to breathe. It was enough temptation to ignore the woman kneeling beside him as he reached for it, his eyes catching the gleam of the ladder. If his body would have been cooperating, he would have been up the ladder by now, but even trying to sit it up sent an awful rush of blood to his head, which wasn't smoothed when his mother shined the flashlight in her left hand directly into his eyes, forcing him to groan in agony as he covered his face.

"Shh, shh," Mary hushed, reaching out to touch his shoulder, a gesture that he was quick to shrug off. He was looking poor, this son of hers, and her slight frown suggested that she didn't like that, even if David couldn't currently see it.

"Don't touch me," David said when she reached for him again, and this time he managed to shove his hand out, hitting his mark when the flashlight went tumbling from his mother's hand and hit the damp ground.

"Don't be like this, David," Mary insisted as she calmly watched him struggle to get up, when ultimately, he only managed to turn away. "I'm trying to help you."

David's shoulder's stiffened, and slowly he looked over his shoulder. The flashlight brightened the lower half of his face, his eyes seeming masked in darkness, but there was no mistaking the glare that was in them as his lips parted and he sucked in a steady breath. "Help me?" he repeated, incredulous.

"Help me? You're tryin' to kill me... slowly, too you bitch, and when I... when I..." His chest suddenly heaved, a burst of air escaping his lungs before a bout of sharp coughs attacked him.

"No," Mary said firmly, taking advantage of a time when he was physically incapable of arguing with her, "no, I'm gonna make things right, David... me and you, we'll do it together. I'm here to help you, but I haven't got a lot of time, so I want you to listen good... you've gotta stop fighting me, you understand? You've gotta listen now..."

"You don't have time," David repeated, grasping onto the only words that currently served as relevant for him. "Because he'll wanna know where you are, won't he? I'll bet he's wondering where I am... whad'you do? Tell him I was dead?" David turned slowly, watching as his mother's face became gri

m, and for a moment, he found himself laughing at the fear on her face before the sound erupting from his throat suddenly came to a halt, and he bolted to his feet.

He wasn't sure where the sudden burst of energy came from, but he was grateful for the small rush. He intended to use it, and he did his best as he forced himself towards the ladder. But then, his best didn't prove to be quite good enough.

"David, no!"

His mother was right behind him, ready to stop him, but it seemed she hardly needed to when he practically plowed into the ladder, which had come a step earlier than expected. He'd gotten one foot up, but found the ankle he'd rolled was still weak, and a sharp pain shot up his calf before the weight of his body collapsed, and he fell back. Getting back up was on his mind. He was ready to try--desperate to try, which is why he didn't understand how his mother was capable of restraining him with one arm while her free hand moved to smooth his matted hair.

"You poisoned me," he whispered, wiggling his toes in his wet shoes, testing to see if he could still feel them at all.

"I just wanted you to be comfortable," she replied calmly.

"Let me out," David said, feeling an odd calm rise within him that said he should try to reason with her. "Let me out. You know what'll happen if Dad finds out you lied to him... let me out, and I'll tell him I ran away... I will run away... just..."

"Oh, I believe you, David," she replied. "But we both know you wouldn't go without Oliver, and I just can't let that happen. That's why we're gonna do it my way. It'll work. You'll see. I'm gonna be a good mother to you." She slid an arm around the back of his neck, pulling him closer, cradling him in a strange way that David found dismaying as she began to rock back and forth, humming to herself. It seemed unnatural that his mother's touch provided more of a skin-crawling sensation than the hole was capable of, but still, David remained still, his foggy brain attempting to read her, wondering how to jerk her from the world of strange fantasy she obviously found herself in, because she'd lost her mind. That had to be it, because while David knew his mother pretended to love him sometimes, she never really wanted to. She didn't want him, not like she wanted Oliver.

And then he understood. It was the only reason she hadn't gone to lengths to let him die down there. Oliver. It was the reason why she'd told him that David wasn't real. She wanted Oliver to forget his brother. Forget him. For David, it was a sickening idea, but strangely enough, he didn't feel threatened by it. Because he believed--he knew--that despite his brother's history, the one thing that Oliver would never forget was him.

And now his mother had probably made promises. To Oliver. If anything ha

ppened to David, Oliver would blame her. That's why she was doing this. But why had she started it at all? That's what David didn't understand. Why lie to his father, when she could have locked him in the basement and allowed life to go on as normal? And then he remembered Frank. David had made Frank curious that night, so much so, that Frank had actually shown up at the house. David had been ready to tell his secrets, and his mother had heard. She'd been threatened, and she must have known that a change was in order if she wanted to see Oliver stay with her, because really, like David, Oliver was the only one of them that she really cared about.

"You're planning to leave Dad," David realized aloud. "You know about those other women..."

The rocking suddenly stopped, and Mary's head turned as she looked down at him... and she smiled.

"Oh, I've always known about them. And really, David, it's pointless to care about little indiscretions like that."

"Then why... why now?" It was impossible to count how many times he'd wished for this conversation to happen when he was a little boy. Before it had all shattered in front of his face, it had been his greatest fantasy, for his mother to decide that she loved him as much as Oliver... for her to take them both away. But now, it was wrong. That wasn't what was happening. And he had to ask. "You knew... you knew I never hurt Oliver. But you let Dad think... why are you doing this now?"

"Because he's going to destroy everything!" she suddenly snapped, dropping his head. The back of his skull hit the concrete, his previous injury throbbing in pain as he reached for it, groaning while she continued to yell. "And you! You just couldn't keep quiet! I'm doing you a favor, David! What do you think he'd do to you if you started talking? Your father's made enough mistakes with this family... with you. I know about what he's made you do. I see what you've become, and I won't let it continue because sooner or later, it'll be Oliver..."

"If you knew, why didn't you stop it?" David demanded, scooting back against the wall to keep his aching head out of the water. "Is it so no one would know the truth about what happened to Oliver? So no one would know it was you?"

Mary gasped as if struck, her eyes grew sharp, and when the palm of her hand collided with the side of David's face the slap echoed around them before all went silent except for Mary Martin's heavy breathing.

"I would never hurt my baby," she stated.

"But you did," David whispered, an awkward little smile curling one corner of his mouth. It seemed important somehow, to hurt her right now. "I remember it... we were outside on the deck, and you picked him up..."

"Shut up!" Mary snapped. "You shut up, boy!"

“And you held him up in the air. Do you remember the way he was crying, you bitch? It was because he wanted you to put him down... and then you dropped him. Tell me something, Mama, was that when you found out Dad was cheating... ‘cause, I know you always said it was a family trip to Grandma’s, you wanted to see her before she keeled over, right? But the thing is... I don’t remember Dad being there at all.” Mary took in a deep breath as her shaking fingers quickly worked to wipe away a few stray tears, and a strange little moan rose up in her throat, but still, David didn’t stop. “Was I supposed to be next?” he whispered. “Why didn’t you drop me, too? Was it because you saw Oliver was still alive? Huh? You couldn’t do it then, could you? So you told him it was me...”

“He wasn’t supposed to hate you for it,” she said quietly. “You were just a baby.”

“But he did, and you played along... until you weren’t playing anymore. Why?”

“Because after a while, David, I really did hate you. You have no idea what your father had put me through, and when he thought you hurt your brother... it was all you. He hated you. So I did, too... It was easier that way, don’t you see? I couldn’t love you. What mother would love something that hurt her little boy?”

“Something?” David hissed. “Wasn’t I your boy, too?”

“You stopped being that a long time ago... But David, we can make this right now. We have a chance.”

“How? You want me to help you leave the monster before he gets to Oliver, too?”

“You know he will... and that Seaberg boy, your father’s been lookin’ at him and Oliver lately like he thinks something’s funny... He’s been getting bored with you, David... and listen to me, now that he thinks you’re gone he’s been getting to Oliver... The things he says to him--he can’t take it, David, not like you could.”

“Then it’s your fault,” David responded. “For letting things get like this.”

Mary looked taken aback. “David! I know you care about what happens to your brother!”

David considered that as he thought of how his brother couldn’t even help him open a damned door.

“So what do you expect me to do?” he asked. “Pretend we’re a happy family after we leave him? You want me to be as forgetful as Oliver? I won’t forget... I can’t.”

“I know your father’s caused you to do a lot...”

“My fawn,” David whispered. “Do you remember her? When we left that day, did you know what was gonna happen to her?”

“David,” Mary said desperately, but fell silent when David’s eyes suddenly c

ut up to hers.

“You don’t know anything. There was a lot I cared about... you wanna know how much I cared about my brother? What about the morning Odetta Grove got dragged outta that lake?”

“David, we don’t talk about her.”

“We were only supposed to scare her, you know,” David said, a tired note entering his voice. “She was all hellbent on getting to Dad, so she was making her threats. But when we got out there, he got out of control. Was stupid enough to slap her around a little and she saw all of us. She said she was gonna get the law, but I guess that was okay with him because we just left ... and then I found out why he was okay with it. Told me he’d say it was all me. No one was gonna believe a crazy old woman, and he’d finally found a way to get rid of me... And then he said that maybe when he was talkin’ to the sheriff, he’d make a mistake. What if it was Oliver? he said. What if the retard did it, cause he didn’t know any better? They’d take him away.”

“You’re lying,” Mary said quickly, shaking her head. “He’d never hurt Oliver, he wouldn’t...”

“But isn’t that why you wanna get out now?” David retorted. “Cause he’ll hurt Oliver? He doesn’t care about Oliver! It’s all a game to him because he thinks he’ll get away with it... but I cared. That’s why I went back. Old lady made it easy, too, down by the water, waiting for help to come along. She screamed when she saw me... and she should’ve.” David paused, eyed his mother, and outright laughed at the look on her face. “D’you know what I told her, mama?” he asked before his voice dropped down to a whisper. “I told her not to be afraid, ‘cause I was gonna help her go somewhere better, where she didn’t ‘ave to deal with pricks like Dad. Old lady scratched worse than her cats, but she got real still when I held her under the water...until she couldn’t talk no more, about no one. Like Oliver.”

Mary shook her head. “Your father said it was an accident... she was on her boat in the rain. He said Oliver saw it, that’s why he was so shaken up...”

“Oliver was freaked out ‘cause he’s the one who helped me put her in the boat. Dad didn’t want to get his hands dirty... but I did. You want me to help you get away from him, huh? Cause you should know, mama, he’s the monster, but I’m the demon, just like you all wanted.”

“Don’t say that! Don’t say anything else, David! Why are you doing this?” she demanded, leaning over him, attempting to ignore the deranged, crooked grin spreading over his face. “Can’t you see I’m trying to help you? Why are you telling me this? I’m trying to help you!”

“I thought you should know, is all,” he said quietly. “Because when I get out of here... I’m gonna do the same thing to you.”

Mary’s eyes went wide when she failed to move fast enough, and only a short gasp escaped her before David’s arm flew up, his hand wrapping tightly around

und her neck. His grip was strong enough, but he was still struggling to get up, and Mary Martin used this to her advantage. Fighting her way to her feet, she kicked, hit and scratched at her son before she managed to knock his head hard enough against the wall to cause enough damage to jolt him, and by the time David did reach his feet, infuriated and ready to pick up where he'd left off killing her slowly, the ladder was gone, and he was once again locked away. And once again, not so sure if she'd be back.

Day Four

Nine seconds from the time David could hear her opening the lock. Three seconds removing it, four seconds to drop in the food, which now came in plastic bags, and two seconds to slam the cap shut. She'd come twice now since their last visit, and David had been paying attention, always careful to keep quiet when he heard her. Best to let her think he was asleep, he figured.

Drugged.

But he wasn't, not anymore. And it was agony when the food came. He rid himself of the water first, using it to clean the open wound at the back of his head, which seemed to be swelling more every day. At least that way some use came from it, because he couldn't, he told himself, under any circumstances, drink it. He'd hoped to find a way to eat, but even that proved difficult when there was no way of knowing what was drugged since nothing she brought him was dry. Peanut butter and jelly, tuna salad, and even slices of banana were promptly dumped and smashed in with the filth on the floor. Without the food and water, his stomach ached and his throat burned every time he coughed, and without the drugs, he was beginning to feel the ache in his body more vividly, down to every festering scrape or scratch. But, it was a good thing, he decided. A good sign. Just like the fact that he was able to walk the length of his confinement now without feeling like five steps was reason enough to take a nap.

David figured he'd wait one more day. Being hungry, he could deal with. It was more important to be ready, because after what he'd pulled with his mother, he knew that there was only one way out now. It was in the nine seconds it took her to drop food down to him, and he wasn't fool enough to think it would be easy. He'd have to jump, take her by surprise before she slammed the door shut. He'd most certainly be at a disadvantage, and as of yet, there seemed to be no pattern of when she'd be coming. Since he had no idea what day it was, let alone how long he'd been down there, he couldn't even make a guess. So he'd have to be alert, make sure to rest after she came. Which, is what he intended to do now with his empty stomach as he held one hand over the flame of his lighter, and then the other, taking what warmth he could from it before leaning back against the back wall and closing his tired eyes. Which, were about to snap right back open.

"Are you there, David?"

David was quick to his feet as he opened his mouth to respond to his brother, but suddenly stopped and thought it over for a moment. His mother had just been there, and if she was still around, he'd have to watch what he said. He thought it was more likely that Oliver had just followed her there, but he needed to use caution.

"Oliver... where's Mom?"

It was a safe question. Oliver wouldn't have lied to him, even if Mary Martin were standing right next to him insisting on it.

"I don't know, David. I think she went back home."

"Good. Do you see the door--the lid dad welded to the cellar last year? It's locked."

"I see it, David."

"Then let me out!" David's request, which admittedly, had sounded more like a demand, was met with silence. And while David wanted to curse over it, he took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, determined to avoid losing his temper with his brother again. "Oliver... please. Please." More silence, and David began to pace before stopping directly below the vent and looking up. "Okay... then tell me why you don't want to let me out, because I swear, I'm beginning to regret everything I've ever done for your sorry..."

"I want to, David, but I can't."

"Why not?"

Oliver mumbled something that David didn't catch.

"You remember that conversation we had last time, about speaking up? Oliver..."

"Frank's gonna come back soon, David. I know he will," Oliver replied. "He's my friend. He promised he was my friend."

"Frank? That's all you care about?" David demanded. "You're going to pretend I don't exist for Frank?"

"No, David!" Oliver said quickly. "I know the truth... I know the truth! You're my brother!"

"Then please, please help me. Oliver... help me."

"She said it's not time yet, David. She said..."

"I don't care what she said!" David shouted. "Oliver, listen to me, you've got to stop listening to Mom! When are you going to get that our parents..."

"Don't do that, David. You shouldn't say bad things about them."

"Look where I am! Oliver, they're killing me! She's trying to fucking kill me! Don't you remember anything? I'm your brother... it was always you and me--you and me! You know I'd do anything for you... don't let this happen. You can't let this happen!"

"You have to wait, David!" Oliver suddenly raised his voice, and his tone suggested that he was stomping his foot, too. "She told me what you're gonna do, and you can't tell, David, or we won't be together anymore. I don't wa

nt you to get in trouble anymore, David. You are my brother... and I don't want you to get in trouble, David."

David closed his eyes, and cursed his mother. Repeatedly.

Oliver, you don't know what you're talking about... let me out. Let me out, and I promise nothing will happen to you and me. I know what to do. But you have to let me..."

"Just wait, David. Please... do what she says. Do what she says, David, and then we'll be together."

"Oliver, you're wrong. She's planning to leave Dad, that's why she doesn't want you talking to him about me... Oliver, she's crazy, if you listen to her.."

."

"I have to go now, David. I'm not supposed to be outside right now."

"Oliver!"

"I love you, David. Please don't be mad at me... I just don't want you to be in trouble!"

"Oliver!" David waited a moment, listening to the sound of his brother's footsteps fading away. "Oliver! You can't listen, Oliver! Not to them! Do you hear me? They're wrong, Oliver! Remember that! They're always wrong!"

Day Seven

Without Oliver's assistance, David was forced to conclude that he'd have to stick to his original plan to escape on his own. And he'd waited for an opportunity. He'd waited as he tried to sort through renewed feelings of betrayal towards his brother, and as he thought about how to deal with it when he did get out. And he thought about it through restless nights, through the shaking, the coughing, and the constant itching he was beginning to experience from the filthy water that had seeped into his wounds. And, he thought, he'd waited pretty damned patiently, so it was understandable that he was upset when three days later, his opportunity hadn't arrived.

At first he'd been concerned that his mother had been making her visits during the sporadic minutes he'd dozed off here or there. But then, the fact that no new food or water had made an appearance within the small space was an indicator that he was worrying about the wrong thing.

What he needed to be worried about, was that there was a possibility that she wasn't coming anymore, and he'd missed his chance. David didn't necessarily like that train of thought. Mostly, because it meant any option he might have had had completely vanished. But then, there was something even worse to think about.

Oliver. He hadn't heard from Oliver, either. There could have been any number of reasons for this, but his main concern was the one where something had happened to his brother. Maybe his father had discovered his mom's plan, and neither she nor Oliver could get to him. But then, he told himself, if Oliver was spending his time in the basement these days, then maybe he'd fi

nally realize that their parents weren't the protectors that he thought they were and he'd come to help David at the first available opportunity. Or at least, David could hope.

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Oliver was no stranger to being afraid. He hadn't escaped childhood without his fair share of nightmares, perhaps more. And he'd grown up knowing that the world he lived in during his waking hours could be equally frightening. But he'd never felt so hopelessly alone with it before. But that was because before today, he'd never really seen himself as alone. He'd had someone to watch over him, and while he'd never admitted it to his brother, Oliver got through most of his nightmares, waking or otherwise, by labeling David the thing that his nightmares were afraid of.

But now David wasn't there, and something was wrong. Very wrong, Oliver determined as he stood in the middle of a half-empty room, fingering what used to be the lens of David's camera. This wasn't how things were supposed to be. His mother had promised. Promised. David had to hide for a while, she'd said. David had done some bad things, she'd said. And if Frank found out, she'd said, then Frank would go away and never come back. If Frank found out, she'd said, he'd tell someone and Oliver wouldn't have a family anymore. Of course, she'd made a point to also say that Frank wouldn't have done that because he was a bad person, but because like many people, he could get a little confused about what was right and what was wrong. To Oliver, not losing anyone who mattered to him was what was right. But now Frank was gone, and David was gone, and everything was wrong. David should have been back by now. Frank should have been back by now. By now, his mother should have made things right and Oliver should have been telling Frank the truth about David. But Frank was still angry with him, and David was most certainly angry with him, and Oliver was beginning to wonder if he should stop listening to his mother as David had told him to do. She'd promised, after all. And she'd broken it.

It was a strange feeling for Oliver, this broken promise. Familiar, although he couldn't recall very many times that his mother had fallen through like this. But maybe she had, and he didn't remember. That was unsettling to Oliver, mostly, because David had always told him that the things he couldn't remember were things that he wanted to forget. David had never forgotten David making a promise. Then again, Oliver had never forgotten David breaking one either, but he was pretty certain that that was because David never had.

And all of this obviously meant... that Oliver was currently a very confused individual.

Listen to your parents. Don't get into trouble. This was supposed to make him happy. As far back as he could remember, until recently, his family had

been all he had, and he'd always done his best to please all members, despite constantly realizing that this was a goal he'd never quite achieve. But, the past week had proved to be more difficult than anything Oliver could remember happening in the past. His mother had asked him to do something unspeakable: lie to his father. The way she talked had frightened Oliver, made him afraid of his father. Most of all, Oliver was afraid of what his dad would do if he found out David had been bad again.

We can't have that, Mary had said.

Oliver agreed.

And asking Oliver to lie to his dad wasn't the only thing Oliver had found strange regarding his mother. She'd seemed different lately. He was sure it had something to do with the vodka she'd been adding to her coffee every morning, but it was more than that, too. She'd yelled at him, twelve times. He'd counted, and only twice it had been about David. The other times had been for leaving the house before she woke up, or for even smaller things, like stirring his tea for too long, or taking breadcrumbs to mix in with his chicken's feed. And he felt like she was always watching.

It had been so hard to go see David. The first time, he'd followed his mother. That's how he knew where David was. When Oliver had gone on his own, his mother had interrogated him as soon as he got home. He'd told her where he'd been, and that's when she'd made her promises. Promises she hadn't kept. But she'd also told Oliver not to go back; that he couldn't talk to

David. He'd gone again, though. He'd followed her there, tried to speak to his brother while his mother was on the way back to the house. He figured that if he didn't stay long, if he got there ahead of her, then she'd never know. He'd just wanted to hear David's voice. He wanted to know what he was okay. What Oliver hadn't wanted, was to hear the things that David had to say. He didn't want his brother's anger, but that was exactly what he'd walked away with three days ago. And now, after seeing his father take away David's things, after watching his mother allow it to happen, Oliver was beginning to wonder if he was looking to please the wrong people.

"Oliver, put that away," Mary Martin's voice hissed, and he jumped slightly as her hand came over his, over the glass lens. She tried to take it. Oliver frowned, held tight. "Oliver, let go!"

And he did, and she took it. He watched out of the corner of his eye as she slid it into her pocket before sighing, touching his shoulder. She opened her mouth to speak, but Oliver decided to beat her to it.

"When's David coming back, Mama?"

"Shh! Your father's in the other room... I already told you..."

"Why'd you let Dad take all his things? They're his. You promised--you promised--he'd come back so we can be a family. Tell Dad to bring back David's things! Tell him David's real!"

Oliver hadn't expected the sting he felt across his left cheek any more than he'd expected his mother to be the cause of it, but there it was, and then for a very long moment he felt... nothing. When he met his mother's eyes again, she was smiling at him, looking as if she'd been doing nothing more than standing there the whole time, as if she had expected him to... to not know it happened.

But Oliver did know, and he felt hurt, and confused, and something else, too. He felt guilty, because he was angry--furious even--with his mother. But he didn't feel guilty for feeling that way. Oliver Martin felt guilty because as he thought of his brother, trapped and alone, he realized that maybe he should have felt that way sooner.

"Sweetheart, you look tired," Mary told him. "Why don't you take a short nap. I'll wake you up for dinner."

Oliver stared at her for a moment, swallowed hard, and then very slowly nodded before his mother kissed his cheek and left the room, closing the door behind her. She left him not knowing how he'd turned towards the window, eyeing it the same way David often did when he was trying to determine the quietest way to sneak out of the house, just as Oliver didn't know what she'd stopped outside the door to nervously wring her hands together.

