

KERMES VERMILIO

THE DECAY OF THE TACTLESS

A BOOK BY YELLOW STREAMERS

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PROLOGUE

Tragic events had been known to the city's lands; the stains were washed by the tides of nature. Dark worlds were drawn into the water. Death and misery grew; new beginnings thrived. As the damned entered the quarters of New Orleans, they did bind strength of proper distaste. Unnatural entitlement loomed and fantasy grew as a result of the unwarranted freedom. On the outskirts of the city, music did ring, fainter than the bosom, drawing in lost souls. As the city expanded with ease, so did the spirits of the souls beyond it. French, Spanish, Congolese, Haitian, Native American, Creole, Latino, Sicilian, Anglo-Americans. Half a dozen more nations gathered, to form a new world identity that stood alone from the rest.

This was its charm.

In the face of extinction, the Cajun Flamingo continued to roar. Outlandish, feathered hats were all the rage during the Victorian Era of the late 1800s. Hunters profited from the market, drawing birds to near extinction. Compared to gold, an ounce of feathers was worth more. Gentlemen would take the whole wing and make it into a mistress's fan. They had to hunt at the height of the breeding season in order to capture the mystical creature. As the young birds of the aerie were left unattended, a man would shoot them all. With an affirmation of sacrifice, a tradition was set forth. Crimson feathers became the unnatural desire of the people.

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BELT ONE: BABYLON

CHAPTER ONE: The World Mother Has Created

Remnants 4000 BC (Before Cassius) to 33 AC (After Cassius)

The Strain supported the Earth's growth, vitality, and longevity.

To nurture Earth's surroundings: the trees, the rivers, the sky.

Keeping balance between The Two.

The Opposed and The Strain.

There is no balance without Mother Nature, because she is the source of everything and the purpose of all things. Mother Nature is a serial killer of all things pertaining to life; it is a natural order unknown to those ignorant of immortality. Mother fashioned one Strain to lead the void and the Opposing Force to participate, like strangers at a wedding, somehow connected, without knowing who the other party truly was.

Mother's words contained creative powers and in doing so, she created Belt One, Babylon

Day One: Mother called the Day life, and the darkness she called Death

Day Two; Mother called for the sky and the sea: let there be a heaven amid the waters

Day Three: Mother said, let there be a divide, let them see the signs and the seasons

Day Four: Mother said, let the earth bring forth spices that yield power

Day Five: Mother said, let the sky bring forth abundantly, creature hath life, and fowl that may fly

Day Six: Mother said, let there be The Strain and The Opposed

Day Seven: Mother created one law that was not to be broken:

"The Strain leader may never mother, I am Mother!"

Cassius, a strong leader, watched the opposition from a distance, intervened when necessary and encouraged enlightenment. It was an arduous task, especially for a lifetime, but it was a gift Mother gave to the Earth. In his connection with the Earth, Cassius gained a reservoir of incantation to care for his new world, an equation that enabled both parties to unknowingly trust each other without knowing each other. Three symbiotic relationships: Mother, Strain, and Opposition, each dedicated to achieving a more virtuous and peaceful era than the one before.

Cassius lived within the Clan, surrounded by a boundary spell that kept them hidden and safe on a 400-acre lot. The Clan's land consisted primarily of open marshes, deep ponds, shallow pools and canals, with oaks, willows and pines along the eastern and southern boundaries. Three segments made up The Fields: The North Cells received water from a canal and had the deepest ponds. The water then channelled into the Central Cells, the areas you would see when looking west from the hill. As the water flowed under the South Cells; it entered the Creek.

This was the primary collection zone for water in the area. It served both as a safety measure and a recreational activity for The Strain Clan. It was their forever home.

Cassius reigned with one task in mind: ensuring the safety and growth of The Strain. It was forbidden for The Strain leader to have a family, and all focus was on restoring the Earth's soul.