Mary Martin had a problem; it was a choice she had to make, one she thought she already had. She couldn't live like this anymore, not knowing that the sky could come falling down over her head at any moment. She'd known that it would come sooner or later, but knew for sure the moment that her son began seeing Frank Seaberg. She'd been unable to tell Oliver to stay away. He'd been too happy to have a friend, and Mary--she did love him, she did care, and she couldn't take that from him. And David had used it, and the moment Frank started asking questions, well, she knew that her husband wouldn't stand for it. She could see it in his eyes when he looked at the Seabergs. They were a problem, and there was only one way her husband knew how to deal with a problem. She'd suspected that he saw Odetta Grover as a problem, but that had been different. The Seabergs weren't like Odetta Grover because if something happened to the new family in town, there'd be questions. Mary couldn't have that.

So she'd rid herself of the problem. She made David disappear. It was the only way. But then Oliver hadn't stopped talking about him, and the lie her husband told, she'd known it wouldn't last. She wanted to protect herself. She wanted to protect Oliver, and she'd known that she only had one choice left. She'd have to leave Brian. They'd be safe if they got away from him and anything he might be planning to hide the truth. Unfortunately, it had become rather clear that she couldn't do it alone. Oliver wouldn't allow that. He'd been looking at her oddly lately, with the same suspicion that had always been present in his brother's face. Mary hated that. But she'd told herself t

hat she could fix it. She could fix it if David helped her. Oliver would be willing to leave quietly, if only David would help her. She hadn't thought it would be easy, but then again, she'd never expected David to be so stubborn. After all, she was giving him a way out. So it was a shame, she thought, that he hated her so much.

But she'd have to try again. She'd try one more time. Perhaps a few days left on his own had given David a new perspective. Or perhaps, it had made things worse. She wasn't so sure. But what she was sure of, was that sooner or later, Frank Seaberg would be back. He wasn't the type to leave things alone, and when he came back, he'd bring trouble with him. She had to get away from it. She had to get Oliver away from it, and if David wouldn't help her, then maybe... maybe she could convince Brian. She could leave him later, with Oliver. She just needed to give Oliver more time to forget about David. Something had to work, she told herself. Something.

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He couldn't keep his head up anymore, and while he couldn't recall it raining during his stay in his humble little prison, David was certain that there was more water coating the ground now than there'd been when he'd first arrived. In his last few attempts to sleep, he'd awoken with his ears clogged with it in his efforts to find a comfortable spot.

He was too tired to keep himself moving. Too hungry to stand without his stomach cramping or his head spinning. He was simply experiencing... too much. And he'd had enough. All he wanted to do was close his eyes. He felt warmer somehow when he closed his eyes. Perhaps it was because he was dreaming more, and for the first time in a long time, he found peace in his dreams, because there, he wasn't trapped. And he was so tired, willing to slip away somewhere warmer, that when David actually got one of the things he'd been wishing for only hours before, he almost didn't care.

"What do I do?"

David hadn't been completely certain that it was his brother's voice he was hearing at first, mostly, because he'd been asking himself the same question for what seemed like ages now. Although, even in the situation he found himself in he couldn't quite imagine himself sounding even that desperate. No, the voice narrating his own thoughts definitely sounded more angry than desperate.

"You were right about them. You were right, David."

David opened his eyes slowly, trying to gather the energy to do more than that as he whispered, "I know I'm right."

"You have to tell me what to do. David, I don't know what to do!"

David opened his mouth once more, this time intending to speak up, but for several moments nothing escaped him but a series of rough coughs before he sucked in a deep breath, and then chose to respond with the one thing he

felt mattered at the moment.

“Are you hurt?”

“David, is that you?”

“What do you think? Fuck. Are you or not?”

“No, David. No.”

David sighed. “Then what do you want?”

Oliver’s surprise at the question accounted for his silence.

“I don’t know what to do, David,” he finally said. “Mom lied to me.”

David couldn’t help it when he forced a gasp to feign surprise. “You’re kidding!”

“I’m not kidding, David! Something’s happening. Something’s wrong. They took all your things away. And broke your camera, David.”

As if he had no other problems, David actually pouted. He’d liked that camera.

“And Mom let him do it,” Oliver continued. “She said you were coming back, David, and she said that Frank would come back, but I think... I think she lied. David, it has to get fixed. Tell me how to fix it. I can’t do it by myself.

I’m not like you. I’m not...”

“Bad?” David asked blandly.

“No, David, I’m not... I’m not smart. I’m not...”

David wasn’t sure where he found it, but suddenly he was on his feet, looking up at the dim light seeping through the vent.

“Don’t say that Oliver. Just... don’t. You came here, didn’t you? Oliver, let me out.”

David caught himself holding his breath, and when Oliver took too long to respond, he couldn’t help thinking that he had good reason to.

“Mama said that Dad’ll hurt you if you come home,” Oliver finally said.

“And Mama lies, Oliver!” David was quick to remind his brother. He could feel his heart sinking, fear rising despite his calm demeanor. If his mom had given up on keeping him alive, Oliver was his last chance.

“But what if he does, David... he’s been so angry lately...”

“I won’t go home,” David said quickly. “Let me out, and... we can go see Frank, Oliver. Show him the truth, huh? Come on, he can’t be mad at you then, can he? We can tell him the truth about everything.”

“No,” Oliver suddenly said, sounding uncharacteristically firm. “I don’t want you to get in trouble, David.”

David fell silent as he tried to determine just how much credit he should give his mother for this. Obviously, she’d covered all bases when it came to convincing Oliver that he shouldn’t be set free. She’d done such a good job, in fact, that Oliver seemed reluctant to help even with his doubts about her.

“I won’t,” David insisted. He tried to sound convincing, but being unable to concentrate on anything but whether or not Oliver would ultimately let him

out, he failed.

“You’re lying, David. You’ll be in trouble... and you said you’d hurt Mama..”

“And maybe I should!” David shouted, his voice once again going hoarse. He’d had enough. “Damn it, Oliver, I’m not gonna argue with you! If you let me out of here, it’ll be me and you--just like it should be. We’ll get away from here. We have to, it’s the only way!”

“Dad, and Mom...” Oliver started, but David didn’t give him half a chance to finish.

“Why are you even here? It’s because you don’t trust them and you know it! That’s why, Oliver! And you can’t trust them, neither of ‘em! You might not remember what things have been like, but I do... and I know that if you don’t let me the fuck out I’ll die down here... is that what you want? Because if it is... just say it. Will it make things easier for you if I disappear? Just say it, Oliver. If it’ll be easier for you to stop worrying... to have a normal life...”

David grew tired as his own words hit him, and he slid back down the wall, his sight consumed with darkness again.

“I don’t want that, David,” Oliver insisted. “I just...”

“Promise me something,” David interrupted. “When you walk away, don’t go home. You’re right, you know. Something’s not right there, and it won’t be until someone does something about it... Go see Frank, Oliver. Bring him here... then he’ll know the truth. Everyone will, and you’ll be alright... I care about that, you know. Nothing more than that. I love you... that’s why I need to know. Just tell me, Oliver... do you care what happens to me? Because if you don’t, no one will.” David took in a deep breath, just before his voice dropped down to a whisper that he barely heard himself. “And then I really am nothing.”

David closed his eyes, not surprised by Oliver’s lack of response. What surprised him, was how numb he seemed to it. It wasn’t that he didn’t care. When it came to Oliver, he did very much. But he was tired, and even knowing that his brother meant well didn’t manage to dull the hurt when it came to the realization that he couldn’t rely on him. He was on his own, and while this had been a constant theme throughout his life, it was the first time it had actually frightened him.

David wrapped his arms around himself, tucking his hands under them as he felt a chill creep down his spine. He wanted to reach for his lighter, to take a moment of comfort in the warm flame, even as small as it was. But even for that, he couldn’t find the energy.

“Oliver?” he called. “Before you go, stay and talk to me for a while. I just want you to tell me... anything. Don’t leave me alone. Just talk, okay? Just...”

And then he heard it. The footsteps over the steel plate, the shifting of the lock. David crawled forward, his eyes focused on blackness as if he needed to see something there, something to tell him that his mind wasn't playing tricks on him. It was when he heard the grinding sound that always accompanied the plate as it lifted, he knew, and for one split second, the betrayal and subdued anger he felt towards his brother was replaced with too much relief to dwell on Oliver's faulted reasoning.

He shielded his eyes against the light, his nostrils flaring against fresh air, cooling the burn that seemed to be scratched into his damp, swollen skin, and he found himself reaching up, his hand expecting to feel the ladder. But it didn't come, and the smile that had been slowly growing over his face disappeared as he made out the shadow standing over him, which was not his brother's.

For a second, Mary Martin looked as surprised to see David looking up at her as he was to see her looking down at him. She recovered first, but still presented weariness when she tossed the bottle of water and the cold can of soup she'd been carrying towards David's head, rather than at his feet in a move that forced him to step back.

"I hope you've used all the time you've had to cool down, David," she suddenly said. "I was disappointed with our last visit."

David didn't reply, not right away. He was too busy staring at the bottle of water, half submerged in the muck at his feet. He'd been waiting for this. But somehow, the shock of seeing his mother and not his brother, had managed to throw him. She was standing above him. The plate was open. His thoughts were having difficulty coming together. He was supposed to be moving now, helping himself. But where was Oliver? Why wasn't he helping? It would be so easy... so easy from up there. If he'd just grab their mother, hold her back so David could escape... so easy. It's what David would do.

So where the hell was Oliver?

"What exactly do you want from me?" David's words were slow, his voice barely an echo in his head. Hell, he'd hardly understood his own question. He was stalling. He just needed to stall. Needed more time. Needed more energy. He needed help.

"I think you already know the answer to that."

"You want me to help you get out," David said blankly. "Away from Dad... okay, I'll do it."

He'd spoken too quickly. He'd known it even before his mother's expression turned suspicious. He needed to be more convincing, and he knew it. He also knew that he'd have to be convincing fast.

"You and Oliver... and me, right? I'll take care of Dad." David stepped forward as carefully as possible, placing himself closer to the opening above his head. "What do you want me to do? Make it so he can't chase us? I'll get r

id of him... if you let me out. I'm..." David swallowed as he felt himself choke on his next words, but managed to move another step closer to where he needed to be as he forced himself to meet her eyes. "I'm sorry... I'm ready to be a family."

"Are you?"

David quickly nodded, succeeding another step. He was in position now, but suddenly the distance between himself and the exit seemed a lot higher than it used to. Impossibly high. "You were right about Dad," he said. "We'll be better off without him... If you let me out now, I won't let him hurt Oliver. Or you."

Mary blinked, seemingly unaware of the frown marking her brow as she looked down at her son. She'd come here wanting to hear exactly what he was telling her, although she hadn't realized it until that very moment. I'll get rid of him. And looking down at David, Mary Martin believed that he truly would.

Her thoughts were frightening as they spiraled around the fact that her son was offering to rid her of her husband... and worse, it was because she'd asked him to. What a horrible person she was for having even thought of it, and yet the prospect was tempting. She'd thought that she only wanted to get away from him, but to be sure--to never have to worry for herself or Oliver becoming victims of his twisted mind was indeed worth considering. Horrible. Wrong. But worth consideration.

But as she continued to watch David, something seemed off. Something in his posture as he waited at the bottom of the hole. It was the calculating look in his tired eyes, his rigid posture, and most of all, the way his gaze seemed to be taking her apart bit by bit. And then Mary knew. Whatever fate David was concocting for the father who'd tortured him for his whole life, it would be an equally unappealing one for the mother who'd trapped him where he was now.

For a moment, Mary Martin felt a margin of well-deserved guilt, because as a mother, specifically this boy's mother, she'd done her fair share to bring things to this. And she truly did wish things were different. She wished she could love him, because maybe then things could really change for the better. But then she told herself she couldn't, because while this boy had the same face as her own loved son, he could be no child of hers. David might have shared the Martin name, but in that moment Mary knew that he was no one's child.

Like being slapped in the face she felt the air rush from her lungs as a strange, instinctual panic seized her and she dropped the steel plate, and not a moment too soon as David decided to jump up. Mary had no way of knowing that he didn't even have the strength to make it to the metal plate, but as her hands fumbled with the lock she could hear him cursing her below, his three

ats ringing in her ears as she swore she'd never remove the lock again, struggling to pull nearby debris over her son's grave in hopes that no one else would, either.

And below, as the light went away, David could hear movement muffled behind his own screams, knowing that she wouldn't be back even though she hadn't said. She hadn't needed to say it. But, oddly enough, it wasn't his mother who he found himself cursing as he worked himself into exhaustion and finally collapsed against the back wall. It was the one person in the world who he'd needed to count on; the one person in the world who he should have been able to. Oliver would have known way of knowing that as David slipped away into darkness until it became a comfortable place, his thoughts had turned to betrayal and fury towards the only person he'd ever cared about. Just as David had no way of knowing that the brother he wished he no longer had didn't realize his mother's decision because he hadn't been there. David had no way of knowing that Oliver would have broken the lock if his mother hadn't arrived, and he couldn't know that Oliver had been spooked a way, or even that later that day he had run from home in his little boat to Frank Seaberg, who hadn't believed him when he said that David was real. And David never heard his brother two days later when Oliver had returned to explain this to him... or when he'd said, "I won't leave you alone, David. I won't."

Day Nine

Frank Seaberg had never felt sicker. It wasn't the kind of sickness that came with the nauseating scent of what he found himself standing in, or the cool walls prickling his skin but the kind of sick that chilled his reflexes and made his heart feel as if it had stopped in his chest. His instincts told him to flee, but even then he couldn't seem to lift his hand from the body. It hadn't been enough to just find it.

"David."

Frank released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding and reached further, pausing when his fingers came against cool, wet ones as he did what he could to accept what he was dealing with.

He should cry. The thought struck him with an odd intensity as he wondered how many others would be willing to shed a tear for David Martin. But even while he thought he should give Oliver's brother at least that, he seemed too stunned to spare any other emotions. And Oliver, he thought. What was he going to tell Oliver? Frank had thought he was as crazy as he was led to believe, and if he'd just listened, if he'd taken a moment to just listen to what Oliver was saying, maybe things would be different.

He lifted David's hands, holding it tightly in both of his, half wishing that if he could make it warm everything would be made right. But it was so cold. Too cold, and as Frank held tighter, he felt a cool strip of metal come again

nst his palm. Taking the object carefully, he ran his fingers over it until it was properly identified, and bracing himself, he held up the lighter. With a flick of his thumb, a shallow flame lit the area in front of him and he shook as he took in the sight of a boy he knew.

It was difficult, not seeing the face as Oliver's. Only, the one he was staring at was bruised and filthy, scratched, and... not as peaceful as it should have seemed. David Martin's lips were parted, his nose red, and his eyes open, looking right back at him. He seemed almost... surprised, and Frank couldn't help wondering what the cause of it had been during the last moments of his life.

"It's over, David... Your brother's safe now. I'll make sure it stays that way," Frank promised quietly, feeling that he needed to say something, even if David Martin was no longer around to hear it.

So Frank was understandably surprised when hazel eyes shifted to his, and David Martin's lips moved.

"Don't count on it, Frank."

Chapter 13

by DomLuka

Thanks to Jim for editing!

"Rudy, look at me. Look at me, okay?"

Jay was kneeling down in front of the bathtub, frowning as he tried to get Rudy Seaberg's attention while she stared straight ahead, seemingly oblivious to the tears running down her face. But, she did meet his eyes, as frightened as she was. And, Jay couldn't blame her for being frightened given the madman who'd taken over her home and had her unconscious mother tied up on the living room floor.

He hurt my dad," Rudy whispered. "I think he dropped him in the lake after he made me get off the boat."

Jay opened his mouth, ready to tell her that she shouldn't worry. That he was sure her dad was fine... but he couldn't. Couldn't bring himself to say it to her, because he seriously had his doubts.

"We're going to get out of here," he said instead. "Do you think you can help me?"

Rudy seemed to consider the question, and the look on her face was so similar to Jay's sisters that it almost broke his heart wanting to reassure her.

"What should I do?" Rudy asked.

"I need you to untie my hands," Jay told her, standing up, even as he struggled with the rope that bound his hands behind his back so tightly that he was certain his fingers were turning blue.

"But I can't," Rudy pointed out, shifting her own bound hands.

"Then turn around," Jay ordered.

Confused, but obedient, Rudy stood and turned around, getting a better grasp on the plan when Jay kneeled behind her and went to work on the binding around her little wrists with his teeth.

“He’s gonna be mad if he sees. You shouldn’t.”

The whisper came from Oliver, and it annoyed Jay just enough to make him sit up and look over his shoulder at the third party in the room, who was sitting in the middle of the small bathroom floor, watching them, also tied up. Like Jay and Rudy, Oliver had managed to force the cloth gag from his mouth.

“Will you shut the fuck up?” Jay hissed. “He’s doing this to you, too. So get pissed off and make yourself useful already.”

Oliver frowned, but at least looked curious. “How?”

Jay let out a breath. “Listen at the door. Let us know if you hear anyone coming.”

Oliver looked between Jay and the door for a moment, looking uncertain before he finally scooted across the door and brought his ear to the exit’s surface to do what was asked of him. “I don’t hear anything, Jeremy,” he decided a moment later.

“Just tell me if you do,” Jay replied. He continued to study Oliver for several moments as the other boy went back to listening at the door. At the moment, Jay wasn’t sure what to think of him. Only moments earlier he’d been wondering the best way to knock Oliver out, worried that he’d call out to his father if they tried to escape. But, that could have been the way Oliver didn’t resist the older man’s embrace when he’d forced the two of them into the house. Or, because he hadn’t seemed as bothered as Jay had by Mrs. Seaberg, who was unconscious on the living room floor. In fact, Oliver hadn’t even objected when they’d been tied up and forced into the bathroom. So it didn’t seem unreasonable that Jay was suspicious of him. Or, at least it wasn’t unreasonable that Jay thought the kid was a complete nut. But for now, he decided that as long as he wasn’t going to start yelling out for his dad anytime soon, he’d leave him be. Because for some unfathomable reason, Frank Seaberg seemed to think that Oliver Martin was okay, and since Jay had a feeling that the current worst-case scenario would be Frank Seaberg ending up in the bathroom with them, there was no way he wanted to deal with Brian Martin and a pissed-off Frank, who would definitely be pissed if he did anything to hurt Oliver. Necessary or not.

“Jay?” Rudy whispered, drawing his attention.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think we can really get out?” she asked.

“It’ll be okay,” he insisted. “Your brother should be on his way here... He’ll see something’s wrong, and... We’ll be fine.”

She nodded, and Jay went back to his attempt at untying her bound hands with

th his teeth, wishing that he could believe his words as much as Rudy Seaberg seemed to.

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“Breathe, Frank... Frank, breathe.”

Frank tried doing just that, although, it wasn't entirely clear to him when he'd stopped in the first place. But more baffling to Frank than sudden respiratory problems was that David seemed so calm at a time like this. When he was supposed to be dead.

But, then, he wasn't dead. Frank stared at David Martin again. It wasn't any thing different from what he'd been doing for the last few minutes, but at least now he was beginning to form clear thoughts. David wasn't calm, he finally decided. He was exhausted, and stunned, and while it wasn't entirely obvious, Frank could see signs of uncertainty in his expression, too. But that was all that he had time to see as he suddenly gasped when the heat of the lighter reached his thumb and dropped it, cursing himself as everything went dark again.

But, the dark seemed to be a good thing. At least, it was an encouraging thing as Frank finally got moving. “Are you alright?” he finally asked David, but the silence he received in return told him just what a stupid question that was. “I mean...let's get the hell out of here, alright? Can you stand?” Frank reached for David in the dark, meaning to help him up. He hadn't suspected that his hand as it came against David's arm would be unwelcome, but the way Oliver's twin lurched back suggested otherwise.

Frank was quick to pull his hand back, stunned. But, while he couldn't see David, he seemed to understand. It was something about their last encounters. It had been in David's posture, in his voice, and given what he'd been through, it should have been no surprise that David was reacting to him this way. So Frank said the one thing he thought David needed to hear as he reached for the other boy again.

“You can trust me, David... Come on. I'm just gonna help you up.”

“Okay,” David said quietly, a noticeable tension entering his voice. But, this time when Frank reached for him, he reached back to accept the assistance. But as Frank moved an arm around him, pulling David firmly against his side as they headed for the ladder, Frank noticed that Oliver's twin seemed to be dragging his feet, and as the dim light from above struck his profile, he seemed to be looking up at their exit with a certain amount of trepidation.

“We're leaving,” Frank said, as if that would answer everything. “David?”

“Who else is out there?” David suddenly demanded, nothing but suspicion in his voice.

“What?”

“What's going on? Why are you here now?” David suddenly pulled away, catching himself when he tripped over his own feet. “You're helping them.”

“What are you talking about?” Frank responded, beginning to feel nervous.

But, despite his sudden impulse to back up, he advanced on David instead. “Look, the only person I’m helping right now is you. Are you coming with me, or am I going to send someone else back here to help you?”

Frank watched in awkward silence as David looked longingly at the ladder. It was as if he were afraid to reach for it, believing that the moment his fingers touched the cool metal someone would snatch it away from him like a cruel trick. Frank had never before met someone who had no trust in anything, and while he now believed that David Martin had every right to feel that way, he had no idea where to start trying to understand it. And it might have been cold, but the fact of the matter was that he didn’t have time for it. He needed to get David back to Jay and Oliver before the Martin parents returned. And that was assuming that Jay had waited for him.

“Okay, David,” Frank said decidedly, and then before the other boy could react, Frank reached for his hand and brought it to the ladder before stepping back to wait. “We can go now.”

David stared at his hand on the ladder, his harsh breathing growing steadier as his grip tightened, and when his gaze slowly shifted to Frank, something decisive in his expression changed. The frightened, alone boy became a determined one, and with Frank right behind him, he crawled out of the hole.