After hundreds of years protecting that bedfellow Earth, Cassius grew vain and empty. After falling in love with a clan sister named Aby, he developed a darkness within him that led him to believe the natural order was to procreate. Cassius and Aby's lust for life was destroyed after Aby miscarried seven months into the growth of their first child. Dark worlds grew from Aby's misery and the natural charm of their love roared into a tide of broken creatures.

Aby was furious. "You know why this has happened, Cassius, it's that fucking bitch Mother. She doesn't want us to be happy or grateful. All she wants is loyal diligence."

Cassius laid a calming hand on her shoulder. "I cannot believe that is true. These things happen my love; it is nature."

Aby brushed his hand aside. "And who rules that nature, Cassius?"

There was no adequate response, so he said nothing.

After Mother's treachery, their dislike of her grew. Cassius and Aby had learned that what Mother gave, she could easily take back.

Aby turned her anger towards the Earth, reflecting her misery on it. As the skies above The Strain's bivouac grew dark, the grass withered and died, the forest wilted, and a storm raged. Cassius and Aby's rule was under threat as The Strain gathered the sisters together to plot.

Within a month after the death of her firstborn, Aby fell pregnant again. Rather than be the hunted, Aby decided to be the hunter. She found a deserted spot in the woods to sacrifice 3 goats in a ritual that was unspoken of within The Strain. After securing the birth of her child with the unsanctioned spell, she considered names for the child she would soon meet. Each strain member was named after a combination of their parents' last names, so the child would be called Aida Eco Swum.

Throughout Aby's pregnancy, she remained distant from Cassius and performed the unsanctioned spell each month. Now it was too late to do anything about the unspeakable that had been committed; his heart filled with dread for his new child, who was most likely devoid of empathy.

In exactly 9 months, the clan stood and witnessed Aida's birth. Upon a large square stone structure at the top of the hill Aby lay, hand in hand with Cassius who stood next to her. Aby's contractions brought strikes of lightening to the fields below and bright scorched feathers fell from the sky. With a horrifying unworldly screech, Aby haemorrhaged the blood of the goats she had sacrificed for the past 9 months of her pregnancy.

As the blood was released onto the ground the minds of the clan members in attendance were filled with images of horrific times to come, and the pain gnawed at their veins. The few unable to cope with the images soon started bleeding from every orifice. Body structures of jaws melted away from their faces as the boiling began from their insides. Within moments, these members of The Strain became uncorked and swept away with the wave of Aby's blood that continued to haemorrhage from her cunt.

Aida exited her mother covered in the unnatural blood and as Cassius held the baby in this time and in this world, he knew she would be hunted. Despite knowing that his only child was born with darkness, Cassius refused to kill her.

He stood suspended in a moment of time, pondering the gold the earth had just gifted him.

"It is nothing to be, but everything to be safe. Embrace deeply my royalty, the way I tried to rule, and that which I did not dread. Let wisdom guide your valour despite that dauntless mind. I was given the name of king when a forest crown was placed upon my head, as if I were a prophet. In my grip a barren sceptre; no daughter of mine succeeds. My vessel of peace must contain rancour, and this eternal jewel of mine must never belong to the common enemy of humankind. Let the creatures charm her and protect her. Allow the lands, tides and music show her roars of might. Let her be the huntress and not the hunted."

As Cassius ran, he used the magic he had inherited from mother to misdirect the remaining sisters of The Strain from his scent. Aida's only hope was to be erased.

Magic is a holistic process, a method of manipulating the natural world by using natural law and truth. The use of magic in witchcraft is like the use of prayer in other religions: through song and spin, prayers and war cries.

While Cassius still had power from the horror he had just witnessed, he knelt and placed Aida on the ground in front of him. He dug his hands into the dirt, exposing the roots of the trees, knowing there would be nothing more. He asked the roots to sacrifice themselves for his love, his one and only child. Cassius had taken care of the trees for centuries, so they returned the favour without hesitation. He drew life from the trees he harvested, and a wooden cocoon encased little Aida. Aida sank into the earth, frozen in time, unscathed. Cassius placed a sensibly sized book, which contained everything he had seen and heard since the dawn of time, next to Aida in the rooted cocoon. No longer would the queen roam, never again would she be wild. If all time was internally present, then all time moving forward would be unforgivable. Despite what might have been and what has been, there is one end that is always present. Enlightenment in a reflection of a journey most would never undertake, a door that most would never open, into the crimson void, Prime Ono Sicrrms.

The sensibly sized book

The sensibly sized book was composed of pages made from the bark of the bivouac's surrounding trees. The ink used for writing on those pages was made from the resin that lived inside them: it was one with the Earth, self-aware. In addition to earth, magic, and neutrality, the sensibly sized book was the encyclopedia of everything. Such a sensible book, it forgot to be sensible to those looking for personal gain from using it. A beautiful naive nourishment of creativity. Gain and greed created serendipity; structures allowed the smart to twist the simple. Belief became benevolence and betrayal bred. Cassius was responsible for the Earth and for everything rooted in its system and he had the responsibility of maintaining that.

So he wrote, journaled experiments, developments he had made, and everything in between. Recording all in a book that was so small

and of such a sensible size. The sensibly sized book was a gift for his daughter.

Over time, the sensibly sized book grew in information and so did the spells within it. It was mystical after all, learning what worked and what didn't work. A prefilling trait now existed within the book's pages, another of many wonders that the sensibly sized book could create. There was a part of the book where it stored unfinished spells in the hope they would be finished one day. This was called The Vault. With stained glass and an undertone of hatred, the Vault seemed like a secure place to store important rhymes where no one would dare to look.

The Vault was arched in form, of stone and brick, and supported by large wooden buttresses. Water flowed under the palace even though the ground above appeared dry. A dark world that slowly expanded in size and sucked in lost souls, devouring them with its charm and gold. A room within a room, a great place to hide, and a great place to seek.

As the sensibly sized book waited for Aida to reawaken, The Opposed scalded the endless abundance of life and prosperity Mother had given them, tearing through the Forest, which had not grown lush from the year before.

Rita:

Rita ruled from 33 A.C, after Cassius's death. She witnessed firsthand the cruelty of humans during the witch trials, but never lost hope for the prosperity of the land. She saved everyone that she could, despite the unforeseen loss of several witches during those trials. Rita was able to foresee time on occasion, allowing The Strain to escape the efforts of The Opposed and the hysteria engulfing the provinces. Both sides lost many during the witch trials: more than Rita wanted to imagine. Then, when both clans and humans needed her the most, the unthinkable occurred.

At exactly 3.26 pm on a Monday, Rita became pregnant with her first child, Jadis. Two premonitions occurred to her at that exact moment. It was the first time in her thousand years of rule that Rita saw two separate future paths. A life had been given to Rita by Mother,

and Rita made her choice accordingly. To sacrifice something that hadn't yet been given a chance, whether it was from evil or grace, wasn't anyone's choice.

Rita's premonitions became clearer as Jadis grew. The birth of Jadis was somehow a response to the split reality that had been caused by the previous clan leader, Cassius. Only when Rita and Jadis ventured into the woods looking for a fallen soul did the split reality reveal its true purpose.

Eighteen years later

Arcadia acted as if it was an old western town, where the men were highly competitive about who had the biggest Glock. Women were strong and had a knack for running bars. In contrast to old western movies, this was a farming town. The highest in the pecking order, in fact, it became prosperous by selling meat to nearby towns. Some residents wanted to live a quieter life, which led them to move farther out of town as the city expanded. They visited only to obtain the necessities.

There was an uneasy feeling in the air as the Earth beneath Arcadia told a story of distaste. The Strain's camp not far from the town of Arcadia had begun to block natural elements from entering the 400-acre lot. The water that flowed into their lands started to detour around the boundary spell, as the bivouac cells started to slowly dry up.