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David felt as if he couldn’t get enough air. Not just air, fresh air. He took it in deep gulps until his blood had rushed to his head. He felt like he was drowning, and as he tasted blood on his lips he wiped his fingers under his nose, pulling them back to discover it had started bleeding. He watched for countless seconds as a few of the light raindrops falling from the clouds washed it away, and Frank... David didn’t know what to think of Frank. But then, he never had. But what he did think about Frank at that exact moment, was that his neighbor from across the lake was currently his only ally. Personally, David would have picked someone a little taller for whatever waited ahead of him, but Frank would do. After all, the guy was giving him the shirt off his back just so he could clean up his nose. Never mind that a little blood running down his chin didn’t make much of a difference at this point. “Here,” Frank said. “Try to slow down.”

David brought the shirt to his face, shaking his head blankly. He didn’t know how to respond. He didn’t know how to respond. Explain. He didn’t need to slow down. It was like he needed to catch up. Everything was spinning around him, moving quickly. He could feel it in his lungs, on his prickling skin. But inside everything was slow. He felt like he was processing one thought at a time, everything repeatedly until he got it, and even then, he didn’t get it. He felt like he was chasing something and wouldn’t be satisfied until he was right on top of it, but if he didn’t stop...

“David!”

Frank’s voice followed David Martin as he blacked out, and a few moments later as David sank slowly back into reality, Frank was next to him, holding him up--or rather, trying to get him to sit down.

“You can’t walk like this,” Frank stated. “You’ll have to stay here. I’ll come back with help...”

“No.” David wasn’t sure how he managed it, but he held himself upright and managed to appear sober for a whole second. “No,” he repeated. “I have to ...”

He had to stop them. He didn’t know how long it had been since he’d last seen his mother, but he remembered clearly that she was planning something. To leave? Good riddance. But Oliver... the thought of his brother was rubbing David the wrong way. It was a new feeling directed towards his twin, but still, he wasn’t ready for Oliver to disappear, too.

“You have to what?”

David’s eyes suddenly cut in Frank’s direction. “You said somethin’ about my brother. We’ll go to him.”

Frank was quick to start shaking his head. “No, David, I left him back at your place with... a friend. Look, they could be there waiting for us, or they might have gotten out of there before your parents came home. They would have gone to my place, and either way... I don’t think you can make it that far. If you drop, there’s no way I can carry you so I think it’s better if you just hide for...”

David didn’t bother interrupting Frank’s explanations and demands. He wasn’t about to spend what energy he had arguing. By that time he was already too busy keeping his focus on putting one foot in front of the other. And he was learning that Frank was very good at keeping up. He also seemed to have the sense to not argue when he wasn’t going to win. And he seemed relentless when it came to keeping close, which quickly became uncomfortable for David. Frank Seaberg was like a shadow in his blind spot, and while David considered him an ally at the moment, he wasn’t sure he liked that Frank was so close, even when Seaberg once again saved him from tripping over his own feet.

“I really think you should...” Frank started, but checked himself when David yanked his arm away and kept moving.

“They’re gonna do something,” David mumbled through his heavy breathing.

“Oliver has to get out of the house.”

“David...”

“He wouldn’t let me out,” David said as if he’d just realized it, his pace slowing. “Oliver knew where I was. Wouldn’t let me out.” David looked at Frank, catching something unreadable in the other boy’s eyes. “What, Frank?”

“It’s not Oliver’s fault. Your parents lied to me, and I believed them. Look,

it's complicated, David... But Oliver did try to tell me where you were. I'm the one who didn't get it."

David stopped altogether. "Didn't get it?"

"I didn't think you even..."

"Existed," David whispered, when it became clear that Frank didn't want to say it. Not after their last conversation.

"I'm sorry... but I didn't realize it until I ran into Jay--Jeremy Flaskis--and... well, I put it together, okay? ... It wasn't Oliver's fault, David. I know I haven't known him that long. I haven't known either of you that long, but I know that this wasn't his fault, and that when I walked away from him that night to come looking for you... I wasn't afraid of anything more than that when I saw him again, I'd have to tell him you were gone."

David stared at Frank hard for a moment, not giving away anything that he might be thinking. He stared until his head started to spin and his eyes narrowed, and when he finally spoke, it was decisively, sternly. "Oliver left me in there," he said, and then before Frank could respond, "Jeremy's not a friend. You better hope he hasn't touched my brother."

Confused when it came to whether or not David was actually angry with Oliver, Frank frowned as he continued to follow the other boy through the woods, deciding that now wasn't the time for talking, anyway. There seemed to be a lot to sort out, and there was no way he was going to get anywhere with it under current conditions. Besides, something about David's demeanor was disconcerting to Frank, and his instincts warned him to use caution.

As for David, he was feeling particularly cautious himself as he decided that Frank Seaberg was trying to figure him out. He didn't care for it. A sideways glance told him that Frank was holding back questions. Suspicions. And while David didn't know what provoked him to do it, he shot Frank a look that invited him to say something.

"Why do you say Jeremy's not a friend?" Frank asked, but the way he said it suggested that he knew more than he was willing to give away. "Oliver said... I mean, he was talking like he was afraid that you were going to give away some big secret or something. Did you know Jay was snooping around?"

David shrugged, and then winced before rotating his shoulder. "The guy's not as subtle as he thinks he is."

"So were you going to?"

"Going to what, Frank?"

"Tell him a secret... like the one you were going to tell me."

David's steps faltered, but he managed to catch himself before Frank had the chance to, and he kept walking as if it would change Frank's mind about asking that question. It didn't.

"David, what were you going to tell me that night? When you called... if I'

d gotten there sooner, what would you have told me?"

"I don't remember calling you. Maybe it was..."

"Don't play games with me!" Frank snapped, surprising both himself and David with his tone, who finally stopped walking to look at Frank as if he were ready to ward off an attack. "You called me. You. You asked me for my help, and I get that I fucked it up then, but now's different. Tell me what you would have said if I'd gotten to you. Please, David."

David snorted, and then used Frank's shirt to nab some more blood from his nose. "I don't know," he finally responded, managing an obnoxiously sarcastic tone. "Maybe I would've told you that my family's completely fucked, and that you should stay away unless you wanna get hurt, since Oliver clearly couldn't manage to stay away from you. Or maybe I would've told you to start talking about it to people who wouldn't ignore the truth, get me and Oliver out... or that if you didn't bad things would start to happen, like my mom going psycho and trying to kill me!"

"Or maybe you were going to tell me what happened to Odetta Grover."

Frank's interruption might have taken David off guard, but he did a good job of hiding it, his mind going blank as it fought for a response for only seconds before he shook his head. "What does that old bitch have to do with anything?" He had to be careful. Things had changed drastically in the last fifteen minutes, because before then, he'd been damn sure that he was dead. But now he was free, in more ways than one, he realized. If he could keep things together. He had to keep things together. He had to think. Think about anything, except for a recent confession he'd made to his mother, and one he had no intention of allowing her to repeat.

"According to Jeremy, a lot," Frank replied, moving around David to better face him. David frowned. With the whole forest to escape into, Frank made him feel trapped. "Look, I might have been a little slow about some things, David, but I know that if you were just going to tell me your parents were hurting you, you would have done it when I asked you--you wouldn't have told me to look deeper unless there was something bigger... maybe something you weren't so sure you wanted to tell me. Oliver said that there were things no one could know, 'cause you'd get in trouble..."

"And if that was true what makes you think I'd tell you any of it?" David snapped.

"I don't know... maybe you needed to... Maybe, it was too much to keep carrying around with you. David, is there something you need to say, but you're afraid you'll be in trouble if you do?"

David looked over Frank from underneath downturned lashes, remaining silent until Frank appeared to be as uncomfortable as he was. "Can I trust you, Frank?"

It seemed like a funny question. To both of them.

"I could say yes," Frank replied carefully. "But I don't think it would matter. You would never let anyone decide who you could trust for you."

David's attempt to laugh was quickly smothered as he choked on his own coughing. "I think we should keep moving," he finally said, but Frank didn't move.

"Odetta Grover called Jay's house the night she died," Frank said. "Any idea what he heard?"

"Wouldn't have a clue."

"She was scared. Thought someone was trying to hurt her."

David's posture stiffened as he turned away from Frank again. "What do you want from me?"

"I don't know," Frank admitted. "I guess I just... I want to know what I'm dealing with here. What your parents did to you--they're not going to get away with it, David. After tonight, they'll never hurt you or Oliver again. They'll pay for it... but I think maybe, there's something else your dad should be paying for. Did he kill Odetta Grover, David? Or are you too afraid to say anything about it because someone else did?"

If David wasn't too busy going numb inside, he might have noticed how nervous Frank suddenly seemed, as if he'd just done the exact thing that he didn't want to do. But David certainly didn't notice. Couldn't. He felt like the world was going blank in front of him, everything gone except the fact that he wasn't going to let anyone lock him up again as he searched for clarity. No. His parents would pay. It didn't really matter what they paid for at this point, either, as far as David was concerned.

"My dad did it." He'd said the words so calmly that it was as if it hadn't really left his mouth, but the look on Frank's face told him otherwise. Frank looked... relieved. "I didn't see it happen... but she was dead when... when..."

"It's okay, David," Frank insisted, gently reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder. David looked at that hand for several moments. Frank Seaberg. Now he remembered why he wanted Oliver to be friends with him in the first place. The guy was actually a friend. Nothing like David had ever known. He actually cared. He cared about Oliver, and he'd believe David. David was pretty sure Frank Seaberg would be a friend to anyone who he thought was being wronged... but his dad had known it, too. David had tried to do Frank a favor by telling Oliver to stay away from him, stay away from things that could get Frank hurt. That's why David was rather certain that when the time came, Frank Seaberg would do him a favor, too.

"She was already dead when he made Oliver and me put her in the boat, make it look like an accident. Oliver doesn't know. When things scare him, he forgets. He won't know if you ask him."

"But you know. You've gotta tell, David... If your dad made you help him, no one's going to blame you. Please just promise me... David?"

Frank found himself grabbing the other boy's shoulders once again when David started to stagger, as if his legs had suddenly decided that he'd been on them too long, and Frank became increasingly worried as he tried to decide if David's face was a shade paler than it had been a moment before.

"I want to keep going," David said quietly, and this time instead of thinking it over, Frank gave a decisive nod and allowed David to lead the way through the forest.

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Brenda Crook lifted the still-warm batch of muffins from the top of the stove and brought them to her nose, inhaling deeply. She loved the smell of muffins. Muffins or cake. Actually, she loved the smell of anything that came out of the oven. She often claimed that the only time she could ever drown out the stench of her husband's cigars was when she was baking. Brenda Crook baked a lot.

Using a newly manicured nail, she stuck her finger into one of the warm muffins to dig out a plump blueberry, which she promptly popped into her mouth. Using that same fingernail, she picked her teeth, taking a few moments to contemplate the last time she'd eaten corn before her attention turned elsewhere.

She could hear her husband's boots clanking away on the front porch before he even entered the house, and by the time he had one foot in she was standing in front of him with her arms crossed, her interrogation ready to commence.

"You stupid old drunkard!" she snapped at his red, weary face. "Where on earth have you been? Do you have any idea what I've been putting up with from the sheriff's station? I warned you when you volunteered Howard! You'd have your duties! And do you remember what you told me? Easy as pie, Brenda, easy as pie! Well, you fat, lazy..."

Howard dismissed her with a wave of his hand as he hung his hat and ran a hand over what was left of his greasy hair. "Don't bother with dinner, Brenda. Had it at the club. Where's dessert?"

Mary gaped at him as he passed her by before she looked down at the oven mitt, conveniently hanging from her right hand, and she threw it at him. "There is no dessert! And you have to get up to the lake. Now, Howard, or I'll call all your friends and tell them you're neglecting your responsibilities again. D'you really want that getting around town?"

Howard huffed more than he sighed as he turned to face his...well, that woman. "What're you going on about already?" he demanded. "Can't you see I'm tired here?"

"Well be tired later. You've gotta get out to the lake."

"You already said that woman! Now get on with the point!"

Brenda turned her head for a moment, making a point to look offended. But,

when she decided that it would get her no sympathy--which it never did--s he simply looked put out as she crossed her arms and returned her gaze to her husband. "Mary Martin called here sounding funny."

"Funny?"

"Funny. I think that husband of hers has been beating on her and the kids . You know the man's no good, Howard, everyone does."

"Don't you start making accusations, you know how I feel about you and your gossip; and if I find out you've called up anyone..."

"I'm not finished, Howard."

"Oh, for the love of..."

"And just a little while ago," Brenda continued, "I got a message forwarded from the emergency number from that Flaskis boy. He was going on about Odetta Grover..."

"Odetta Grover?"

"Claims he can prove she was murdered. I know he took her death rough, but obviously..."

"Did he say anything else, Brenda?"

"Something about the Martins being involved. Oh, and something about waiting for you with the Seabergs. And I'm pretty sure he said something about one of the Martin boys disappearing... or maybe he said that one of the m was with him. The people out that way are so strange, you know. Except for Mr. Dron. A sweet man, that one. I asked him to check up on Mary since I couldn't reach you, but when I tried to call her up about twenty minutes ago there was no answer. When you go see her, will you bring her some of my muffins?"

Howard clenched his teeth as he went back to the door and retrieved his hat. If he rolled his eyes, she'd see it, and then he'd never get out.

"Don't wait up, Brenda," he said as he left their house. "I think it's gonna be a long night."

"Hold on a minute, Howard, the muffins!"

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"Hurry up, Rudy," Jay insisted, fidgeting against his bound hands as Rudy's small ones attempted to free them.

"I'm trying," Rudy insisted. "The rope's really tight."

"You have to pull it through that loop. There."

Jay glanced over his shoulder to find Oliver standing next to Rudy, and wasn't sure if he was disturbed by this or not, but still, he gave Rudy a nod. "Try it."

"It's still too tight," Rudy insisted, but never once stopped trying. "I don't want him to hurt my mom, Jay."

"Don't think about that right now," Jay insisted, and then looked back at Oliver again. "Are you sure no one's coming?"

Oliver nodded.

“Will Frank be here soon?” Rudy asked. “What if he gets tricked, too? Then who’ll come?”

“Stop thinking about it, Rudy,” Jay said firmly, just as he felt the bindings around his wrists loosen enough to pull one hand free. Bringing his hands in front of him as he cracked his knuckles he turned to face his fellow hostages, focusing on Oliver. “I’d better be able to trust you,” he remarked, and then ordered, “Turn around, I’m gonna untie you.”

Oliver frowned uncertainly, but did as he was told, and found himself wishing that Jay’s knot-untying skills were better than Rudy’s. Unfortunately, that didn’t seem to be the case, and it was unclear whether Jay or Oliver was more frustrated by it.

Rudy suddenly turned, her attention focused on the door, and Jay’s attention snapped to her as she moved towards it. “Rudy,” he hissed. “Get back here.”

“I just wanna see if we can get out,” she replied. “My mom’s out there...”

She stopped in front of the door, her little hand reaching for the knob before Jay abandoned Oliver and managed to pull it back just before her fingers reached it. She jumped, looking up at him with wide eyes.

“Just be patient,” Jay told her. “We’ll find out in just...”

A muffled sound moving down the hallway caused Rudy’s fingernails to dig into Jay’s hand as he pulled her away from the door. “Get over here,” he whispered as they moved past Oliver.

“He’s coming back now,” Oliver said quietly before looking at Jay. “You’re gonna be in trouble, Jeremy.”

“Shut up, and get down, Oliver,” Jay retorted as he and Rudy reached the bathtub, where he led her to sit on the edge beside him. She was quick to follow his lead as he moved his freed hands behind his back. “Rudy,” he said quietly, “listen to me, alright? If he comes near us, I want you to get in the tub and stay down, got it?”

She nodded slowly, her eyes focused straight ahead. Jay wasn’t even sure if she’d understood anything he’d said, but there was no time to repeat the question as the obstruction holding them inside the bathroom was suddenly moved and the door swung open.

Brian Martin shouldn’t have looked so normal. A normal man. A husband, a father, a guy who liked to go hunting and fishing with his sons... it was all sick, Jay decided as he stared back at the man standing in the doorway, the man smiling at him before looking over the rest of his captives.

“Everyone comfortable?” he asked, before laughing to himself in a way that suggested he expected everyone else to do the same. He placed a hand on the door, as if to close it, and determined to keep that from happening, Jay spoke up.

“You should let us go now,” he said, surprised by how calm he sounded. “This isn’t something you’ll get away with... I know about your wife. Someone’s going to find out what you did to her and come looking for you.”

Brian’s eyes widened comically, his tone as innocent as could be. “A tragedy, isn’t it? It’s too bad no one will feel sorry for her; I mean, after they find out she killed her own son... poor David. His brother missed him so much--that’s why you did it, right Oliver? Your mother took your brother away from you, and that’s why you got angry. I’m sure they were arguing when she said something that made him snap. Must have strangled her without realizing it.”

On the floor, Oliver’s eyes widened as he looked up at his father, the image of his own fingers touching the bruises on his mother’s neck still fresh in his mind.

“I...” he started. “I don’t...”

“Of course you don’t remember,” Brian supplied for him. “You’re a retard. There’s a lot of things you don’t...”

“You didn’t kill her, Oliver,” Jay suddenly snapped, and then looked at Brian. “And no one will believe he did.” His eyes shifted to Brian’s left hand, the thick silver band on his finger. “His hands aren’t big enough... and he wasn’t wearing your wedding ring, was he? Are those scratches on your arm, Mr. Martin? I wonder if your wife has blood on her nails... or maybe Mrs. Seaberg does.”

Brian stared at Jay for a long moment and then smirked. “You think you’re smart, don’t you boy? Well, why don’t you see for yourself.”

Keeping his eyes suspiciously on Jay, Brian Martin slowly knelt and reached behind the door before dragging something forward that seemed heavy. Jessica Seaberg seemed to be nothing but dead weight in his hands. Her head was slumped forward, her shirt torn at the sleeve, and the left side of her face swollen with a fresh, ugly bruise as he pulled her into the room.

“Mom!” Rudy screeched, and before Jay could stop her, she was on her feet, her freed hands no longer concealed as she rushed towards her mother.

“Rudy, no!” Jay shouted, but it was too late as Brian Martin’s eyes widened on the little girl as he dropped her mother on the floor, his hand raising as if to strike, the danger unbeknownst to Rudy.

On the floor, as Jessica’s head landed uncomfortably on Oliver’s chest, Oliver found himself between his father and Frank’s little sister. And for once, he wasn’t confused. Don’t forget, Oliver. Don’t listen to them. Be like David, he told himself. David never cared if he got in trouble. Be like David.

As his father’s hand came down towards Rudy, Oliver lifted his feet as best as he could, his worn shoes making contact with his father’s knees and sending the old man tripping back against the wall. Startled, Rudy stopped a foot short of reaching her mother to duck on the floor, her thin arms flying def

ensively over her head, and all Oliver could see were Jeremy Flaskis's shoes flying over his head as he attacked, his fists hitting Brian Martin sporadically and hard as the two of them fell outside the bathroom door.

Finding himself over Brian Martin's mid-section, Jay found himself with only one goal, and that was to make the man beneath him stop. He blocked the older man's hand coming towards his face with his forearm, and felt his own knuckles crack on Brian Martin's teeth before he felt a sharp pain at the back of his skull as Brian managed to get a hand in his hair, and before Jay realized what was happening his feet were off the ground and Brian's furious eyes had pinned him. Jay's back hit the corner of the doorframe, the hand around his neck cut off the air from his lungs and while his arms flailed he was pushed back until his feet were colliding with Oliver's face below the sink.

Rudy screamed, the sound high pitched and echoing off the walls in the small space as she watched Brian Martin slam Jay's head against the bathroom mirror until there was the sound of glass breaking and Jay's eyes rolled back, and then she was silenced as she found herself in the middle of a cluster of bodies on the floor as Jay unconsciously fell over herself, her mother, and Oliver, and her mind was too blank to realize Oliver was being dragged from the room before the light went out, the door slammed shut, and there was silence in the little room once again.

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"Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Frank's outburst, combined with his efforts to pull his own hair out, was met with silence as David stared blankly at the front of his house. "Okay. We can deal with this...fuck. I can't believe he just left. Maybe Jay's going to send help. We should wait. No. No. It's not safe here. David, can you keep moving? We have to get across the lake. I think they would've gone to my place. If we can get there...David?"

To turn around and find that David was no longer with him was unsettling at the very least, but rather than panic, Frank calmly turned his attention towards the open door of the Martin house. Climbing the front steps two at a time, he decided against knocking before entering.

"David?"

The house still smelled like smoke from Oliver's botched cooking as Frank moved in slowly, his instincts causing him to shut the door as if he feared someone entering the house behind him. The lights were still on, the telephone off the hook, but something he hadn't noticed before: the rug pulled back, the dark stain on the carpeting drawing his attention. Frowning to himself but passing this new development, Frank headed towards the hall as the sound of a muffled sneeze reached his ears.

"David, we really shouldn't stay here," he called, pausing briefly in front of Oliver's bedroom, looking in to find it empty before he moved towards the

next opened door, where he stopped, too shocked by the sight of David standing over his mother's corpse to properly respond to it.

"She's dead," David unnecessarily announced, his voice coming out in a strange monotone. In the light, David himself looked like a corpse standing over his mother in his water-crusted clothing, with his skin so pale that the shadows beneath his eyes along with every bruise and scratch stood out with horrifying clarity.

As Frank looked away from Mary Martin and in David's direction, he became disturbed enough by the sight of both of them to want to flee, but forced himself to go forward instead. He was almost careful to not get too close to the body, moving pointedly behind David instead. Frank lifted his hand, wanting to lend David some kind of support, but it only dropped back to his side as the other boy's posture became undeniably unapproachable. "I'm sorry," Frank whispered, and then felt completely tactless as he added, "David, we really need to get out of here."

David was still for several long moments before he suddenly moved towards the nightstand alongside the bed, and Frank watched as he opened the top drawer.

"What are you doing?" Frank asked.

"She usually keeps them in here," David replied as he shuffled through a pile of receipts and jewelry, and then came up with a small keychain holding two keys. He turned towards Frank, holding them out. "Should be a car behind the garage. It runs like crap... but it runs."

Surprised by the unexpected blessing, Frank reached out and grasped the keys. "Come on, let's go."

But, instead of heading towards the door, David looked back at his mother.

"I wanna minute with her," he replied, that strange monotone returning to his voice as he blankly took in what was in front of him.

Frank frowned, looking down at Mary's body, and then back at David. He wasn't sure why he wanted to object to David's wishes, but he knew he did, and that he had to fight it. Swallowing hard, he finally nodded, despite the fact that David wasn't looking at him. "Meet me out front," he said, and then went in search of their transportation.

David heard Frank's footsteps fade away, and when he was met with silence he blinked, his eyes suddenly focused on his mother's open eyes. He took a step towards the bed, shaking his head as he felt a small smirk grow across his face. "I want you to know something," he whispered, talking down to his mother as if she were still there to hear him. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry he beat me to you."

Sliding his hands into his damp pockets, David Martin moved slowly past his mother's bed, pausing only briefly to pay his last respects as he looked back long enough to spit at her feet.

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Frank all but kicked the Volvo in front of him out of frustration as he looked towards the house. It had been ten minutes, and the vehicle kept stalling on him as he waited for David. But even in the midst of all the insanity of this night Frank felt the need to be patient. David's mother was dead. Oliver's mother was dead. Thinking of Oliver's off-behavior, Frank felt a pang of guilt. If he'd known about Mary, maybe he would have approached Oliver a little more sympathetically. He likely wouldn't have left Oliver with Jay, who wasn't the most patient person in the world.

And there was a fucking body in the house. It seemed like a good enough reason as any not to go back in there. But then, David was in there, too. It was late, definitely past dinner. Brian Martin should have been due home soon. Maybe he was due home already. Frank didn't want to find out what would happen if the man showed up, now that there was no doubt in his mind what Oliver's father was capable of.

"David!" Frank called, raising his voice as the hair at the nape of his neck uncomfortably stood up and he headed towards the house again. "David, seriously, we have to..."

He stopped short when David's figure appeared in the doorway, and for a moment, Frank felt guilty for his impatience when he saw David had taken the time to put on dry clothes. Warm clothes. Thick sweatpants and a sweater, and in his hands was a bottle of water and what looked like a bag of crackers. "When was the last time you ate?" Frank found himself asking as he went to meet him.

"Don't know," David replied, although his tone strictly forbade any pity coming his way. In fact, he sounded rather nonchalant, something that struck Frank as odd before he decided to ignore it.

"Alright... ready to get out of here? Oliver and Jay should be at my place by now," Frank said optimistically. "Bet you we run into cops on the way there."

"Have you met the cops around here, Frank?"

Frank frowned. "Right. Let's just get out of here."

Ten minutes later, and Frank was taking the dark roads slowly, uncomfortable in the unfamiliar vehicle as he continued to glance at David, who was looking rather uncomfortable himself. His head kept lolling, his throat seemingly knotting up every time he tried to take the smallest sip of water, and each time a shadow crossed their path he gave Frank the impression that he was ready to jump from the vehicle.

"Are you doing alright?" Frank asked. "We're almost there."

"Just worry about the road, Frank," David said, his voice becoming a strained rasp.

Frank frowned, but as he looked forward again, David's warning seemed to ha

ve some merit as he moved around another sharp corner, only to have headlights shining back at him. Startled, Frank hit the brakes, and David, who hadn't bothered to buckle up, braced himself as the bald tires skidded ten feet over the dirt road before it came to a jerking halt.

Frank, with his knuckles white on the steering wheel stared through the glass, disoriented as the dust cleared in front of the headlights before he was able to put together what he was looking at. The pickup truck was halfway off the road, imbedded in the trees, and as he looked harder, Frank could make out a shadow slumped over in the front seat.

"Let's keep going," David said, and Frank looked at him like he'd lost his mind.

"There's someone there, they might need help."

"We need help."

"Stay here then," Frank stated as he opened his door, pausing to remove the keys from the ignition before he left the vehicle. He headed towards the truck, shielding his eyes from the headlights as he got closer. He didn't see who was inside the truck until he'd pulled the front door open. Mr. Dron was the last one he expected to see, especially since the intimidating old man no longer looked so intimidating--unconscious and injured.

Mr. Dron suddenly groaned, causing Frank to step back in surprise, and only then did he notice the light up ahead in the road, a second vehicle that had been involved in the crash. It didn't take him long to figure out who it belonged to.

"Oliver!" he shouted, Mr. Dron forgotten as he ran towards Jay's mangled car. "Oliver!"

He reached the opened front door, looked inside, and wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed to find that Oliver and Jay were missing from it. Taking a deep breath, Frank moved back and saw David staggering in his direction. "They're not here," Frank called as he moved to meet him. "They must have walked the rest of the way. Come on, we've gotta get Mr. Dron."

"Why?" David rasped.

"Because we're not leaving him here," Frank said firmly. "If you don't wanna help, get back in the car."

David frowned, but obviously decided that the task would go faster with both of them involved because he was on the opposite side of Mr. Dron when Frank led the disoriented older man from the truck to the back seat of the Volvo.

This time as they moved down the dark, winding roads, Frank drove even slower, windows down as they searched the trees for any sign of Oliver or Jay, and before Frank realized it, he was looking at the back of his own house.

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Frank opened the passenger door of the Volvo, and looked in at David, who looked ready to fall asleep against the front seat.

“Come on, David, let’s get you inside.”

David looked towards the side of the house, the light coming from the windows, and shook his head. “I’ll wait,” he said quietly, and when Frank didn’t seem satisfied, David gestured to Mr. Dron in the back seat. “With him.”

Frank opened his mouth to object to either of them remaining there, but let out a breath instead as he looked to where Mr. Dron was hunched over in the back seat. “I’ll be right back,” he promised, and then moved towards the house, pausing when his eyes shifted towards his mother’s car, or rather, what was behind it. The shadow on the lake wasn’t something he remembered seeing there before, especially since it looked a lot like the larger boats docked near the town. Frowning, he watched it for a few moments, feeling that something was off, but unable to decide what it was. A shadow. That’s what made it strange. No lights.

Frank looked back at his house, suspiciously this time as a strange feeling crept up his spine and he backed away from all light that came from the windows, suddenly not wanting to be caught in it. Instead of heading for the front door he made his way around the side of the house, briefly pausing to look through his sister’s bedroom window where the light was off. He could see the door was open to the hallway, and for a long moment he listened for his parents’ voices, his eyes darting across the shadows of the room, unsure of whether or not they were really moving.

He brought his face closer to the glass, shading his eyes with a hand in hopes of seeing better, completely unprepared for the dark mass that suddenly appeared in front of his face. Startled, and feeling like something massive was coming through the window at him, Frank tripped backwards, gasping as his back made contact with the ground, the air rushing from his lungs.

Frank looked up, ready to bolt if necessary, and nearly kicked himself as his eyes focused on the dark cat sitting up in the window, looking down at him as if he was the one with the problem. Shaking his head he stood up, mindlessly dusting himself off as the blinding fear slowly faded away. And then came back with a vengeance as his eyes widened on a familiar yellow truck parked beneath the shadows no more than ten feet away from him.

Frank stared at Brian Martin’s vehicle for a hard moment, knowing that the man in question wasn’t in it, but still concerned that the engine would roar to life at any moment and run him down. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to think. Here. Brian Martin. If he was inside, perhaps he was fooling Frank’s mom. Maybe he hadn’t hurt her. But then, thinking of Mary Martin, Frank was less than convinced that his family was safe, and he found himself hoping that his mom and Rudy weren’t alone. Frank’s father seemed to be very good at abandoning them, but this time, this time, Frank thought, he

couldn't. He just couldn't.

Cautiously moving towards the yellow truck, Frank looked back around the house, deciding that it was clear, but that still didn't stop him from picking up what used to be the handle of an old rake as he continued to circle his way back. He paused near the kitchen window next; the light was on, but nothing looked out of the ordinary inside. Deciding they were in the living room, he made his way back to the front of the house where once again, he froze.

A few feet from the house, beneath the porch light Frank watched the boy who he quickly believed to be David, but after further examination he realized the clothes were wrong, the posture. The back was to him, head ducked as the boy shifted nervously from foot to foot, making a strange sound that sounded like muffled words, or maybe humming.

"Oliver?" Frank whispered, taking a cautious step forward, examining the area for any sign of danger before he felt comfortable enough to continue. "Oliver," he said again, lowering the stick in his hand as he quickened his pace, moving forward until he was reaching out, his hand sliding over a trembling shoulder. "Oliver," he said firmly, forcing his friend to turn around. But, when Oliver's hazel eyes met his, Frank reeled back in shock, taking in cuts and scrapes, but more noticeably, bound hands and a taped mouth. Frank's moment of clarity came quickly as he understood more than he cared to, and a little too late as he spun around, his eyes widening on Brian Martin's angry face, and then the butt of a rifle he couldn't stop from making harsh contact with his forehead. Falling, lost, defeated, Frank Seaberg hit the ground, his eyes focusing on the Volvo parked past the drive, the open passenger door, and while he didn't mark it with any significance at the time, his last thought before the world went black was that David Martin seemed to have disappeared once again.

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There was a soft humming, insistent rocking beneath him. Perhaps it would have been a calming sensation if Frank's head didn't feel like it had been trampled by stampeding cows. He moved his fingers at his side, flattening his hand over the surface he seemed to be lying on. A cheap mattress, he decided. A cheap, hard mattress that did nothing to separate the springs from him.

Opening his eyes he found darkness, shadows. A small curtained window seemed to be somewhere above him, and there was the scent of old wood and dust, the muskiness of damp carpeting. Frank took in a deep breath, was careful to be still for a long moment. He was definitely moving, and there were limited ideas that came to mind when it came to moving bedrooms. But then, he didn't have to think about it too long because his instincts told him that he was on the water. It felt like he was on the water. And there'd be

en the boat, which obviously no longer was in front of his house.

Ignoring the pain that spread from his forehead down the back of his neck, Frank tried to sit up, only to have his heart momentarily stop in his chest as a large hand came down over his shoulder. He opened his mouth to scream, his body no longer taking caution with his injuries as he struggled against the hand that came down sternly over his mouth and his fingers gripped a strong wrist, trying to pry it away.

“Shh!” he heard against his ear. “You’re okay. You’re okay, Frank.”

The voice he recognized, and the restraining arms around him suddenly became a source of comfort for Frank, one he remembered from his childhood. He wanted to feel safe there, with his father. He wanted to be calm, allow his worries to disappear knowing that a man who was supposed to be invincible would take care of everything. But as Frank sat there, in the dark, leaning back against his father’s chest and allowing his chest to heave in each breath in time with his safety net, he realized that at that moment, his father had never seemed more human.

“It’s not okay,” Frank stated, struggling away, feeling his way off the mattress and catching himself against the rocking floor beneath his feet. His hands moved to search the walls, finding a bolted-down picture frame, a lamp... a light switch. He flicked the four times, and nothing.

“Here,” he heard Sam say, “I already tried that, and then there was a soft light in the small cabin, his father sitting on a full sized mattress holding a lantern. He looked worn, but not hurt.

“What happened?” Frank asked.

“I’m not sure,” Sam replied, placing the lamp on a short floorstand. “Are you alright?”

“No.”

Sam’s eyes rolled upwards in a sign of impatience as he left the bed, catching himself against the rocking boat. “Have you seen your sister?” he asked.

“What?” Frank demanded.

“She was with me... we were renting the boat...”

“With Brian Martin?”

“Look, I just wanted to spend some time with you, okay?” Sam snapped. “I didn’t know the guy was a lunatic... I think I drank something. When I woke up, I was locked in, and Rudy was gone... he came back with you...”

“You lost her?” Frank all but screamed, anything else his father had to say lost on him as he became submerged in a panic, turning as his fists beat at the cabin door. “Rudy! Rudy!”

“Frank, stop!” Sam ordered, his hand wrapping around his son’s arm to yank him back. “I’m sure there are a million reasons why you should be mad at me, but none of it matters right now! You need to listen!”

Frank looked at his father, his eyes wide, his mouth open with nothing to say

“Frank...”

“He’ll kill her,” Frank got out. “He killed his wife, I saw...”

“Frank!” Sam said again, shaking him. “Listen. You have to get away from here, the first chance you get... you can still swim?”

“Dad...”

“You have to get help. I want you away from here! Do you understand me?”

“No!” Frank snapped. “I’m not you. I won’t just leave...”

“Yes you will. Promise me... swear it, Frank, the first chance...”

Sam Seaberg interrupted himself as he suddenly yanked Frank behind him, just as the cabin door flew open and he came face to face with the man he very much would have liked to murder at the moment.

“What did you do with my daughter?” Sam demanded, trying not to feel intimidated by the rifle pointed at his mid-section.

“I see the two of you are catching up,” Brian remarked. “Nothing like a father-son reunion, right, Sammy? I hope Frank’s cutting you some slack. So sad when family can’t get along.”

Frank looked around the obstruction of his father’s body, past Brian Martin, and his eyes widened on Oliver, who was standing in the background, looking numb and shaken. “Oliver!” he shouted, attempting to move forward, only to have his father hold him back.

“Frank, no!”

Brian Martin suddenly laughed, drawing both Frank and Sam’s attention. “No need to keep the boys from their fun now, Sammy,” he remarked, just before his demeanor changed, his smile faded, and he lifted the rifle. “Get out here.”

Sam didn’t move, frowning when Frank wouldn’t get behind him. “What do you want?” he demanded.

“Don’t look so upset,” Brian replied. “We’re just gonna play a little game. Now let’s go. Out.”

Frank started to move first, his eyes once again trained on Oliver, but Sam wouldn’t allow him to move too quickly, waiting for Brian Martin to back out of the doorway before he allowed Frank to break free, and even then it was because Brian had grabbed the sleeve of his shirt to hold him back.

Frank stopped in front of Oliver as their eyes met, Oliver seemingly asking him something that he didn’t know how to answer. Frank wanted to ask him plenty, too, but first he looked back at their fathers, feeling threatened as his eyes dropped to Brian’s hand on his father’s shirt before he met Sam’s eyes.

“You boys play nice for a few minutes,” Brian stated, leading Sam away, but Frank hardly heard him when the look on his father’s face seemed to be loud.

der than any voice. Sam's eyes were ordering him to listen. Listen.

"Do it," Sam stated, but there was no doubt that he wasn't talking about what Brian had just ordered them to do.

Frank suddenly wanted to follow after his father up the short flight of stairs, where Brian was taking him. But, Oliver had other ideas for him as he suddenly latched onto Frank's hands with both of his, pulling him around the narrow walkway, towards the bow.

"Oliver..." Frank started.

"Are you okay, Frank?" Oliver suddenly asked. "I'm sorry, Frank. I'm sorry."

Frank sighed, glancing up to see that above them Brian still had the rifle on his father, who was now driving the boat. Brian looked in his and Oliver's direction, smirking, and Frank found himself pulling Oliver back even further until they stood against the side of an inflated life raft covered by old blankets. "It's not your fault, Oliver," Frank stated, and then lowered his voice even more. "I found your brother."

Oliver looked both hopeful and terrified by the notion.

"He's okay," Frank said. "I mean, I think... I don't know where he went." Frank stole another glance at Brian Martin to make sure he wasn't listening too carefully, while Oliver's gaze seemed to drift to Frank's father.

"Frank? Why's your dad looking at you like that, Frank?"

Frank looked at Sam and frowned. "Because he wants us to get off the boat."

Oliver was quick to shake his head, obviously disturbed by the idea. "No, Frank. That's a bad idea, Frank... he'll find us... he'll find us."

"I don't know," Frank replied, looking over the lake. He could see land close enough, and a glance to his father told him that they'd be getting closer, only, he no longer knew what side of the lake they were on. "There's a lot of places to disappear out here."

"Frank..." Oliver groaned.

"Hey," Brian suddenly said sharply. "What're you two talking about down there?"

"Nothing," Frank said quickly, looking hard at Oliver before he whispered.

"Trust me."

Oliver's eyes widened. "Frank..."

"Hey, get up here!" Brian shouted. "Both of you!"

Frank heard a click. The gun.

"Oliver... go!" Frank suddenly lunged forward, shoving Oliver towards the side of the boat. "I'm right behind you!" he shouted, just as Brian shouted for them to stop. Oliver moved, climbing up the rails as the boat suddenly rocked, a shot fired, and looking over his shoulder, Frank was just in time to see his father tackle Brian Martin.

“Frank, hurry!” Sam called.

Frank turned back to Oliver, knowing that there was no turning back now. They had to get off the boat. There wouldn’t be another chance. “Jump!” he shouted, moving to step over the raft at his feet, and perhaps he would have if the blankets hadn’t suddenly moved, rising into the air until they were as tall as he was.

Startled, Frank reeled back as the force under the blankets shook free, and suddenly he found himself separated from Oliver by no one other than David, who was looking at him strangely just before he turned, grabbed the back of Oliver’s shirt and pulled him back.

Two brothers, nearly identical, nearly, Frank now realized, faced each other. One was in shock. One was smiling.

“Hi, Oliver,” David said. “Hope you’re not going anywhere just yet.”

And then Frank watched David Martin’s fist force its way against Oliver’s face.

A/N: Yeah, I know. There will be one more. Seriously this time. One.

Chapter 14

by DomLuka

Thanks to Jim for editing!

There was a lot about the night’s events that Frank was certain he’d never forget, and a lot that he thought was just plain insane, and even more that he had no way of comprehending; but at the moment, nothing confused him more than David Martin. In fact, as Frank sat on the ground at the bow of the boat, his arm around Oliver as they tried to get his nose to stop bleeding, Frank decided that he was tired of trying to figure David out.

David was crazy. End of subject.

Made perfect sense. But not really.

The last long minutes of Frank’s life hadn’t made sense at all, because no one had seemed more shocked to see David on that boat than Brian Martin.

In fact, Frank was under the impression that Brian had never expected to see David again, but now that he’d figured out that wasn’t the case, Brian seemed overly pleased with the more unstable of his two sons. He’d even produced a second weapon, and disturbingly, David seemed to be very comfortable with it in his hands as he watched over Oliver and Frank.

Braving a glance over his shoulder, Frank saw his father watching him from above where he was seated next to the wheel. Brian was now in charge of navigation, and both of them looked irritated, but then, both of them had faces swelling in places due to badly aimed punches.

And it was quiet. Except for the sound of the engine, the water hitting the sides of the boat, it seemed too quiet. The tension was suffocating, and the fear... Frank didn’t really want to think about the fear.

“What are you doing?” Frank whispered. He didn’t know exactly why he was t

alking to David, but it was likely out of desperation.

David smiled at Frank, much like a parent amused by a confused child. "I'm surviving, Frank."

"You're out of your mind," Frank retorted. "Look what your parents did to you... Your mom's dead, David... and your dad...you're helping your dad."

"Nothing about the notion was comprehensible for Frank. "He was going to go to jail for a very long time. Now what do you think is going to happen to you? Neither of you will get away with this. Jay called people from your house... someone's gonna know what happened. And what about your brother, David? What happens to Oliver?"

Oliver frowned at Frank, as if he'd really rather not think about that himself.

"If I were you, Frank," David replied, "I'd be more worried about myself. See, it doesn't really matter when it comes to anyone else. Think about it; if you don't survive, and let's face it, there's a good chance you won't, then what does it matter what happens to everyone else after you're gone. They're their own problem. It's out of your control...I mean, unless you take control."

"And is that what you're doing?" Frank replied.

David shrugged. "Maybe. I might as well have it, right? I don't trust anyone besides myself... and lately I've been thinking that it was stupid to think I could." He seemed to direct this last remark at Oliver, who became visibly upset by it.

"I don't want you to be in trouble anymore, David," Oliver said.

"I know you don't," David replied. "But the thing is, that just isn't up to you anymore, Oliver. Never was."

"David!" Brian suddenly called. "Stop playing around with them and help me look for a good spot."

David looked in his father's direction calmly, right before he held his middle finger up in Brian's direction. Brian snorted, and David rolled his eyes as he stood from the railing he'd been leaning on and flicked the barrel of his gun in Frank and Oliver's direction. "Don't go nowhere," he remarked. "You won't wanna miss what happens next."

Above them, Sam released a frustrated breath that he hoped covered his nervousness and looked at Brian. "This is ridiculous. Why don't you just let the boys go, alright? We can settle this ourselves."

Brian laughed. "Sorry, Sammy. I just can't bring myself to do that."

"They're just kids!" Sam snapped.

"I know, and trust me, we wouldn't have nearly as much fun without them."

.....

In the sixth grade, Jeremy Flaskis tried to join the football team at school

1. Twenty minutes into his first practice, he was tackled during an exercise and fractured his collarbone, and learned exactly why an athletic cup was invented. So after careful consideration, he decided that he wasn't one to do pain and took up photography instead. But he'd always wondered if giving up on becoming the school's most popular jock, perhaps the future homecoming king and maybe even superhuman babe magnet, had been worth abandoning just to avoid a long series of injuries that he would likely endure as a result of following those dreams. Waking up in the Seaberg's bathroom with broken glass stuck in his hair only convinced him that he had, indeed, made an appropriate decision.

"Jeremy? How many fingers, Jeremy?"

Jeremy opened one eye, then the other as he stared up at the woman talking very loudly over him. "You're pretty."

Jessica Seaberg liked to think that she had a sense of humor, but this didn't seem like the time to display it. "Can you get up?" she asked.

Jay thought about it for a minute, among other things. He thought until he remembered exactly how he'd ended up on the bathroom floor with sore places that he hadn't even known he had, and then he answered her question by bolting upright, looking around as if he half expected to be assaulted again.

"Are you alright?" Jessica asked. "Do you know where you are?"

Jay gave a short nod, partly in response, and in part to test his stiff neck before his eyes settled on Rudy, who was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, looking pale in the face. Suffering a moment of confusion, the redheaded little girl he saw was his sister and his concern was immediate. "Stephanie?"

Both Rudy and Jessica looked at him oddly, and he shook his head, attempting to pull himself together. "Rudy," he corrected himself. "Are you doing alright?"

Rudy sniffed, wiping away invisible tears. "He took Oliver."

Jay looked towards the door, and with Jessica's assistance, found his feet.

"We think they left the house," Jessica explained. "Jay, what's going on?"

"We have to get out," Jay replied, moving to try the doorknob.

"It's jammed from the outside," Jessica said, but she'd hardly finished the sentence before the bang of Jay's body hitting the wooden door echoed through the room, and then again, and again as he repeatedly rammed the side of his body against it, and then for good measure, he started to kick.

"Jay..." Jessica started to object, but realizing that the boy's idea was better than any she currently had, she ended up next to him, the two of them attempting to knock the door in.