An undisguised power emanated from the site where Rita and Jadis went to investigate what was redirecting the natural flow of water. Rita stood on top of the dwelling from which the energy was emanating. As Jadis stepped onto the ground behind Rita, she felt hatred burning within her. As if someone had lassoed her from behind, Jadis was thrown violently backwards past the forest boundary with one foot centred on the ground. Rita heard a faint and unforgiving whistle from the woods. Silence blanketed the forest. Despite its erratic movements, the whistle drew closer with one goal in mind. The

arrowhead sliced Rita's carotid artery instantly as it flew through her. Falling to her knees in some sick parody of servitude, Rita drowned in her own blood within six seconds, collapsing to be forever still.

The Arrow was tethered to the roots of the forbidden forest, where it originated. As the sky darkened, it gathered harm. Though it was perfectly balanced, its shape would lead you to believe otherwise. The metallic tip was made in the shape of a crescent moon. This tip would gore anything it encountered. It did not add structure or stability to the arrow to have three pink feathers at the end, but it had them.

The Forever Forest was exactly what it meant; it was forever. Animals and humans alike who entered the Forever Forest usually got lost and overwhelmed by its huge canopy of trees, forever growing and forever consuming. The town of Arcadia knew that the Forever Forest led to the channel of water that extended miles south to reach the Mexican coast. Animals who entered surely became lost within, and with their eventual deaths, they would fall upon the earth to be absorbed. Those taken to sustain life became an eerie decay of dust within the wind of the Forever Forest, confined by the spaces of the forest, never allowed to leave the borders. Over the centuries the decay of those lost became so thick, it was barely visible to anything or anyone. Those who dared to enter in the mist of decay without a tether quickly became lost.

Humans were sometimes more capable and less susceptible to the Forever Forest's lingering engagement. The Forest was rich in flavour, hunting that which hunted it. It had a monthly rainfall of 200 cm and a mean temperature of 15 to 30 degrees Celsius. Due to the lack of droughts and frosts, the trees were evergreen and so densely packed with vegetation that a drop of rain falling from the forest's emergent layer took 10 minutes to reach the forest floor, where the soil was poor in nutrients.

The Forever Forest wasn't seen as an unnatural evil force, more a spiritual place that should not be ventured into unless you had nothing else to lose. This forest only took what it needed to sustain the cocoon of its ancestors. Sacrifices had to be made, and a debt was owed to the Forever Forest until it had recovered what had been taken from it. Animals and humans who got lost and died of starvation soon decayed and left all their nutrients behind to source a fuel for the roots of the system below. An interconnected root system so unique and in touch

with each part, it sent what was needed most to the forefront of the forest where the cocoon lay in silence forever, or what seemed like forever.

CHAPTER TWO: Medusa

Yesterday, I dreamt about myself, which reminded me it had been an exceptionally long time since I had such a vivid dream.

Two hunters searching for a lost sheep in the Forever Forest not far beyond the tree line of Arcadia found a young girl covered in dirt and blood. Despite their best efforts, Suci and Bassay had not been able to procreate despite being young and in love, so when news of the discovery spread through town, they pounced on the opportunity to take the newborn baby.

Her features were light, and she cried in the most goddamned loud voice anyone had ever heard. As Medusa grew and developed, she was known for her quiet personality and quirky charm. It was due to her charm, grace, and beauty that Medusa was able to get away with murder. The community of Arcadia never questioned her origins nor told her she was found within the Forever Forest. Despite this, Medusa became interested in the woods anyway. It was up to the men of the town to enter when a party required. So instead, Medusa sought answers from the townspeople who refused to tell her why the forest wasn't explored.

One day, even though she was barely 13 years old, she walked into the local bar, silently lingering at the entrance for a good 13 seconds. Her intuition somehow ignored what was happening in the back of the pub. Instead, she walked up to the first bartender she saw and spoke: "Where is Croce?"

The bartender smiled at her. "My love, you already know where he is, you have just not looked yet."

She turned around, glanced the length of the bar, and saw Croce in the corner with an outsider. Medusa approached the two.