"Mommy!" Rudy objected, covering her ears.

"Maybe we should wait for help," Jessica suggested, causing Jay to pause and look at her.

"If they left the house, I don't think there is help coming," he replied. "Brian killed his wife... he knows we know it, and if he doesn't already have Frank, I think he'll be going after him next."

Jessica took a moment to digest what she was hearing, and a moment later she was kicking at the door with Jeremy again.

Down the hall, past the kitchen and in the living room there was a coffee table wedged up against the back of the sofa. A keepsake Jessica had acquired from her late grandfather. Unbeknownst to her, someone had carelessly left a pile of old receipts and pages from one of Rudy's many coloring books scattered over the surface, beneath a low-burning candle that had recently been standing decoratively atop the dresser in her bedroom. A stray cat that Frank had refused to place outside sat on the floor, wagging its long tail as it watched the shadows from the flame with interest, releasing a loud mew as a colored picture of a horse caught fire and went up in flames; and as the small fire slowly spread the feline's instincts did exactly what they were supposed to do as the animal fled out a crack beneath the kitchen counter, into the woods, and away from the danger.

.....
"How long was I down there, Frank? How long was I... nothing."

It had started sprinkling again, the raindrops tapping the trees, water feeling unclean as it dripped down from above. Frank's shoes were soggy, his pants drenched from tracking through waist-deep water as they made their way into a little cove, away from the boat. No porch lights in the distance, no lights from the dock. He felt disoriented as he looked over his shoulder at David, who trailed the line Brian Martin led with Frank, Sam and Oliver somewhere in the middle.

"You weren't nothing," Frank replied, insisting to himself that now was not the time to say anything cruel, anything provoking.

"Just answer the question," David responded.

"Nine days. I think."

David released a bemused little sigh. "That's all? Felt longer."

"I'm sor—"

"Of course you are. Now," David interrupted.

Frank continued walking, sharing a glance with Oliver, who was in front of him. It was meant to encourage each other, but if that was the purpose, their efforts failed miserably.

"Do I get to ask a question now?" Frank asked David.

"You don't have to," David replied. "I already know what you're thinking."

"I doubt it."

"It's not that hard to figure out. You're wondering the same thing that I was wondering for... what was it? Nine days."

“David...”

“You want to know what’s going to happen to you,” David continued. “You want to know if this is really happening, if you’re going to die before the sun comes back up. Bet you’re wondering if it’s gonna hurt.”

“Okay. Just stop,” Frank stated.

“Wouldn’t that be nice? If we could all just stop... wake up in our beds tomorrow and know...”

“Know what?” Frank asked.

“That we’re somewhere better.”

“You can stop this,” Frank whispered, his voice becoming a little more shaky than he was comfortable with. “David, you can...”

“You’re not listening,” David cut him off. “You can’t ask for my help. You have to trust yourself... you’re the only one out here you can trust. So... aren’t you going to ask?”

“Ask what?”

“What’s going to happen to you.”

“I would... if I didn’t think you were going to tell me it was up to me.”

“You don’t think it is?”

“I don’t know, David,” Frank responded irritably. “If I had a choice I’d run... but then you’d shoot me in the back.”

“So don’t run, it’d be a bad choice.”

“David...”

“It’s all about choices,” David said. “You’ll see... and if you let him in your head, you’ll probably make the wrong one. But it’ll happen, Frank. He’ll be in your head. He’ll put you in the dark.”

“Is he in your head, David?”

“D’you think so?”

Frank simply shook his head. “What I think... is that you’re all a bunch of fucking lunatics.”

David laughed something that was so void of humor that it only proved as another reminder that he was definitely not Oliver, and thinking of Oliver had Frank picking up his pace to catch up to him. Oliver, who had no place out here. It was a mystery to Frank as he wondered how Oliver could have turned out the way he had with a family like this.

“I wanna go home, Frank,” Oliver whispered.

“I know you do,” Frank replied, lifting a hand to squeeze his friend’s shoulder.

Up ahead of them, Brian Martin suddenly looked back, his eyes settling on Frank. Sam saw it, and purposely moved in front of his son, but it did little good as Brian shoved him aside and grinned at Frank again.

“Why don’t you come up here with me, boy,” Brian said. “We’ll get to know each other better.”

“No,” Frank replied. “That’s okay.”

Brian frowned and looked at Sam. “Nice boy you’ve raised,” he remarked, and then pointed his rifle at Frank. “I wasn’t asking.”

Frank looked at Oliver, who shook his head. Frank couldn’t tell if Oliver was telling him to follow orders or to ignore them, but having a gun aimed in his direction didn’t really give him any desire to be disobedient. He glanced at his father, who had paled over the last few moments. Maybe, Frank thought, if he could keep Brian distracted then his dad and Oliver could get away. Maybe they could get past David. But then, the look on his father’s face was enough to tell Frank that that wasn’t going to happen. His dad wasn’t going anywhere. There was something funny about that; the fact that he had to be in mortal danger to get the old man to stick around. Something about it made Frank angry, and he found himself moving towards Brian Martin, now not only to avoid getting shot, but also in a blatant display of disobedience towards his father. He just wasn’t sure if it was worth it when Brian Martin threw an arm around his shoulders and pulled him against his side. Walking stiffly, Frank tried to ward off a sudden burst of nausea as they continued forward.

“Nice out here, isn’t it?” Brian remarked, as if they were supposed to be on a peaceful nature walk. “I’ve been taking my own boys out here since the day they’ve been able to keep up. It’s good for fathers and sons to do things like that, don’t you think?”

Frank found it in his best interest not to answer.

“I bet there was a time when you and your dad spent a lot of time together,” Brian continued. “But that was a while back, wasn’t it? Now you don’t want to listen to him, do you? That’s disobedience, boy. A sin, you know. But, I’m sure you shouldn’t blame yourself, Frank. ‘Cause it’s not your fault, is it?”

Frank found himself glancing back at Sam, wondering how he found the energy to be irritated with his father at a time like this.

“Why don’t you tell me what he did, Frank. I know you don’t get along with him. But what did he do to make you so angry. You are angry, aren’t you?”

Frank continued on in silence, but only until Brian Martin seemed to squeeze him harder. Something about it was smothering, warning Frank that he couldn’t get away with allowing this conversation to pass him by, and that was an irritation in itself. Not only had Brian Martin kidnapped him, now he was forcing him to think about festering wounds that Frank wasn’t yet willing to deal with, let alone during a crisis.

“Is there a reason why I shouldn’t be angry right now?” Frank finally responded, causing Brian Martin to laugh out loud.

“Of course you’re angry right now, but we’re talking about the old man, Fran

k,” Brian responded, lifting a fist and rubbing his knuckles against the top of Frank’s head in a way that caused him to wince.

“Hey,” Sam said, “leave him alone!”

“Is that what you want Frank?” Brian asked. “D’you want me to leave you alone, or do you want him to leave you alone?”

“I want both of you to leave me alone!” Frank snapped, and with no further regard for his current situation, he found himself furiously pulling away from Brian Martin until Brian suddenly shook him, and Frank found himself face to face with Oliver’s father, the barrel of a rifle pointed at his chin. He still led, his eyes intensely on his captor.

“It’s time to calm down, Frank,” Brian warned. “I’m just trying to help you here.”

“Go help someone else,” Frank retorted.

“I would, but I think I’m better with solving father-son dilemmas,” Brian said thoughtfully.

Frank raised an eyebrow. “If this is an example of your credentials, it’s not that impressive.”

“Frank,” Sam warned, as if to say don’t antagonize the guy holding the gun.

“You stay out of this, Daddy,” Brian growled, glaring at Sam. But his warning only escalated the situation when Sam took a threatening step forward, wanting nothing more than to separate his child from a threat. He was stopped short, though, when he found the rifle in David Martin’s hands aimed in his direction.

“Don’t!” Frank shouted, speaking to David this time. He looked at Brian. “I’m angry, okay? Now just stop... please, just stop.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Brian asked, giving Frank a pat on the back that the boy visibly shied away from. “So let me ask you something, Frank. Why are you so mad at your dad, huh? Your parents got divorced, did they? I bet your dad didn’t work hard enough to keep the family together. Keeping your own together’s important, you know.”

“Is that why you killed Mom?” David suddenly asked, drawing attention from everyone and a dirty look from Brian. David seemed pleased with himself, but nonetheless, shrugged and added. “I don’t really miss her or anything, I just think it’s funny... you talking about togetherness and all.”

“You getting bored, son?” Brian asked him irritably.

“A little,” David replied unapologetically. “But go on, maybe we’ll get this done sooner.”

“Look,” Sam interrupted. “Why don’t you just tell us what you’re planning to do... better yet, just take us back home; no one has to know anything, I’ll take my family and...”

“Now you want your family back?” Brian cut him off. “What do you think about

t that, Frank? Kinda highhanded of him, ain't it? I mean, the nerve of this man, right Frank? First he leaves, now he wants you back? I'll bet he's already got that little sister of yours won over."

"Don't talk about Rudy," Frank snapped, his stomach knotting as he wondered where she was, and his temper flaring as he thought about his dad having lost track of her. Frank knew it was a mistake the moment he divulged those feelings to his father with one look, but it was too late. Brian Martin had already seen it.

"Why don't you just tell him, Frank. Tell him you don't want him anymore. I can see it in your face... this bastard had the nerve to hurt you and yours, and now he's back to do it all over again, ain't he?"

"That's not true," Sam insisted, looking at Frank as if he was losing him, but again, the look on Frank's face told him he might have already. "Look, just leave my son alone!"

"You don't have a son anymore," Brian replied. "Ain't that right, Frank? Why don't you tell your old man to get lost... then you and I can talk about things. What d'you say?"

Frank stared at Brian Martin for a long moment, trying to understand the meaning behind his words before he gave a slow, careful, nod. "Okay," Frank said quietly. "I don't want him here."

"Because you're angry," Brian said.

Frank looked at Sam. "Yeah," he agreed. "I am." And he meant every word.

"Good," Brian said gently. "Now you've just gotta show him, Frank. Make it all better... I can help you do that."

Frank wasn't sure when it happened, but suddenly Brian Martin was turning him, turning him to face his father, and there was something cold and hard beneath his hands. "What are you doing?" Frank demanded, a panicked edge entering his voice as he looked down to see the rifle in his hands. "What are you doing?"

"Shh. Shh, Frank," Brian insisted. "It'll be okay. I just can't do this for you."

"Do what?" Frank shouted, but the answer to his question came when he found himself with a gun aimed at his father.

.....

Andrew Dron opened his eyes. He'd done that a few times before, too, but each time he'd considered keeping them open just damn inconvenient. This time was different, though. Perhaps he was slow to realize it, but Mr. Andrew Dron was pretty sure that not all was right in the world. He was also pretty sure that when this was over, he'd be grounding a few members of the town's youth himself, if he couldn't get their parents to do it first, and at le

ast one of them would be working off any damage to his truck.

He wanted to get up and see how bad it was; of course, that would have been made if easier if Andrew Dron had actually been in his vehicle. But he seemed to be in someone else's. Looking up out the back window, he found it difficult to conclude where exactly he was, too, but there seemed to be something wrong with the sky. It was glowing crimson, and dark clouds seemed to be covering the sky, swirling about in unnatural patterns. But then, he wasn't seeing it right, because as Mr. Dron slowly pulled himself upright he realized that he wasn't seeing clouds at all, but a mass of smoke beneath quickly growing flames spreading through a structure that looked an awful lot like the Seaberg house.

Fumbling for the door handle, Mr. Dron forced his way from the vehicle, catching himself on wobbly knees that didn't feel as strong as they used to be and he stared up at the house, mouth agape and eyes wide before reflexes took over and his gaze drifted around him, taking in the family's vehicles, the occasional fleeing cats, and most importantly, what he couldn't see. He didn't see the Seabergs, and common sense would dictate that if Andrew Dron could see a black cat disappearing into the woods fifteen feet away, then he'd likely see people fleeing a burning house, and anyone with the slightest bit of common sense would most definitely be retreating from the house in front of him.

But, what Mr. Dron didn't know was that behind a narrow bathroom door jammed with a chair and barricaded with a heavy dresser full of keepsakes, Jeremy Flaskis was trying very hard to get out as Jessica Seaberg shoved a wet towel against the crack at the bottom of the door to keep out the thick smoke that had recently assaulted them.

"Jeremy, get away from the door!" Jessica screamed as she went back to her daughter, but didn't dare get between the adamant teenager and the wooden surface he insisted on assaulting. It had cracked in three places already, but unfortunately, it didn't seem to be enough.

"It's the only way out!" Jay retorted, coughing as he drew an arm over his mouth and nose, hoping to keep out the smoke that was already making him feel light-headed. He could hear Rudy crying, not the most encouraging of sounds, and as he turned to look at Frank Seaberg's family he found himself experiencing a strong sense of helplessness as he saw the look on Jessica's face and silently agreed with what she was thinking. Even if he got the door down, there was still a chance they wouldn't get out. The thought made him nauseous, made him feel cornered. Sweat broke out over his face as once again he scanned the small room for another way out, all his hopes eventually moving back to the door.

"I don't want to die in here," he said decisively, and once again the side of his body felt the sting as it collided with the wood.

.....

I don't want to die out here. Frank wasn't sure where the thought came from, but he was certain that he needed to have it. Furthermore, he didn't want to watch anyone else die out in the cold woods, either. And as he realized that those fears had been somewhere on hold in his mind since the moment they'd left the boat, he'd never once considered that he'd be the cause of any of it, and yet Brian Martin was forcing his shaking fingers into place, and there was nothing Frank felt he could do to avoid it. One wrong move, he thought. That's all it would take, and any number of things could go wrong. Things Frank didn't want to think about while he was the one aiming the gun at his father.

"What are you doing?" Frank asked again, his lips seeming incapable of producing a more intelligent question. He didn't even know who he was asking, what answer he expected. His eyes locked with Sam's, and Frank felt himself go numb from head to toe.

It all felt so strange. Frank Seaberg of all people knew how delicate a relationship between a father and son could be given the right circumstances. And this man, his father... just that morning Frank had wanted nothing to do with him. He hadn't wanted to talk to him, he hadn't wanted to look at him. Now, nothing could have been further from the truth. There was so much Frank wanted to say, all the things he wanted his dad to understand. But, now that Frank wanted it, he felt like it was already too late. Over. And so completely out of his control that all he knew how to do was shut down.

"Get away from him," Sam demanded, but there was hardly as much heat behind his voice as there was behind the look on his face as he glared at Brian Martin. "Just leave my son alone... Frank... Frank, it's okay."

Frank blinked, and quickly decided that he couldn't have disagreed more. But then, he was having trouble giving his father any response at all with Brian Martin so close behind him, holding him in place. The man smelled like mint, and Frank had never been more disgusted by it. "All you gotta do is squeeze right here and this all goes away," Brian said as he adjusted Frank's fingers, which Frank had managed to paralyze somehow, as if he were willing one little digit to be stronger than Brian Martin's entire body. "Take your time now, son. There's no hurry. D'you feel it? D'you feel it, Frank? You're in control now. You just do what you know's right. This is the way it's gotta be. You just let your old man know it now."

Frank would have attempted to look over his shoulder in disbelief at Brian Martin just then, if he wasn't already eyeing David in the same fashion. David, who was suddenly avoiding his eyes, but still looking obnoxiously relaxed. And looking down at the rifle in his hands, Frank realized that he was in control. It didn't matter that apart from the water gun he used to torture his sister with, he'd never had one in his hands before, or that Brian

Martin was right up on him, ready to stop Frank from doing something that he would disapprove of. And for the briefest moment as he considered it, David Martin made sense to Frank.

"Dad?" Frank said, so quietly that he swore the entire woods became still and a few people stopped breathing just so he could be heard.

"Frank," Sam replied, and Frank met his eyes again, his tired, red eyes that looked so much older than they had during past father and son talks, late night basketball games and unplanned weekend vacations that Frank had once been accustomed to. "Frank, you don't have to do anything that..."

"Yes I do," Frank cut him off, causing not only Sam, but also Oliver to start looking very worried. "I have to say it. I am mad at you... I mean, I am really... just, pissed. And I didn't want you to come here, and I don't want to listen to you. I don't want to hear what you have to say, because it won't matter. It won't change that you left."

"That's right," Brian interrupted. "You let him know, Frank. Tell'im you don't need him anymore."

Frank's brow creased, his grip on the rifle becoming increasingly nervous as Brian Martin's grip tightened, as if he were becoming excited over what was supposed to happen next. Frank took in a deep breath, released it, and then found himself with half a smile that found very odd on his mouth given his current predicament. "I can't do that," he finally said, still looking at Sam. "Because I don't want you out of my life. I never did."

Sam nodded. "I know," he said, while his eyes begged Frank not to do anything stupid, and he didn't mean by shooting him. As it seemed, Frank realized, that was the least of his father's concerns. But, that didn't change that Frank's finger was still way too close to the trigger, or that he was entirely unsettled by it.

Frank moved his hand carefully, hoping that Brian Martin wouldn't notice. He moved it away from the trigger, his forearm over the top of the long gun, and pushed down. Brian Martin still had control over where the rifle was aimed, but from the current position, neither of them would be getting a shot off, and as Frank stiffened his posture, and Brian tightened his grip, it became clear that if either one of them tried to make another move they would be inducing a struggle, and while being on equal footing with Brian Martin for the moment did tend to ease a little of Frank's nerves, the fact that David was still holding a weapon simply did not.

"Oh, Frank," Brian said, sighing heavily. "I'm afraid that this isn't going to work. Obviously, you're a very misguided young man. I'm disappointed. And, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask, one more time, for you to do the right thing here."

Frank swallowed hard, adjusting his grip on the weapon in front of him as Brian did the same thing. "I already did... why don't you just give it up, alright?"

ht? No one's getting shot."

"Frank..." Brian warned.

Sam glanced sideways towards David, his hands becoming loose at his sides as he contemplated his next move, but the boy seemed to sense it, and suddenly Sam found himself standing between two rifle barrels instead of one. "Frank," he called. "It's okay... it's okay, Frank... you just...Frank..."

"They'll kill us all, anyway," Frank said, matter-of-factly, his voice becoming strained as he turned slightly to eye Brian Martin. "But I swear you're not gonna get away with it."

For the first time since Frank had found himself with his hands on the rifle, he looked at Oliver, who'd not only been silent, but had also managed to effortlessly fade into the background. He hadn't left, though. In fact, he seemed to be taking in every detail, every face, and every terrible moment as he became torn apart inside. And now he was looking at Frank in a way that seemed so helpless that Frank decided that he wanted to be anything but that. He tightened his grip on the rifle, looked to see where David was, and then spoke to Brian Martin one more time. "Get your hands the fuck off me."

Perhaps Frank had tried to produce a certain amount of authority with his words, but he wasn't very surprised when it didn't work. He did think, however, it was rather rude for Brian Martin to laugh at him before he said, "David, seems Frank isn't going to cooperate. Why don't you show'im what his choices are." And then to Frank's surprise, Brian Martin did let go of him.

Of course, it didn't make much of a difference now that David was at his side, seemingly not bashful when it came to aiming a rifle at Frank's head.

"Your choice, Frank," David whispered as Frank glanced sidelong at him.

"Your choice, David," Frank retorted, and then jumped when Sam raised his voice.

"Frank! Look at me... just... do what they say," Sam stated, nervously taking in his son's situation and ready to get Frank out of it the only way he knew how. "Please... just do what they say, Frank."

Looking at Sam as if he'd lost his mind, Frank shook his head. "Fuck you!"

"Frank!" Sam said again.

"David, time's up," Brian said.

Frank heard a soft click, a muffled noise as David took aim, and closed his eyes tightly. He heard his father as Sam started to yell, but something had stopped his dad short, and the shot never came. The lights didn't go out, and when Frank opened his eyes to look in David's direction, he was horrified to find the back of Oliver's head separating him from Oliver's twin.

"Get out of the way, Oliver!" David ordered, for the first time sounding truly angry.

"No, David," Oliver replied firmly. "I won't forget anymore... I won't forget anymore, David. If you hurt Frank, I won't forget."

David stared at his brother for several long moments before a strange smile curled his mouth and he narrowed his eyes. "You act like it would be hard for me to go through you to get to him."

"David!" Brian suddenly said, moving to get a better view of his children, and for a moment, David's eyes drifted to his father, waiting for the old man to remind him that Oliver always had been, and always would be the favorite. But this time something was different. This time it didn't happen. "David. ..it's getting late. You better get on with it if we want time to bury your brother next to your mama... least we can do before we get out of town, don't you think so?"

.....
Jeremy Flaskis cried out in pain as his body collided with the door again. He seemed to lose a little bit of the force he was putting behind it each time, and this last time, seemed to be all that he had left in him as he sank to the floor and looked at Jessica Seaberg, who had attempted to get through the drywall in the shower with broken pieces of glass from the mirror, only to reach bricks. Rudy, on the floor between them, looked tiredly about before she suddenly went to Jay, the currently available body in the room, and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

He hugged her back slowly, falling into a state of numbness as he realized that he'd just given up. Jessica must have seen it, because a moment later she was pulling them both off the floor. "Jay, turn on the shower," she ordered. "You and Rudy get in and stay in."

"What?" he asked dumbly.

"There's too much smoke," she said, coughing. "The fire could be in here any second--stay under the water!"

When Jay didn't budge further than standing up with Rudy still wrapped around him, Jessica turned on the water by herself and shoved him towards it before she took her already bleeding hands towards the bathroom door and attempted prying open the cracks that Jay had already left in the wood.

Behind her, Jay carefully placed Rudy in the tub, adjusting the water temperature when she shied away from the cold shower. He lifted one foot to step in after her, trying his best not to think about the prospect of burning to death, and then found himself ducking as the sound of glass breaking somewhere in the house came before Rudy's high-pitched scream.

Jessica, whose reaction had been similar to Jay's in front of the door, looked back at the two other sets of wide eyes in the room before hearing a crash outside the bathroom door that sent her stumbling backwards, deeply inhaling the smoke managing to make its way in as she struggled to pull herself together. But then Jay was there, pulling her away from the door and half way across the bathroom floor before they both jumped as it flew open.

Seeing the tall shadow standing before them as the smoke flooded the room a

nd the flames became visible from the hall, Jay yanked Jessica Seaberg to her feet and pulled her back further. All he could think was Brian Martin, and how this time he'd manage to take him down. He'd need his arms for that, he decided, which made it inconvenient that Jessica's hands were cutting off the blood flow in his left one. Jay didn't let that slow him down, though. Breaking free from Jessica, he charged the man standing between himself and the way out of the burning house.

Jay hit the man's body hard, but didn't find nearly as much resistance as he'd expected, only two hands gripping his shoulders in surprise as they both toppled over into the hall where the weight of their bodies crushed the chair and Jay could feel the heat of the fire on his skin as the flames reached the dresser. Feeling blind and disoriented, Jay drew back his fist, paying little attention to the way that his victim was violently coughing and struggling beneath him rather than fighting back.

"Jeremy, wait!" Jessica suddenly shouted, and her voice was followed by one that snapped Jay's attention from his anger and fear to utter confusion.

"You idiot! Get off me before I beat your backside so hard your grandbabies'll feel it!"

"Mr. Dron?" Jay demanded, just before an uncomfortable fit of coughing hit him and he lost control of everything going on around him until Andrew Dron pulled him to his feet and Jessica was pushing Rudy into his arms.

"We can get out through Frank's room," he heard Jessica say, and assuming that Frank's room was away from the flames he took Rudy and headed further down the hall, keeping low when the ominous black cloud seemed to surround them so thickly that he only knew Mr. Dron and Jessica were still with them when he heard them choking on the smoke or bumped into another body every so often.

"Which way?" Jay finally shouted, feeling overcome and heavy with Rudy still strapped to his chest. He didn't startle this time when Mr. Dron grabbed him by the waist and hauled him up, and he didn't fight it as he was led to a broken window.

Feeling the fresh air on his face through the cloud of smoke, Jay set Rudy down and after a quick look around, pulled the blankets from Frank's bed to throw over the broken glass before climbing through the window. His feet hit the ground outside, and upon turning around, Mr. Dron was pushing Rudy into his arms.

"Get back now!" Mr. Dron ordered, and deciding to take the old man's advice, Jay took Rudy back, holding her against her own coughing as he watched the girl's mother and their neighbor escape the burning house.

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Silence. So much silence that for a moment, Frank almost wanted to hear a gun go off. To break it. To end the tension. And then...

“It was never Oliver.” This coming from David, didn’t seem directed towards anyone, but as his eyes cleared it became clear that that was in fact his brother who he was speaking to. “It was never you.”

“Oliver,” Frank whispered, his hands once again adjusting over the rifle, “Oliver, get out of the way.”

“Yeah, Oliver,” David mimicked. “Get out of the way.” He shook his head, frowned at his brother. “I always thought you were in the way, you know. Just didn’t say so... didn’t wanna hurt your feelings. It would’ve, wouldn’t it?”

Oliver seemed to consider his brother’s question for a moment, along with David’s strange posture before giving a short nod.

David sighed. “Thought so. You get your feelings hurt too easy. Like I’ve always told you...”

“I can’t let people in to hurt me,” Oliver finished for him, and the comfortable moment of understanding that passed between them seemed to be an awkward one filled with silence and tension for everyone else.

“I wouldn’t have hurt you on purpose,” David continued.

“I know that, David.”

“But I did think you were in the way,” David said. “You got everything, all because you were...because you got hurt, and I hurt you, right? But you know what? I wasn’t the one. It was Mom, did you know that?”

Oliver’s weren’t the only set of eyes that widened.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Brian demanded.

“She dropped him,” David said easily. “I remember.” But that was the only explanation he offered his father before he found himself speaking to his brother again. “See, she hated me anyway... I always figured they both did, and sometimes I thought that if you weren’t around, things would be different. That if I didn’t have to watch out for you no more...but they wouldn’t have been different. And you know what else? Dad never hated me. Did you, dad?”

Frank found himself turning his head slowly, and in the dark he could see Brian Martin, seemingly growing uncomfortable. And making Frank uncomfortable, it seemed that he was looking at the rifle in Frank’s hands, regretting that he’d given it up for his game. But that was unfortunate for Brian because Frank, who’d felt like the weapon was burning his hands moments before no longer felt very eager to give it up. He gripped it tighter, and when Brian’s eyes lifted to his Frank was quick in his attempt to distract the old man from whatever he was thinking about.

“He didn’t hate you, David,” Frank said, sounding louder than he’d intended. “But he was wrong. When he told you that you were bad... he said that because he wanted you to be. He wants you to do this to us because he doesn’t wanna get his hands dirtier than they already are, David. And you’re pr

obably right... he'd be proud of you for it. So maybe you should take some of your own advice, because right now you might have the gun, but you're not the one in control."

"Frank," Oliver whispered. "I don't think you should say anything else, Frank. David looks angry."

Perhaps Frank would have thought it was thoughtful for Oliver to keep him informed if he'd actually given a damn about what David was doing at the moment. Not that Frank didn't see David Martin as a threat anymore. Frank Seaberg had simply found a bigger threat, and it was currently staring him in the face in a way that had his back quite literally up against Oliver's.

Frank wasn't sure if Brian Martin had actually been listening to his little speech, or if he'd sensed a sudden change of energy now that Frank was no longer pointing the rifle at Sam, but it was clear that things were no longer going as the twins' father had anticipated, and it agitated him. His eyes continuously drifted to the weapon he'd handed over to Frank, and his feet moved one at a time, small steps forward in a way that suggested he hoped that Frank wouldn't notice. Of course, Frank did notice, and he wasn't the only one.

When Sam had come to attempt righting things with his family, he'd expected a challenge ahead of him. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, it was still difficult to see Jessica. Regardless of the fact that their marriage was irreparable now, it was nearly impossible to be in the same room with her without thinking of her as his wife... and without thinking about how angry she was with him. And the kids... Rudy, he had been confident he could win over rather easily, not that that made his reunion with his daughter any easier. Guilty. That's what Sam was, every single time she asked him where he'd been, and she'd asked a lot since he'd arrived. Frank wouldn't even talk to him, and if he'd had one goal to accomplish while he was in town, it had definitely been to reconnect with his son. He'd known that would be hard, too. But, what he hadn't anticipated was that Frank had a whole new life and a new excuse to avoid him every time they crossed each other's paths. That very morning, Sam had hoped to find away around that and the very least, discover what his son was up to. Now, however, he wasn't sure he still wanted to know.

Perhaps it had something to do with the impression that everyone currently standing around him had developed a case of the crazies that had Sam feeling so lost. And while he had no idea what his own son had been talking about moments before, he was pretty sure that Frank had said the wrong thing, and Sam was growing increasingly uncomfortable with the way his son seemed to be boxed in. A quick evaluation of the turn of events had him somewhat confident that no one was pointing a gun at him anymore, and looking at Brian Martin, he wondered if that would change if he made a move.

It didn't matter, he was quick to decide as it became clear that Brian Martin intended to get a rifle back into his hands, and if that happened, all bets were off. It might have been selfish, but Sam found himself almost relieved that Oliver's head was between Frank and the threat of David Martin, and that meager reassurance was enough to convince him to make his move. Sam caught Frank's eyes, urging his cornered son to be calm, even while Sam's actions were the last thing in the world that were going to help accomplish that.

Frank, so watchful of Brian Martin and wondering what he was going to have to fend off next, felt panic rise in his chest as a shadow from the side rushed him, and before Frank could begin to comprehend what was happening, his hands were fighting to remain on the rifle as a strong force violently twisted the long piece away.

"Frank!"

Hearing his father's voice so surprisingly close to his ear caused Frank to see more than his fear as he mentally shook himself, looked up into his dad's familiar eyes, and relinquished the rifle to him. Seeing the barrel rise, and only knowing that he wanted to get out of the way, Frank turned, expecting to see Oliver. Only, something had changed during the brief struggle, and once again Frank was face to face with Brian Martin.

"Look out!" Sam shouted, but in the chaos it was unclear who he was talking to. Still, Frank took it as good advice and was quick to backpedal away from Brian, who was quick to reach out and grab the front of Frank's shirt. For a moment, all Frank could hear was the sound of tearing fabric as Brian pulled from the front and someone from behind grabbed him around the waist and pulled him past his father. He turned his head, alarmed before he determined that the eyes now facing him were Oliver's, and not David's. Meanwhile, Sam Seaberg was granted the pleasure of seeing the look on Brian's face as the rifle aimed towards him stopped him cold, and at the moment, it didn't seem to matter to either man that Sam had never fired a gun in his life. But then, it wasn't exactly information that Mr. Seaberg was about to share now that the situation had turned in his favor, or so he thought.

Behind him, Frank and Oliver weren't so confident that this was a good thing, especially when they saw what Sam couldn't.

"No!" Frank suddenly shouted, moving forward even when Oliver pulled him back, and ultimately, he was too late from stopping David Martin from reaching his father.

Sam turned at the last moment, only to take a hard blow to the bridge of his nose. Gritting his teeth to keep a pain-induced wail from escaping he lifted his hands to his face, not paying attention to the way the gun fell to his feet, and upon opening his eyes, he found himself staring down not one, but two barrels aimed directly at him, and behind one of those weapons, Br

ian Martin looked very ready to shoot him. Which, was likely the reason why Sam chose David to reason with.

“Look,” Sam said carefully, “this doesn’t have to happen.”

“Yes it does,” David responded adamantly. “Enough talking! Get back!” To make his point, David moved between the small space separating his father and Sam, pressing his rifle firmly against Sam’s chest as he walked him back, until Frank could reach out and touch his father.

“Oliver!” Brian shouted. “Get out of there!”

Oliver looked at Frank, and then towards his brother.

“Oliver,” Frank whispered. “Just do it...don’t let them hurt you, whatever happens to us... just don’t let them hurt you, not anymore.”

Oliver, still looking at David, seemed to find something that he didn’t like in his twin’s eyes as he shook his head and huddled closer to Frank and Sam Seaberg.

“Oliver!” Brian said again.

“No!” Oliver suddenly snapped, his eyes moving accusingly to Brian. “You killed my mom.”

“She had it coming,” David casually remarked, before Brian had a chance to react. He studied Oliver for a long moment and then disapprovingly shook his head. “You pick the worst times to stop actin’ like a puppet, Oliver. Makes it fuckin’ hard to keep saving your ass. And y’know something? I’m sick of trying.”

“I’m sorry I’m making you mad, David...” Oliver started, but stopped when Frank elbowed him.

“And I’m sorry this has to happen,” David replied. “But see... it’s all I’ve been thinking about for... what did you say, Frank? Nine days.”

“What do you mean? What you mean that’s all you’ve been thinking...” Frank demanded, but David continued as if he hadn’t heard him at all, and Frank became too busy resisting Sam’s attempts to shield him to repeat the question.

“Sorry you’ve gotta see it this time, Oliver,” David said, his weapon becoming more apparent in his hands to those standing on the wrong side of it.

“Hold it, David!” Brian suddenly said, surprising everyone. “You could hit your brother!”

Frank watched David’s face in the shadows, that strange smirk growing across it again, and then his eyes widened as he watched David Martin spin around suddenly, the gun going with him.

Brian froze in the step he’d been taking forward, his mouth agape as he stared at David, his own rifle pointed foolishly towards the ground.

“I don’t think so,” David whispered.

“Boy,” Brian hissed, his posture becoming intimidating in a way that suddenly seemed pointless.

David looked his father up and down, meeting his eyes in the end. He's looking at me now, David decided, and ignoring the sudden objections coming from behind him, David Martin fired a rifle for the last time in his life, and moved in to claim his kill.

It seemed strange somehow. Brian Martin wasn't really an intimidating man. Not like this, anyway, choking for his last breath on the forest floor. And David couldn't stop looking. And there was no remorse: just fear. The kind that had him worried he'd develop a condition similar to Oliver's and forget. He wanted to keep watching, and while he was watching, he realized that his father had stopped breathing, just as he mildly realized that Frank's father was slowly prying the rifle away from his fingers. But then, he couldn't watch anymore because Sam Seaberg's shadow was blocking his view. Startled by this, David looked up into eyes that seemed to pity him, that made him vulnerable. He didn't like it, and when Sam reached out for him, he took a step back. Sam hesitated, reached again, and then he did what no father had ever done before and wrapped David Martin in his arms.

Feeling uncomfortable, but suddenly unable to retreat, David turned his head to find his brother's eyes, which had become familiarly confused, but strangely accepting as Oliver focused on David, and not their deceased parent. Beside him, Frank was watching, too. He was once again trying to figure David out, and while the muscles in David's face suddenly felt like they weren't working right, he managed to smile over it. Taking a breath, he stepped away from Sam Seaberg and gave a small shrug. "What're you looking at, Frank? You're the one that said he'd pay."

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Jessica Seaberg was a firm believer in crying. When she was sad, when she was angry, or even if she just plain felt like it, she'd find a quiet place and cry until she just didn't feel like crying anymore. But she'd always made a point to do so carefully, and never in front of her children to avoid making them worry.

This time, however, with her house in flames and her son missing, Jessica Seaberg made an exception. Or rather, the exception was made for her when she couldn't seem to stop, let alone communicate to Mr. Dron that it wasn't her burning home that was upsetting her so much, which is why she left it to Jay Flaskis. It seemed to be a good choice, especially when Jessica discovered that Jeremy knew a lot more than she did, but what he was telling Mr. Dron hardly made her feel any better.

"What does Odetta Grover have to do with this?" Mr. Dron was asking, as it became apparent that Jay's nonstop outbursts concerning the night's events weren't helping his head injury.

"Aren't you listening?" Jay demanded, equally frustrated. "Brian Martin killed her! It was no accident, her getting in that boat! And he killed his wife

, I saw Mary's body! There's a chance he killed David... but we don't really know that for a fact yet... But look, if Frank was here, then he has to have Frank... don't you remember how you got here, Mr. Dron?" Jay pointed towards the newest vehicle on the lot. "That's one of the Martins' cars... Frank could have brought it here."

"Mommy!" Rudy suddenly interrupted. "The fire's getting bigger!"

"Alright," Mr. Dron said, "we should move away from here, closer to the water, and hopefully it won't spread too far after all the rain."

"Hopefully?" Jessica repeated, sounding hysterical. "We can't even call anyone, everything's burning... half my family is missing! Hopefully?"

"Jessica, I know it's hard but you've gotta be calm now," Mr. Dron insisted.

"I promise you, someone's seen the flames by now and help should be here soon. From there, we'll try to get this fire out and organize a search party."

"That boat's gone," Jay pointed out. "They could be anywhere...I could take a car and get to my house, my parents could call out of town, get real cops here in an hour's time."

"You're not going off anywhere on your own," Mr. Dron replied, guiding everyone further from the house as he spoke.

"No. Please don't go, Jay," Jessica insisted, suddenly latching onto his arm like a lifeline. She felt like she was in a whirlwind of tragedy, and she didn't think she could take losing another boy tonight. Closing her eyes, only half paying attention to Jay's insistence that he go, Jessica made an effort to calm her nerves, but the tension building in her chest over her missing son was threatening to overwhelm her completely. The relief of having escaped a potential fatal situation had been short-lived as it became clearer and clearer that not everyone was safe just yet.

Jay started to argue with Mr. Dron, and Rudy was clutched to her side. Jessica could hear the crackling from the flames as they took everything she owned, and she felt like covering her ears. The light rain, either coming from the sky, or just the trees, or perhaps both, tapped at the ground, and a low humming sound was coming from the lake, getting louder, closer. Jessica opened her eyes, and turned towards the water, squinting in the dark as the lights of a boat became visible.

"Mr. Dron!" she shouted. "Is that them? Is that them?"

As the arguing stopped, Jay and Mr. Dron moved closer, but it was Jay who shook his head.

"No, the boat's not big enough... Shit, I think that's the Hills' boat." And sure enough, as it grew closer, Jay could see streaked hair behind the wheel and a blond head next to it. "Jenny's with Jeremy, she probably got my message."

"Does that boat have a radio?" Mr. Dron asked, but didn't receive an answer.

as he and Jay were already trudging through the water to meet them.

“What the fuck happened here?” a wide-eyed Jeremy Hill asked as he stared towards the burning house while Jeremy boarded the boat and hugged his girlfriend.

“You got a radio on this thing?” Mr. Dron demanded.

“Yeah, but...” Jeremy started.

“Outa the way!” Mr. Dron demanded as he caught sight of what he was looking for and pushed Jeremy Hill out of the way.

“Is everyone okay?” Jenny asked, and then seeing Jessica and Rudy on the shore, she forgot about any response she was expecting, grabbed a few blankets from beneath the passenger seat and held them over her head as she stepped down into the shallow water and made her way towards Frank Seaberg’s family. She reached Rudy, but as headlights from the road became visible Jessica ran in the other direction to meet Howard Crook before she all but yanked him from his vehicle and began to speak hysterically.

“This is a mess,” Jeremy remarked to Jay.

“Yeah... so, I need your boat. There was a kidnapping.”

Jeremy, who obviously wanted an explanation, but was reasonable enough to know this wasn’t the time to ask for it, simply nodded as Mr. Dron’s voice raised to speak to one filled with static over the radio.

“You got a gun on this thing?” Jay asked Jeremy.

“Jeremy shook his head, but a moment later, he was opening a box and retrieving a flare gun.

Jay considered it for a moment, and then shrugged. “That’ll work.”

“We’ve got more help coming,” Mr. Dron announced.

“We can’t wait, we’re gonna go look for Mr. Martin,” Jay said firmly, as if he expected an argument.

But, Mr. Dron only nodded. “I’m going with you.”

“Well, where are we going?” Jeremy wanted to know.

“We’ll check the coves first, anything that can’t be seen from here,” Jay said

“Hold on!” Mr. Dron suddenly interrupted. “We might not have to go anywhere.” He pointed out over the water where more running lights were visible as they moved straight for them, and as Jay took a closer look, he was quick to determine that it was the boat he’d seen earlier outside of the Seaberg’s house.

“Jeremy,” Jay said quietly as he held out his hand. “Give me that flare gun.”

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The sounds of the boat moving through the water and the wind blowing past Frank’s ears was met with silence as he stood at the bow of the boat with Oliver, making eye contact, but unable to say anything. And really, what could

d he say? All things considered, he thought that Oliver was handling all of this well enough. He just seemed to be in a strange daze, was all, looking at Frank as if he expected to hear something soon that would make everything better.

"You're going to be okay," Frank said, for the tenth time since they'd made it onto the boat. Because that was all he could say, and Oliver would nod, and they'd go back to their silence.

And Frank couldn't even bring himself to look back at David, who'd sat himself on the stairs next to the cabin when Sam had taken up the chore to drive them home. But he knew that David was there, watching silently thinking about... well, probably things that Frank couldn't begin to imagine. And David seemed to be handling things well, too. But then, unlike Oliver, it was terrifying for Frank to see David like that because David Martin was most certainly not Oliver.

David Martin had shot someone dead right in front of all of them.

And he wasn't sorry.

Maybe it was understandable, Frank had decided. Maybe after everything, it was acceptable, what David had done. He'd been living in a nightmare his whole life, and wanted out. And if he hadn't shot his father, maybe everyone else would have been dead, including Frank. So maybe, Frank thought, he should be grateful. But still, for David to kill his own father... murder, self-defense perhaps? Frank wasn't sure what to call it. He just knew that after having been made to point a weapon like that at his own father, anyone who could do it without feeling would have had to be someone completely numb. Empty. So David Martin was a frightening individual, and so sad. It seemed that Frank didn't know if he wanted to keep his distance, or reach out and comfort him.

"David's not bad," Oliver whispered, as if reading Frank's thoughts. "I don't want them to take him away from me, Frank."

Frank had no response for that. Mostly, because he didn't know what was supposed to happen next. The lines between right and wrong had somehow been blurred tonight, and as he looked up at his father, he felt that Sam was thinking the same thing. And something about that gave Frank the courage to tell Oliver what he needed to hear one more time. "You're going to be okay."

"Oh my god!" Frank suddenly heard his father say, and instead of looking back, he looked forward towards the shore, his eyes resting on the orange glow of flames lighting the sky. It took another moment for him to realize what was burning, and when he did, he nearly fell over the railing before Oliver caught him.

"Dad!" Frank shouted, as if the one word could destroy what he saw. But, the boat only moved faster, and Frank could only take in the scene. He saw a

nother boat on the water, three figures on it. Decidedly, they weren't his mother and sister and the fact sent him into a full fledged panic. "Mom!" he screamed, regardless of whether or not he was still too far away to be heard. "Rudy!"

"Look. There." David's voice had been so quiet and calm that Frank had to look to his left to realize that Oliver's twin was now standing next to them, pointing towards the shore. Frank looked, and after a moment of gathering his thoughts he saw two figures, a woman and a little girl. "Looks like they're gonna be okay," David said stoically.

Relieved and tired, Frank looked back at David as Oliver began to wave to the people waiting for them. "So will you," Frank found himself saying. "Both of you. I promise."

Chapter 15: Epilogue

by DomLuka

Thanks to Jim for editing!

Oliver looked across the small but comfortable room as he sat at the end of one of the two twin-sized beds occupying the space, his fingers slowly drumming one of the thirty-or-so photographs scattered over his mattress. Looking the pictures over carefully, he selected one and held it up to the light.

"I like this one," he said before looking towards the other bed again.

"Of course you like that one," his brother answered, rolling hazel eyes that matched Oliver's. "It's got Frank in it."

"They've all got Frank," Oliver pointed out, frowning as if he thought he was being teased. "I just like this one 'cause he's on his bike... like in the one you took for me."

David smiled. "I'll take more for you soon."

"Oliver?" a curious female voice was heard before Jenny Woodmoore appeared in the opened doorway with her camera strap over her shoulder. "Are you talking to someone?"

Oliver looked towards the space where he'd pictured his brother a moment before, and then shook his head at Jenny. "Nope, Jenny. It's just me in here. See?"

She smiled at him, and moved to look over the pictures on the bed. "Did you pick one yet?" she asked.

Oliver nodded, smiling as he held up his chosen photograph. "I like this one," he told her.

Jenny looked thoughtful for a minute. "Yeah... it's a nice one. But how about one Frank'll like? Like this one?" she asked, selecting another from the pile. "It's got both of you in it."

Oliver looked at a picture he specifically remembered Jay taking when he'd followed Frank up a tree to see a bird's nest, and ultimately shook his head as he held the one of Frank on a bike higher, as if he didn't think Jenny ha

d taken a good enough look. "This one."