Croce looked up at her. "It seems child, you have spent a long a time in a bottle. This has consumed you with wishes that were never answered within that empty shell of time."

Medusa frowned. "WTF does that have to do with the Forbidden Forest?"

Croce gestured towards his companion. "I believe you already know Aida!"

Confused, Medusa left the town feeling even less trusting towards it than before. Retreating up the hill she sought refuge in her mother's soup.

One summer day, Medusa wandered unattended into the Forever Forest. Deep in the dense bush, she found a wooden cocoon made from tree roots, buried like a small grave. The aging and overgrown tomb of roots was stained with moss. In the dirty, yet comfortable wooden carcass, Medusa felt an unnatural desire to lie down.

After lying for a while, she awoke to see the setting sun. She panicked when she realized she was supposed to get home well before then. She tripped on the uneven cocoon and fell backwards, feeling a sharp poke on her ribs. Reaching down, she found the source of the pain. A black book lay underneath the roots. She took the sensibly sized book home and hid it under her bed.

It had been a few weeks since Medusa had hidden the book, and now her curiosity was getting the best of her. Within the pages were a series of rhymes. Each rhyme included a list of ingredients.

The sensibly sized book introduced Medusa to a new fantasy. She had never felt completely connected to the ground she lived upon or the suspicious nature of the townspeople who treated her so naively. She experimented with the rhymes on the page. As she read the sentences aloud, she gathered the ingredients from the Forever Forest. Putting each rhyme into reality, she soon discovered that magic was real. The ripe green leaves she plucked from the trees circled Medusa as she frolicked amongst the dense Forever Forest, turning brown as they changed from season to season. For Medusa, it seemed as if the forest enjoyed her company, showing her its fruitful delights and the truth behind its dark nature.

The sensibly sized book consumed every spare moment of Medusa's waking life. Each day she spent more time discovering new spells. The innocent, charming little girl that was Medusa became a being capable of changing reality to her own benefit. Medusa succumbed to the magic she had been endowed with. She had now adopted the sensible-sized book as her bible, and the consequences of her rhymes caused equal and opposite reactions.

Her only saviour was her loyalty to her parents. Medusa wanted a better life for them, so she started casting rhymes for Arcadia's other occupants. The township would be an easy place to profit. This induced her to venture into other rhymes that would allow the darker realm of clients to come forward, but at a higher cost. It took more work to make more money, and the worse the rhyme, the higher the cost.

Annabelle Lutwidge was one of Medusa's very first customers. Annabelle asked her to make Jim Parsons fall in love with her and marry her within a year. To conjure up the love required to plant such a subconscious thought, Medusa gathered her ingredients and recited the words of the love spell, and soon the two were married.

Jim didn't snap until the fifth year, after their children had been born, and now were three and one years old. When Jim awoke on Sunday morning, Anna was getting the children ready for church, and Jim retrieved the shotgun from the wall. While Anna dressed the eldest and the youngest waited, her back to the door, Jim entered and shot her. Her blood splattered on Jim Junior's pale face as she coughed up blood. The neighbours heard Jim fire another nine shots, every cartridge he kept in the house, as Anna fell forward. Jim continued to the barn with his clothes and skin completely covered in blood, pouring gasoline from a jerrycan over himself then lighting a match.

A few weeks after Annabelle's request a young man called Scott Stokes sat down with Medusa at the pub in Arcadia. He asked that Medusa make his mother sick, so that he could inherit her fortune and live his life as he saw fit. The spell was granted. Mrs. Stokes died of a stroke, instant and painless. The funeral was short and simple, dressed in the reverence of despair. Margery was so young: only 51.

It wasn't long before Scott started using the estate to his benefit, throwing ravaging parties where sex and drugs ruled the night.

Unknown to the town, Margery had been a cruel mother to Scott as he grew, with constant beatings and mental abuse. Margery never did like her son much, and he used his upbringing of hate against her. Riches, booze and fun turned sour, and the spell soon showed its repercussions. During one of Scott's lavish parties, he felt the taste of his mother's wicked ways. These lavish parties usually had women who for a sweet price would accompany certain men to rooms within the house.