Jenny laughed. "Okay," she agreed, taking it. "Let's go see how fast they can get it printed on a card."

"Okay, Jenny," Oliver replied, stepping into his shoes as he stood up. "Can we go now?"

"We'll have to if we don't want to be late. Jay should be here in just a minute."

"I should feed my chicken while we wait!" Oliver exclaimed, as if he'd just remembered.

"You know, I fed all the chickens this morning, Oliver," she pointed out.

"But this one's lucky, and she likes it outta my hand," Oliver objected.

Jenny sighed as she followed him out of the room, through the house and into the small backyard surrounded by a newly painted picket fence. She knew better than to argue. Oliver had made a lot of adjustments since moving in with her family over ten months ago, but he'd still been irritated that his chicken had to live in the backyard with the rest of the regular birds, and not in its special cage in the garage. She supposed that if feeding it separately made him feel better, she shouldn't argue. Besides, that chicken was the only thing he'd taken from his family's home besides a few old pictures his brother had taken, and her family wanted him to be as comfortable as possible. Even when he'd insisted on having two beds in his room.

Jenny watched as Oliver all but chased his chicken away from the others and picked up the kicking animal once it was cornered.

"So are you looking forward to today?" she asked him. "Still glad we're going?"

"Yeah," Oliver replied. "I'm gonna tell David about Frank's card. And on the phone, he told me he's got a surprise for Frank, too."

Jenny raised an eyebrow at that, but when Oliver looked back at her, she simply smiled. "Well, I guess we'd better hurry then, huh?" And she was grateful when she heard the old truck Jay had recently purchased from Mr. Drohn pull into her driveway.

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"That's enough... Mom, that's enough!" Frank insisted as he piled the rest of the mountain of sandwiches Jessica was putting together onto a piece of plastic wrap. "There's only gonna be four of us... and we'll only be thirty minutes away."

Jessica ignored him as she moved towards the refrigerator. "Are you sure there's no room in that cooler for cake?"

"Positive. We'll do cake when I get back, alright?"

"Alright. Help me clean this mess up before you go."

Frank looked at the meager amount of crumbs on the countertop and rolled his eyes, but still grabbed a rag. Cleaning. Always cleaning. It had been like

that ever since they'd moved into the new house. It was actually located in town, had a real backyard, and his mother's favorite part--a new kitchen that always had to be clean.

Have you called your dad yet?" Jessica asked.

"No. Rudy said not to bother them."

Jessica turned from what she was doing and raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"I don't know what they're doing," Frank admitted. "Figured they probably want to have the party on the boat or something."

"There's not enough room on the boat!" Jessica objected.

Frank shrugged. "Tell Dad that." Not that it would work even if she did. His father was quite attached to the little houseboat he'd rented for summer. Frank hadn't taken up his dad's offer to spend the night on it yet, but then, apart from Oliver's little boat, he hadn't been very enthusiastic about boarding one. At least overnight. And besides, with his father making good on a promise to take time off during the summer to be closer to his kids, Frank found himself with plenty of opportunities to reconnect with his dad that didn't involve remembering the last time he woke up floating on the water.

"I already told him we were doing something here," Jessica continued, beginning to look suspicious. "Maybe they're hiding a present from you... but I'd know if they were, unless they're hiding it from me, too. You didn't ask for a dog, did you?"

Frank looked at his mom, and chose to smile instead of following the urge to roll his eyes. "With three cats in the house? No."

"Four cats," Jessica replied, and when Frank opened his mouth to respond she aimed a finger in his direction to silence him. "I know about the one you brought home last weekend. Don't bring home anymore, and let that poor thing out of your room already."

"Actually...it's in your room now. Ran under your bed this morning."

"Frank..."

"I think I hear Jay's truck," Frank conveniently interrupted as he grabbed the cooler and headed into the newly carpeted living room.

"You do not hear Jay's truck!" Jessica called, following him. But, a moment later she was ignoring Frank's dubious look as she heard the familiar sound of Jay's engine.

Frank grinned. "Gotta go. I'll be back before dark."

Jessica sighed and rushed to the door before Frank had a chance to open it, lifting her hand to his shoulder as a few lines of worry touched her forehead. "Are you sure this is how you want to spend your birthday?"

"It's fine, Mom," Frank insisted. "Besides, I promised Oliver, and it's not his fault David only gets to see visitors once a month. If we don't go today it's another thirty days, and it's already been over six months since..."

"Okay, okay," Jessica cut him off as she raised a hand in defeat. "I just w

ant you to have a good day. Do you want me to go with you, just in case there are any problems?"

"There won't be. We already called ahead, and we both know you don't really wanna go."

"It's not that I don't want to..."

"Mom. It's fine. I gotta go, alright? See you tonight."

After leaving a quick kiss to her cheek Frank was outside, tossing the cooler into the bed of Jay's truck and moving through the passenger door to over-crowd the bench seat where Jay was at the wheel and Jenny and Oliver occupied the middle. It wasn't the most comfortable way to travel, but Frank was comfortable enough with his company not to mind.

Jay and Jenny had been good friends to Frank, even forgiving him when they discovered that he had no eye for photography whatsoever. Jay had once said it was nice to have a friend who didn't know everything about him down to the bad haircut he'd had when he was eight, and in him Frank had found the kind of person he could call up late on a Monday night just because he was too bored to come up with a good reason to sleep. It was something he'd missed after discovering that his friends back home were too interested in their own lives to care anything about his new one. Jay had also made his transition into a new school easier to tolerate, not to mention the events surrounding last summer had built an odd, but strong bond between them. Over the last year, Frank had even helped him coordinate a second funeral for Odetta Grover, where Jay was finally able to make certain everyone knew the mystery surrounding her death. The small town had been surprisingly accommodating, placing a memorial on the land Odetta had once lived on, right where the Seabergs' last house had once stood.

Frank had found that he liked Jenny, too. He'd been a little concerned when his mother had been less than enthusiastic about the idea of taking Oliver in, and he'd even admit to being annoyed when Jenny's family was quick to offer Oliver a home. But, Frank had to admit that it had worked out for the best. The Woodmoores had been able to provide things that Frank's couldn't. Like a stable roof over Oliver's head to begin with. The Seabergs had been in and out of tents, neighbors' houses, and even an old cabin behind Mr. Dron's house for over a month before they found a more permanent residence that qualified as suitable. Frank wouldn't have wanted that ordeal for Oliver on top of everything else.

And Jenny's family had also been able to provide Oliver with something that Frank would have had a hard time giving. Independence. It had been no smooth adjustment when the state had taken David. Oliver had been devastated, and Frank's instinct was to never allow him to feel like he was alone. But, Frank's own anger over David having to leave had turned his support for Oliver into something that managed to seem overbearing. He'd hardly want

ed Oliver to speak with anyone else unless he was present. It was the Woodmoores who'd shown him that Oliver was stronger than that. He'd settled in with a family who'd been able to support him and reintroduce him to society. He was going to church, and school, and he'd even taken a part-time job where Jenny worked, something that had been his idea.

But, even though Frank was no longer Oliver Martin's only friend, there were still things that he only shared with Frank. It was only on occasion that

Oliver mentioned his parents. He'd once asked Frank if it was wrong to be sad about what had happened to them, since no one else seemed to have a good thing to say about his mother or his father; and only Frank knew that Oliver stalked the old women after church, listening to their rumors regarding his family only to mull over it over later, hiding his hurt behind a crooked smile when he saw those same ladies around town. But the hardest for Oliver, and Frank thought for himself, too, had been David's absence. He'd been gone for almost a year. At first they'd been told that there was a chance

David would be charged with murdering his father, but with all witnesses insisting that there was some sort of self-defense involved, the notion was soon dismissed. But even then, David's troubles were just beginning, and no one had been able to do anything about it when it was decided that he'd be held in a hospital until a more "suitable" arrangement could be made, even after the Woodmoores offered to take him in along with Oliver.

Matters didn't improve when David attacked a nurse two weeks later, and didn't bother to deny it. Frank didn't know the particulars, but during one of the few phone calls David was allowed to make to Oliver, he'd told his brother that the woman had reminded him of their mother. Over the next months, he'd undergone evaluation after evaluation, held in juvenile detention centers and inpatient mental facilities. Jessica had repeatedly insisted that David was getting the help that he needed, but while Frank could admit that David probably needed help, he had ultimately dubbed the entire situation as just plain unfair.

David Martin wasn't the way he was because he wanted to be. He'd become exactly what he was made to be, and as a result people were afraid of him. He didn't belong in a school with kids his own age, or out walking the streets with Frank and his friends. He was unpredictable and bad-tempered, and he wasn't afraid to act out negatively towards any adult figure who attempted to control him. At least, that had been David Martin until two months ago.

The Woodmoores had called to announce that David was being transferred to yet another private hospital. But, this one didn't have bars on the windows, and while his contact with the outside world still had to be limited, Frank had learned that David was making progress and there was talk that he'd eventually be released. Although, no one seemed to know if that day would co

me before the twins' eighteenth birthday.

The facility was only a half hour down the interstate, and when David did see visitors, it wouldn't be through a glass window. Although, for this first visit his doctors had requested that only family speak with him. Frank had been disappointed when Oliver had mentioned this, but at least Oliver would get to see his brother. And in a way, Frank thought, he wouldn't be going alone. Especially after Jay, Jenny and he flooded Oliver's ears for thirty minutes with well wishes for David.

.....

"Why d'you keep asking me the same question? You already know what I'm gonna say."

Dr. Grant Devling looked past his spectacles at the young patient sitting across from his desk. Just a boy. Dark hair, hazel eyes that sparked with intelligence, and a lopsided smile that appeared every time Dr. Devling looked at him as if reading a book.

"Just in case you decide to change your answer... and because I think you want to. Sooner or later, David, I'm pretty sure you will."

David looked thoughtful for a moment. Maybe he would change his answer if he thought it would get him out of there sooner. But then, he knew better than to say so. Hospitals were strange places. And doctors. Doctors just like Dr. Devling, who insisted that he wanted to help David get out even as he came up with reason after reason why David shouldn't. And if David said he wanted out-- because god help him, who wouldn't?-- it was like a sign to his captors that he needed to stay longer. Made no sense.

"I don't think so," David replied. "It's been the same the last sixty-one times you've asked, and I think it'll be the same the next sixty-one."

"Sixty-one? Really?" Dr. Devling replied with mild interest.

David nodded. "Yep. Been here sixty-seven days, came to see you sixty-two of 'em, and including today, you've asked me sixty-one times. Check if you want," he added when Dr. Devling looked surprised. He knew he was right. David had developed a strange habit of counting days. He felt trapped when he didn't. "I'm not sorry my parents are dead, and if you ask tomorrow, I won't be then, either. And I'm still not sorry I helped one of 'em get that way... so what d'you think? Am I still broke in the head?"

David wasn't being a smartass. It was a real question that he expected a real answer to. All these doctors, they seemed so interested in fixing him. And maybe, he sometimes thought, he needed fixing. But other times, times like this day, he'd sit in Dr. Devling's office thinking that he was the only one around there who made any sense. After all, he was telling the truth--something the doctors obviously didn't like to hear, knowing that if he lied... they wouldn't want to hear that, either.

"You're not broken, David," Dr. Devling replied as he wrote something down

on his clipboard, and David resisted the urge to roll his eyes. If Dr. Devling really believed that, David thought, he wouldn't be stuck in the man's office. "But, we'll talk more on this tomorrow."

"My hour's not up yet," David pointed out, wondering what Dr. Devling had in mind for the next fifteen minutes, since there was no way he was going to let David leave early.

"You have a visitor coming today."

"I know that."

"Are you excited?"

David shrugged. "Guess so. Haven't seen him in a while."

"Are you close to your brother, David?"

"Says so there in my file."

Devling smiled tiredly. "You must be looking forward to talking to him. You know, most people here see up to four people at the same time and don't get as much out of their visits. I think it was smart to ask to only see your brother. I think catching up with him will be good for you."

"Him, too," David replied. "Can I go now? I wanna get a shower before he comes."

"In a few minutes. Do you have your journal?"

David sighed, and lifted the folded notebook he'd been holding in his lap. Like every day, he dutifully opened it and read aloud the carefully written detached, impersonal words that he'd written down five minutes before his appointment with Dr. Devling.

"This morning I woke up at six thirty when the man-nurse knocked on my door, real loud. I thought that was rude. I laid in bed for seven minutes and thought about what breakfast was going to be. I hoped it was gonna be French toast and not that oatmeal stuff. When I got up I brushed my teeth first, and...."

"Did you write about your brother coming?" Devling asked.

David frowned at the interruption, shaking his head. "Why would I? It hasn't happened yet."

"Yes, but I'm sure you've been thinking about it. How are you feeling, David? It's been quite a while since you've seen him, aren't you nervous?"

"What for?"

"Well, according to quite a few police reports your brother was very upset about what had happened to your parents. Are you worried that he blames you for your father's death?"

"I'm the one who shot him, ain't I?" David remarked. "Credit's mine. Oliver knows it."

"The credit? Is that how you think of it?"

David thought about it for a minute. "I don't know. Sounds better than blame, I guess. I don't think there is a right word. It just happened, and if I had t

o go back, it would happen again. I ain't sorry that he's gone, and neither is Oliver."

"Are you sure about that?"

David narrowed his eyes, and held a burst of temper in check. He didn't like when Dr. Devling used an argumentative tone. David was damn sure that the man did it on purpose just to push him, and when David got pushed, something always happened that made someone decide he needed to be locked up by himself for a while. And he didn't even want to think about the drugs, especially today.

"The only thing Oliver's upset about is that we're not together," David said, finding a smile. "But when I see him, I'm gonna tell him not to worry, cause that's all gonna change."

"What do you mean it's going to change?"

"We'll be together again."

"David... you do realize that Oliver will only be visiting today? No one's coming to take you home."

"I didn't say today, did I? But I'll be with my brother again, Doctor. He needs me."

"Oliver is living with a good family right now," Devling said as he flipped through his notes. "He's made progress with them. You don't think he's better off right where he is?"

"He needs me," David repeated. "And someday, we'll have our own life. The right way this time. It'll take time to get there, is all. I'm not stupid, you know."

"No, you aren't. I'd like you to start setting some goals for yourself, think about what you want to do when you get out of here."

"I got goals."

"Can you give me an example?"

David shrugged. "That's easy enough. First I gotta walk out the front doors of this place with you waving goodbye... then I gotta be on my own for a while. I'll get Oliver when it's time."

"Alright... what about school? Your tutor tells me you make a good student."

"Maybe. But she don't teach me nothin' I don't already know. That's what books are for."

Devling smiled. "Then maybe it's time to introduce you to some advanced classes. It'll keep you from getting bored."

"Oh, I'm not bored," David insisted, tapping his temple with his index finger. "I'm always busy up here. I don't need a teacher to tell me what to learn."

"You know... there's nothing wrong with getting a little help sometimes, David."

“I get that. Like you’re helpin’ me get ready for being out there again. But... it’s just... a man should always help himself, too. I mean, in the end, that’s all you’ve really got to count on.”

A frown creased Dr. Devling’s brow, but instead of responding, he momentarily looked away from David as the phone on his desk started ringing. “I want you to write about that in your journal. Explain it. We’ll go over it tomorrow, alright?”

“If you say so,” David replied as he stood up. “But, I don’t think I’ll feel like talking about that tomorrow.”

Dr. Delving lifted the phone receiver as he watched David head for the door, and then politely put his caller on hold.

“David?” Devling called curiously. “What do you want to talk about tomorrow?”

David smiled. “Frank. You should ask me about Frank.”

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It wasn’t what Frank had expected. The facility was gated and guarded, but driving in was more like entering a modest retirement home than a prison full of legally insane inmates.

“We can walk in with you, Oliver,” Frank insisted. “Maybe they have a waiting room or something.”

“I can do it myself,” Oliver replied, his focus on the building in front of him as he took a few steps away from Frank, Jenny and Jay. But, he suddenly stopped and turned back to smile at Frank Seaberg. “I wish you could come with me, Frank.”

“Me too,” Frank replied. “When you get in there... maybe find out when David can have more visitors, alright? We’ll come back when we can... and have a good time. With your brother, you know?”

“Okay, Frank,” Oliver replied, and then reached into his back pocket, smiling sheepishly when Jenny opened her mouth to object to what he had.

“Oliver,” she hissed. “That was for later.”

“I wanna give it to Frank now,” Oliver insisted, presenting his friend with the birthday card Jenny had helped him with. The picture of Frank on the front of it didn’t look as good as the real thing to Oliver, but it would do, and he felt good when Frank smiled. “Happy birthday, Frank.”

“It’s really great, Oliver,” Frank said. “Thank you.”

“You didn’t open it yet,” Oliver pointed out.

Sensing Jenny and Jay looking over his shoulder, Frank opened the card slowly, and laughed at the real picture that Oliver had slipped inside. It had been one of Frank’s own attempts at a self-portrait. He’d held up a camera and managed to get one of his eyes, his nose, and the bottom half of Oliver’s face. Sliding the picture aside, Frank found pencilled-in smiley faces next to Oliver’s handwriting. “Happy birthday, Frank,” Frank read aloud. “I love y

ou, from Oliver. P.S. Your real present is a hat to wear when you're fishing . I hid it under Jenny's bed."

"You're not supposed to tell him..." Jenny started, only to have a laughing Jay pull her back.

Ignoring the bickering couple behind him, Frank pulled Oliver in for a quick hug. "Thanks for the hat. You can show me when we get back... I think we're gonna eat while we're waiting for you. Should I save you a sandwich?"

"Okay, Frank."

"Good luck, Oliver," Jay said as he pulled down his tailgate, his words prompting Oliver to head towards the building once again, stopping twice to wave to his friends.

Oliver wanted to see his brother. He'd said so plenty of times. Wished for it. Been sad when it didn't happen. And, every one of the few phone calls he'd been allowed to have with David had left him feeling empty afterwards. Alone. And as he walked through the front door of the hospital and found a nurse behind a glass wall talking to an older man in a white coat instead of his brother, Oliver felt disappointed, and perhaps a little cheated.

Walking right up to the glass, he startled them both when he lifted his hand to knock on it.

"Where's David?" he demanded in the same, firm tone that Jenny always used to get her way with Jay.

The nurse looked at him curiously, obviously at a loss for how to respond, and the man in the white coat looked bewildered before realization suddenly touched his features, and he actually laughed.

"Oliver? Right," he remarked. "You couldn't be anyone else. I'm Dr. Devlin, your brother's my patient. Why don't we get you signed in and I'll take you to him myself."

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"This is bullshit," Frank remarked, looking across the parking lot at the doors that Oliver had disappeared into. He sat at the end of the tailgate, opposite to Jenny, who was on the other side of Jay. His feet dangled above the ground and he'd mindlessly just picked all of the meat out of the sandwich in his hands, tossing it to the ground until only bread was left.

"Okay," Jay said irritably as he took the remains of Frank's sandwich and tossed them over his shoulder. "Next time, you stay home."

Frank sighed. "Sorry. I mean, I know Oliver needs this time with his brother, but seeing how he's all the family David has..."

"Frank," Jay cut him off, "why do you wanna see David, anyway? You really don't even know him... you told me that even before..."

"I just think it sucks he's being treated like a criminal. It's like they'll never let him out."

"I agree," Jenny said quietly. "It's not fair."

“Hey! Hello,” Jay remarked. “He is a criminal.”

“Jay, that’s not...” Jenny started.

“Look,” Jay cut her off. “I know I didn’t like the guy for a long time, and I thought he was...well, you know what I thought. But this isn’t about that. I get it was his dad that killed Odetta, but...”

“But what?” Frank demanded, sounding defensive. “Oliver and David are innocent; after everything they’ve gone through...”

“Oliver is innocent,” Jay said. “David shot his own father.”

“I was there,” Frank retorted, “and trust me...”

“It doesn’t matter if Brian Martin deserved to die,” Jay said. “It wasn’t for David to decide. What he did...”

“If he hadn’t done it, I don’t think I’d be here talking to you right now!”

Frank snapped. “And you can’t look me in the eye and tell me you wouldn’t have done the same thing in his place, so I don’t wanna hear it from you.”

“It’s not the same thing, and I’m not so sure I would have,” Jay replied. “And, even if David did have another choice about it...”

“What?” Frank demanded.

“I’m not so sure he wouldn’t have pulled the trigger, anyway.”

“Okay!” Jenny shouted, moving off the tailgate long enough to force her way back up again, this time between them. “You’ve both made your points. Can we stop now?”

Jay frowned, glancing past his girlfriend to eye Frank. “Look, Frank... I’m sorry, but I think the guy needs to be here. I know you feel like you owe him something... but would you really feel safe with him free out here, maybe sleeping in the room down the hall from your little sister? There’s something about David... it’s just not right. I can feel it.... and what about Oliver? I know Oliver wants his brother back, but do you really think that’s what he needs?”

“I think...” Frank said quietly, “... that David deserves a second chance. He’s lived in prisons his whole life. He’ll never get the chance to change what that made him if he doesn’t get out.”

“Maybe,” Jay agreed. “But I’m more worried about what happens if they let him loose and he doesn’t wanna change.”

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When Oliver Martin hugged his brother, the only sound made was the whoosh of air as it escaped David’s lungs.

David didn’t hug him back, but neither brother had really expected him to. David wasn’t big on hugs, and he would have been the first to admit that he wasn’t very good at them. But Oliver didn’t mind as much as David didn’t mind his brother wanting to be close. This was the way they were, and instead of returning such a display of affection, David simply stood there and took in old familiarities, like the lemon fragrance coming from his brother’s

hair, and to notice a few changes, such as the way he'd either gained a few pounds, or perhaps Oliver had lost a few.

Glancing towards the door that locked on him every night at eight o'clock, David found Dr. Devling watching them, looking at them the same way people used to years before when they'd been allowed to go to town with their parents. Something about seeing two of them invited people to stare, to look for differences, to wonder... it had made David uncomfortable at one time, but now, he let the doctor look on curiously, all the while staring him down until the older man figured out that he was intruding and cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"David, just make sure to stay in the visiting areas with your brother if you leave your room, and don't forget your meds are coming at two o'clock."

"Sure," David said blandly. "Make sure you let 'em know I want some of those little yellow happy pills."

Devling responded to David's smart remarks with a shake of his head, and David listened as his doctor's footsteps moved down the hall, paused, and then moved on again. This hospital had proven to be a lot different from the numerous other places that had watched his every move, but still, he waited until he was certain that he and Oliver were alone before he placed his hands on his brother's shoulders and gently pushed him back, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards when Oliver met his eyes.

"I'm glad to see you," David said quietly.

"Me, too, David. I came all by myself, just like you said."

"I see that. Who brought you up here?"

"Frank. And Jenny and Jay, too. They're waiting outside, David. And Frank wants to see you, too. Can I ask him to come in a little later? That doctor said..."

"No," David said quickly, touching Oliver's shoulder and guiding him to sit on the narrow, heavily blanketed bed that occupied the small room decorated with blue-bird printed wallpaper. "This visit's just for us, alright? You remember what we talked about, right?"

Oliver's brow wrinkled as he nodded. "I remember, David."

"Good. Now tell me everything about the Woodmoores. They treat you good?"

Oliver nodded. "They let me go to school. A real one, David. And Jenny doesn't talk to me like I'm stupid. She says we're friends."

"You got your own room?"

Oliver nodded again. "And I got two beds in it; one for you, David. But sometimes Jay sleeps there. He's my friend, too."

"Jeremy Flaskis?"

"Yeah. He's my friend, David." Oliver repeated, as if to convince his brother.

“Since when does Jeremy Flaskis want anything to do with you?”

“I don’t know, David. But, one time at school he hit a guy for being mean to me... he got in trouble for that.”

“Huh.... So, what time do you go to school? You take a bus?”

“No. Jay gets us and Frank in the morning, and...”

Oliver told David everything from what color the carpet was in his room to the kind of chicken he ate at Frank’s house on Saturday nights when he went over for dinner. And there was a lot to tell. Like, how Frank’s family got a new house, and how Mr. Seaberg came to visit a lot and always invited him to go out with their family. He talked about how he didn’t like not waking up in the same room as David, and how sometimes he got lonely even in good company, and that Rudy had drawn a picture of him and David together, which he kept hung up next to his bed. He talked until he realized that at David wasn’t doing any of the talking.

“Are you mad at me, David?” Oliver wasn’t sure where the question came from, just that he needed to ask it. David didn’t look too surprised, either.

“Why would I be?”

“I don’t know,” Oliver said, shrugging uncomfortably. “Sometimes I think... maybe if I was better, or different, you wouldn’t be in here.”

David’s eyes drifted, his lungs releasing a slow breath. “You’re not the reason they won’t let me go, Oliver.”

“Then I think... maybe you’re mad at me about the way things were before,” Oliver said quietly.

“That wasn’t your fault, either. You can’t help what you are. None of us can.”

“But I remember things, David... things I didn’t before. It’s like I’m having dreams, but they’re not dreams. I don’t tell no one. Not even Frank.”

David raised an eyebrow. “Why not?” he asked, and then Oliver fell exceptionally silent. “If Frank’s such a good friend, why don’t you tell him the truth?” David pressed.

“Because,” Oliver whispered. “You’re my brother, David... and Frank thinks Dad killed Ms. Grover.”

Apart from blinking, David didn’t have much of a reaction to this news.

“What do you say when Frank says that?” David asked.

“Nothing, David,” Oliver whispered. “I don’t say nothing.”

David smiled. “That’s good, Oliver.”

“It’s not lying, David? It feels like lying.”

“It’s not lying,” David insisted. “It’s Dad’s fault she’s dead... and it’s in the past, right? What does it matter now?”

Oliver sighed, frowning. “I don’t like thinking about Dad anymore, David...

I don’t like thinking... I don’t like...” He paused, taking a deep breath to calm himself. “I want you to come home, David. I don’t want you to be sa

d anymore. You're sad here, David."

David's eyes widened slightly in surprise, and then he laughed. "You don't gotta worry about me, Oliver. I'm gonna make sure you and me are together again, and it's not so bad around here. People cookin' and making sure you eat three times a day. You getta watch TV when you want, and go outside in the morning, and where else can you wear pajamas all day long without someone hollerin' for you to get your ass dressed, huh?" David waved roughly at himself, his chin turned down as he looked over the matching blue one-size-fits-all pocketless pants and shirt that consisted of such thin material he was convinced that the nurses got more than a glimpse of his ass when the light hit him the right way. "These are actually kinda comfortable. Don't gotta put a lot of thought into what you're gonna wear every morning. You should try 'em."

"I sleep in shorts, David."

David grinned. "Who said anything about sleeping?" he asked, a sly grin aimed at his brother. "Oliver, when we talked last time... do you remember, when I asked you to do something important for me?"

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"Dr. Devling, you have a patient waiting in your office, and Adam wants you to go over his meds with him again... the color of one of his pills has changed and he wants to make sure no one's trying to poison him."
Devling graced the short woman peeking into the front offices with a wry smile. "No alien transmitters this time?"

"You've obviously brought Adam a long way," she replied, and then with a nod, left him.

But, Dr. Devling didn't wander off in search of Adam like he normally would have done, or send someone by his office to tell his appointment that he'd be delayed. Instead, he continued to stare at the small, wilting desk plant that one of the employees had brought in months ago, and he thought about the one patient he saw on a daily basis that he didn't seem to be helping at all.

The boy was one of the most impersonal people he'd ever come across, and over the past few months, he hadn't been able to make the slightest breakthrough with David Martin. If Devling was certain of anything, it was that David was far from being ready to be released. But, he wasn't sure that David belonged there, either.

David refused to talk about the incidents leading to his current condition, or to express any remorse for them, but Dr. Devling wasn't exactly ready to transfer David to another program just yet. In fact, being moved around so much had likely become part of the problem, not to mention, given his history there wasn't likely anything David despised more than being locked up.

It was difficult to believe that David Martin knew how to trust anyone, so

now it was encouraging that he hadn't objected to seeing his brother. Dr. Devling had promised him a private visit, in hopes that seeing Oliver would encourage David to start working towards progress. Perhaps if Oliver came more often he could suggest that he participate in one of David's sessions. Oliver might have had some mental disabilities, but Dr. Devling was willing to do anything that could help at this point. Maybe, he thought, gathering up his binder, he could intrude on the brothers for a few minutes to discuss it. Lifting a phone, he dialed David's hall, confirming with the orderlies that they were still in the room, but when he hung up, he changed his plans since the information he'd received wasn't what he'd expected. Waiting casually in the main hall, he flipped through David's file until a familiar face with a visitor's tag appeared moving in his direction.

He'd treated twins before, even some that had to wear nametags so that he could tell them apart, but these brothers were something else. Almost like an illusion. When they were side by side there were differences, a broader nose, thicker chin; and the facial expressions, their attitudes, made them so individual that it was like they didn't really share the same face. But separated, the mirror image they presented of each other was spooky, and watching Oliver Martin walking towards him had Dr. Devling feeling as if he'd slipped into the future, right to the day that David would walk out the front doors and find a better life than he'd had before.

Oliver didn't acknowledge the doctor as he passed by, almost as if he didn't even remember meeting him a few hours before, which Devling decided was entirely possible. Oliver struck him as the type of person who had trouble focusing on more than one thing at a time, but still, he fell into step beside the boy with a friendly smile on his face.

"Oliver, I'll walk you out."

Oliver looked up, smiling as if he'd just noticed his company. "Okay."

"You know, I think it's good you came today. Your brother's had to make some difficult adjustments, and I think seeing you will help. I'm hoping you'll visit again soon."

Oliver released a little laugh, and grinned. "I'd like to see my brother again soon," Oliver replied. "David's not bad. He's my brother."

"Well, no one's saying he's bad, Oliver, but I think..."

"He's my brother. I know him better than you do, Mr. Devling. He's going to be better really soon."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"Well, Oliver, I don't think you understand..."

"Do I give this to you?" Oliver interrupted, removing his visitor's tag and holding it up. "I can keep it if you want me to."

"Um...I'll take it. Oliver..."

“My friends are waiting for me outside. It’s Frank’s birthday.”

“Frank? He was there the night your father was killed. David mentioned him. I was wondering if you could tell me a little about him.”

Oliver looked up expectantly, and when the doctor wasn’t more specific, he shrugged his shoulders. “I like Frank. It’s his birthday. I gave him a card with his picture on it. Frank takes good pictures... there’s Frank!” Oliver said, suddenly pointing out the front windows to a group of three hanging around a pickup truck, and in the time it took Dr. Devling to look, Oliver had slipped out the door, and when Devling spotted him again, a crooked grin was flashed in his direction as the boy waved goodbye to him.

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“Jenny, stop trying to be his shrink, will ya?” Jay complained.

“All I said is it wouldn’t kill him to spend one night on that boat with his dad. It’s not like Mr. Seaberg hasn’t been trying.”

“Well so has Frank,” Jay retorted. “And he can work it out with his dad without you. They’re fine.”

“It’s not like he...”

“He, is still sitting right here,” Frank remarked with a roll of his eyes. He liked having friends he could confide in, he really did, but sometimes he couldn’t decide if these two particular friends were there to amuse or annoy him. He was happy that this time he wasn’t required to put too much thought into it, because as soon as he saw Oliver moving towards them he slid off the tailgate to meet him.

“Hey,” Jenny called, her argumentative demeanor fading. “How was it?” Frank wanted to know the same thing, but as Oliver came closer, he found himself wondering if he already saw the answer on Oliver’s face. Something seemed off. Oliver looked tired; drained. Frank was quick to look at the building accusingly, wondering what Oliver had seen in there.

“Oliver?” he asked, getting close enough to touch his friend’s shoulder. “Is David okay?”

Oliver finally met his eyes, curious for a moment before a lopsided grin spread over his face, his features becoming much more familiar. “It was good, Frank. We played a game.”

“Checkers?” Jay guessed.

Oliver shook his head. “Nope, not checkers. Can we go home now? It’s Frank’s birthday.”

“Sure,” Frank agreed, sliding an arm around Oliver’s shoulders to lead him to the truck. “You can tell us how David’s doing on the way back.” He looked at Oliver and affectionately moved his hand up his neck towards his hairline.

Oliver laughed, shifting like he was being tickled as he caught Frank’s hand and brought it back to his shoulder. “Okay, Frank,” he agreed, and some

etime over the next several hours there was cake and gifts in the Seabergs' living room, along with the argument over a puppy that Sam and Rudy had been hiding on a houseboat.

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Early on a Wednesday morning, on a boat owned by Jeremy Hill, Jeremy Flaskis snapped a picture of two unsuspecting boys on a small motorboat.

"Jay," Jenny Woodmoore called irritably from behind him, "I didn't borrow Jeremy's boat so you could take pictures of other people all day. Stop spying and get over here."

Jay smiled. "I'm not spying. I don't do that anymore... it's just, they're getting kinda close to where the Martins used to live, aren't they?"

Jenny sat up from where she was sunbathing to look across the water where Oliver and Frank were definitely drifting towards a red roof, but seemed too busy talking to notice. "So what? They're talking."

"Yeah," Jay agreed. "But Oliver's still steering... see that?"

"Maybe he wants to go by his old house. No crime in that. He's probably missing his brother again... he's been kinda off since he talked to David. I think we should drive him back there on the next visitor's day. What do you think?"

"I think you mean I should drive him," Jay remarked, feigning irritability in a way that made Jenny laugh. "And, I guess so... Hey, maybe we should turn around and catch up to..."

"No," Jenny said firmly. "You promised all day--with me; and if I have to remind you again I swear I'll go drop you off in that boat with Oliver and Frank so I can find a boyfriend who likes to watch me."

Jay held up his camera as he slowly turned to face her, smirking. "Watch you... with, or without the lens?"

"Without," Jenny decided as she brought her hand to the camera and pushed it down. "I've forgotten what color your eyes are."

"Then you better check," Jay said, leaning closer to her, and with Jenny busy studying Jay's eyes, and Jay busy studying Jenny, neither of them noticed Oliver Martin's motorboat drifting out of sight behind some brush, and if they had noticed, they probably wouldn't have cared.

And Frank, who was in Oliver's boat, didn't exactly care, either. He hadn't paid any mind to Jenny or Jay since they'd passed by twenty minutes ago, waving. Since then, it had been the pinhole-sized leak in the bottom of the motorboat and the occasional water moccasin that occupied his mind.

Oliver had taken them further out than Frank had been comfortable going in a long while, and while his ego had prevented him from making complaints thus far, his nerves were slowly outweighing it.

"Oliver?" he finally said. "Are you ready to eat yet? We can find my dad... h

ave lunch...”

“I’m okay, Frank.”

“Oh. Alright... Do you remember where that spot is yet? Maybe if we could stop for a while...”

Frank stopped when Oliver glanced back at him, grinning. “Frank,” Oliver said, before dropping his voice into an amused whisper, “are you scared?”

“No,” Frank said quickly. “I just wanna know what the plan is. Last week all you could talk about was some place where you wanna catch baby frogs...”

“Tadpoles, Frank.”

“Whatever; tadpoles, to fill up your tank--last week you were calling them baby frogs... And now, you changed your mind about that because you wanna go fishing, but if you haven’t noticed, we didn’t bring any fishing poles, so unless you plan to catch ’em with your hands I don’t see that happening, either.”

“Actually,” Oliver replied, glancing over his shoulder, “I didn’t notice. But that’s okay, I got somewhere better to go. Okay, Frank?”

Frank frowned as Oliver turned his back once again, and found himself staring at it as if the answer to every question running through his mind was supposed to be on Oliver’s shirt. And Frank did have questions. Not all of them had to do with where they were going, either. There had been plenty of things bothering him since his birthday, and not the least of which had to do with the realization that he hadn’t been enjoying Oliver’s company as much as usual.

“Okay... Oliver.” Frank took hold of the sides of the boat, sliding forward where he more or less forced Oliver to make room for him on the narrow bench at the back of the boat. “Can we stop for a second?”

“Right now, Frank?”

“Right now,” Frank insisted, and to make a point, he reached around Oliver to kill the engine, leaving the boat adrift on the water, and the two of them in silence until he broke it. “I wanna know why you’re not talking to me.”

Oliver cocked his head, baffled. “I’m talking to you right now, Frank.”

“You’re avoiding me,” Frank replied, matter-of-factly. “You’ve been doing it all week. And Mrs. Woodmoore told me about the problems at her house.”

Oliver crossed his arms. “She’s lying,” he was quick to say, and Frank’s frown only deepened.

“You don’t even know what she told me,” Frank pointed out, and when Oliver turned his eyes down, he sighed. “Look, just because they noticed some money missing doesn’t mean anyone’s accusing you of doing it, Oliver. Jenny doesn’t think you did... and I... Oliver, I’m not going to ask if you did it. You know... I don’t think I even care. I was talking about the other s

tuff. I wanna know why you've been acting weird ever since you saw your brother. Did David tell you to stop talking to me or something? Or to Jeremy? Because you don't call anymore, and every time I see you it's because I come dragging you out of your room. And I see the way you've been looking at Jeremy when he can't see you. Did he do something to make you mad, because if he did, it better be good if he catches you grinding your teeth at him... or is this something else?"

"Something else?" Oliver repeated, suddenly seeming uncomfortable with Frank's eyes so close to his. He stood, having no trouble with his balance as the boat rocked beneath him and he slowly stretched.

Frank looked up. "Yeah," he replied, his voice beginning to sound unexpectedly cold. "I guess I'm trying to figure out what the hell happened between now and when you last talked to David."

Oliver returned his gaze to Frank, the corner of his mouth twitching as he itched his shoulder, and then released a small laugh.

"What?"

"It's an easy question, Oliver," Frank replied, finding his way to his feet, somewhat slower than Oliver had. "Did something happen with your brother? I think he said something to you... maybe he did something that wasn't good. I'm just wondering, because it's not like you've talked to me about any of it."

Oliver snorted and reached out to take a playful swipe at Frank's shoulder, seemingly oblivious to the way even the light touch forced Frank to retake his balance. "That's silly, Frank. I just saw my brother. He can't say anything bad. You're my friend."

Oliver grinned widely, but for once, Frank wasn't eager to smile back as he slowly reached out and placed a hand on Oliver's shoulder, mostly to continue holding up his own balance. "I wanted to be your friend. But I'm wondering," Frank said, dropping his voice into a secretive tone, "when you just saw your brother, David, did you tell him the same thing before you left him trapped where you're supposed to be?"

Frank snatched his hand back, and something sparked in the other boy's expression. The boat rocked beneath their feet, and Frank fought to keep his knees securely locked as a small bout of lightheadedness reached him. He'd done things that weren't very well thought out, and he'd spoken out of turn before. But this time, on a little boat hidden out of plain sight, and facing something he hadn't realized that he feared until now made him feel as if his words were about to cost him. Suddenly not trusting his own legs, or the boy in front of him, Frank could only stare, his instincts becoming defensive as hazel eyes stared back at him, and the crooked smile that faced him a moment later was far from comforting.

"How long have you known?" David finally asked, and the attempted commu

nication surprised Frank.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "Maybe before now...I didn't want to think it. Why? You could have..."

"Waited? I was sick of waiting, Frank."

"So you used your brother?" Frank snapped.

"I didn't use him," David replied. "I asked for a favor. Did it ever occur to you that I didn't force him, Frank? He's not as innocent as you wanna think he is. Got a little bit of me in him... and he knows I did this for us."

"David, I know Oliver wanted you to get out... I wanted you to get out, but after everything that's happened if you don't do this the right way you won't have any kind of life. Unless you plan to keep hiding, and if you're gonna do that, it isn't going to be behind Oliver's face. You have to go back. You know that, don't you?"

David lowered his head, his shoulders sagging as if his body was processing some deep thought along with his mind, and on his face... disappointment, as if he'd expected this moment, and moreover, expected a different outcome. And then he looked up, and the world began to move very fast for his boat-mate.

Frank made a mistake, one he recognized very quickly when he chose not to follow his instincts and shove David right over the side of the boat. He'd had the opportunity, a split second when he could have pulled it off, and it was missed before he was raising his arms to fend off David's, catching his balance as the boat rocked violently beneath his feet. But, balance didn't prove to be enough, and when two firm hands came forcefully against Frank's chest, he hardly caught his breath before the air rushed from his lungs and he toppled sideways in a dizzy, panicked haze.

There was a strange crack in Frank's ear, and he felt something wet trickling down the side of his face before he even made an oddly heavy splash into the water, the lake surrounding him like a cold, heavy blanket. His body twitched beneath the surface in his valiant effort to get above it, and as if to bring on one last terror he looked up to see the bottom of Oliver's boat before the oncoming darkness surrounded his senses and he sunk slowly into it, unaware of the hazel eyes still watching him.

David Martin's mouth was tugged down into a frown as he watched the head of blond hair below the water fade away into the murk before his attention was turned to a snake weaving its way past the boat. Frank Seaberg was a disappointment, and would be a necessary sacrifice if he wanted to accomplish all that mattered to him. And just like all his life, all that mattered to him was taking his brother away from this place. He looked to his left, the back of the house he'd once been prisoner in coming into his sights. Somehow, all of those memories constantly on his mind seemed like a distant dream; something he'd never speak of again. The moment was a new one for him, a

nd standing there on the little motorboat he knew there was a decision to be made. A change. And in an instant, he was somewhere better. At least somewhere better than Frank was, he imagined, as he looked down once again and tried to ignore a strange ringing in his ears that insisted that when they met again, his brother was not going to like this.

“It’ll be fine. Trust me, Oliver,” he whispered. Because like himself, David knew that the only thing Oliver would ever be able to count on in this world... was David.

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“Jay, look out!” Jenny screamed, and surfacing in the water, Jay casually grabbed a small snake around the neck and tossed it well away from his personal space before he swam closer to Oliver Martin’s boat and looked up to where his girlfriend was still standing in the larger one.

“I don’t see him!” he shouted, and without waiting for a response, dived down below the surface of the water, knowing that Jenny’s watchful eye was on him until he surfaced again. She was crying, and Jay didn’t feel there was time for that. “Leave me here!” he shouted. “Get to Frank’s house and tell his mom...”

Jenny’s attention was suddenly turned as she heard coughing behind her, and she left the edge of their borrowed boat to attend to it. “Jay, he’s awake!”

Frank Seaberg groaned as he fell from the bench seat they’d carefully placed him on, and jumped when Jenny Woodmoore gripped his shoulders, calling his name as if he wasn’t right in front of her. Forcing his wet lashes open, Frank took her in before looking past her, his attention on a dripping figure until it became Jay Flaskis, kneeling next to him.

“Frank, where’s Oliver?” Jay demanded.

Frank coughed again. “What?”

“We can’t find him!” Jenny said impatiently. “What happened?”

Frank looked between the two of them, his mind seemingly working at an inconveniently slow pace before he found himself looking gratefully at Jay and his wet clothes. “Did you pull me out?” he asked.

Jay frowned. “We found you in the boat--Frank, did Oliver go over or not?”

Pulling himself up, ignoring the assistance from his friends, Frank made his way to the bow, looking over the edge at the small motorboat still drifting in the water.

“Frank!” Jay shouted, as if a firmer tone would get his attention.

“We have to go get Oliver...” Frank started.

“Where’s Oliver?” Jenny demanded.

“It wasn’t Oliver,” Frank stated, raising his voice above both of theirs. “It wasn’t Oliver... with me.” He turned to them, meeting Jay’s eyes, and in a moment he knew that Jay understood. “It wasn’t Oliver.”

“David did this to you?” Jenny asked. There was a fright in her voice, and a feeling of paranoia as she turned in a circle as if ready to ward off an attack.

“If that was David...” Jay said.

“We have to go get Oliver,” Frank finished for him.

Jay cursed, his temper sparking as he looked at Frank. “I told you! I told you he was nothing like Oliver! He’s dangerous, Frank, we should...”

“I don’t know,” Frank quietly interrupted, his mind on the last moments he remembered in the water as his eyes took in the boat where they’d found him. “Maybe David’s got a little Oliver in him after all.”

“Frank,” Jay growled.

“Wait,” Jenny said. “So... where is David?”

It seemed to be a question the three of them had in common as they silently looked over the water for several long moments before Frank finally shook his head. “We won’t find him. He’s gone.”

“For now,” Jay said, and in a whisper full of uncertainty towards the near to distant future, Frank agreed.

“For now.”