This night, when all the women were occupied, their fruitful distastes of death became reborn. The women began to convulse as the babies they had aborted over the years of their service, started to labour from within. The screams could be heard from every room of the old stone mansion. Unaware of what was happening, men were running naked from their rooms covered in blood. The carrion things, however, were pure death, and they were not born still or young. Instead, they emerged from the escorts at the age they would have been if they had been kept alive, some as old as twenty ripped their mothers apart from the inside out. A group of walking dead children slowly made their way to Scott's bunk and began devouring him whole. This was forever known as the massacre of 1666.

Roger and Mobb, two farmers, had been arguing about their properties for over a decade. Each believed he had a right to certain pieces of land which both used daily. Celine, Roger's wife, hired Medusa to end the quarrel. The Mobb farm was the dominant business in town, selling milk, wool, and meat in Arcadia as well as in neighbouring towns. In order to end Mobb's good fortune, she cast a misfortune spell on his cattle. Once Mobb's farm went under, Medusa would receive a 10% share of Roger's profits, setting up her family for life.

With a rhyme that would end all rhymes, Medusa predicted that Mobb's farm would fall in seven days.

A peaceful Japanese painting filled Medusa's mind as a wave of repetitive, angry sounds filled her ears. A piece of wood Medusa had secured from Mobb's fence line lay surrounded by a circle of gun powder. On top of that piece of wood was another; this piece came from Roger's fence line. With the required herbs from the Forever Forrest, she set the two pieces of wood on fire. Mobb's piece of wood instantly disintegrated underneath Roger's piece of fence line. Roger's

wood did not burn; soon the flame turned rainbow and the wood became indestructible.

The animals of Mobb's farm fell sick on day one, causing grief to the farm. Soon, no animal was left unaffected by this new illness. After 7 days, no animal could be found alive on the 100-acre block, leaving the Mobb family completely broke and dumbfounded. In euphoria over the Mobbs' family defeat, Celine never had any intention of paying the family of Medusa 10% until the end of time, and she began bragging about her cheap recruitment of the witch. Word spread through the town. The people of Arcadia called a town meeting. The men in the town became riled. They demanded that Medusa be sacrificed as a witch who dealt in the realm of heresy. They marched in anger up the dirt road to where Medusa, Suci, and Bassay lived.

When the mob arrived at the cabin, Medusa's parents did not fear the angry words the townspeople yelled. Medusa asked her mother and father to kneel behind her, and Suci and Bassay did just that, putting every part of their faith in her.

Medusa turned to her parents. "Mother, Father, it is about to get very loud and very scary. Things you have never seen before will appear, and I will look possessed. Do not worry; know that I am in control."

Succi gazed up at her. "We trust you, Daughter!"

Bassay frowned at the mob's hatred. "Do not hold back, Sweetie."

"Oh, I won't."

Medusa recited the spell of energy. Her concentration was not hindered by the hateful cries of the townspeople. The wooden floor became edged with a scorched symbol following the rhyme that she recited. Medusa's chant became unstoppable as her energy grew. Succi and Bassay did not look in fear; they sought strength from their young daughter to protect herself and them. Arcadia's town clock struck three.

Medusa thought during the trance of her energy spell how something as subtle as 3 o'clock had eluded her all these years. Neither the day nor the night mattered. The townspeople moved towards the cabin's entrance, trying to storm the home of the loving family. The

Arcadians reached the door, but when they tried to enter, they were thrown back. Medusa's chant continued unabated. It was Suci and Bassay who pleaded with the townspeople to stop their anger, screaming from behind Medusa's chant, unheard and unseen

Arcadia's residents were prevented from entering by the energy spell, resulting in a stalemate. They threw lit torches at the doorway, retreating slowly. The dried grass around the cabin ignited a small fire, which spread to the bottom of the walls.

While Medusa tried to contain the fire with her energy spell, it soon engulfed the entire house. A fireball now consumed the family home, engulfing Suci, Bassay, and Medusa; all three of them were now confined in a snow globe of pure hell. Within their new globe of terror, the heat soon reached an unbearable level. Due to the sheer rise in temperature, neither of Medusa's parents nor she would survive much longer. As their new tomb increased in heat, Medusa had no choice but to absorb it all.

Medusa's scream was audible beyond the hills of Arcadia as she inhaled the energy of pure hatred. She exhaled it from her body with such a strong shock wave, the fire instantly blew upwards. The townsfolk were blown backward into the field by the release of power.

Gratified by their victory over the witch that would burn in hell for her deeds, the citizens of Arcadia slowly regained their feet, looking at the desolate cabin. As the shreds of the cabin fell from the sky, they lingered in the dense air. In the middle of the splinters of a house that once held a trusting family, a small, dense figure lay. Medusa arose from the dust, faint and unsteady, looking back to where her parents had knelt in prayer. Two scorched figures stood behind the dust, embracing in fear. She had incinerated her parents with her energy spell, yet she had saved the townspeople. As she collapsed, Medusa dreamt of a better world.

Medusa, now unconscious, was dragged to the Forever Forest by the townspeople where she had been found 17 years earlier. Over the tree of the rooted cocoon, the townsmen of Arcadia tied a rope and strung a noose around the neck of the witch that had burned her own family to hell. She awoke with her lungs deprived of air, and her eyes soon turned crimson. She choked to death as the town cheered, except

for Mr. Croce, who stood in the distance, not a participant of the horrible crime that had just been committed.

CHAPTER THREE: Not this Shack, Not this Cocoon

Inside the cocoon, avalanches, wildlife, and massive storms are the external dangers, while the internal hazards are altitude sickness, disorientation and hypothermia. Shifting tectonic plates threaten my lonely community. Storms and heavy rains are further compounded by gravity pushing down upon my land. In this harsh plain, smoke and ice dominate, and ash clouds pound the ground between the hail and ice storms. Other cocoons crash into one another, lightning strikes splinters from those mounds, falling to the void below. Inside each cocoon is a lost soul waiting for their demise, lining the tombs they now occupy. The harsh elements of The Ether have no effect on the air elementals, broad and blunt, with large mortifying jaws, elongated shark teeth and a head with a hollow interior firing electrical charges from one side to the other: the watchers of this realm

In Florida, a legend had been spreading among teenagers of a malicious spirit, cleft "Wiccademous," who lurked in the woods. Nobody knows how old this tale is, but locals claim it's at least a few hundred years.

This story begins in the 1600s, when a young woman was sentenced to death for practicing witchcraft. According to some reports, the execution was carried out on September 12, 1670, although no one is certain of the year. Stories of mutilated bodies dyed crimson being thrown into nearby creeks and lakes began to emerge.

A farmer named Jack Prior built a shack in 1912. Despite being a cattle farmer, Jack was a kind-hearted person. To keep the kids from witnessing the slaughtering of pigs, cows, and chickens, he built the shack to hide such horrors. It was a small house built of logs from the tree line at the back of his property, notched at the ends and laid one upon another with the spaces filled with mud and dried manure. The shack was large enough to slaughter a few animals at the same time and hang the carcasses to age. There were no windows in case the children tried to peek inside and see what truly occurred in the

forbidden building. To keep the children's minds occupied from the forbidden shack, he told them German tales of Grimm.

When the animals' necks were slit upside down hanging from the hooks on the ceiling, blood was left to soak into the ground below where a rooted cocoon lay. Deep inside that lair was housed a vengeful being who had been plucked unwillingly from time twice. Around the inside of the shack was a bench that covered all four walls except for the entrance. On the walls hung tools, spices and herbs and other materials. The logs that lined the walls were a beautiful light cedar colour that matched perfectly with the natural elements that surrounded the shack. But the carvings on the walls told stories of what occurred there. Anyone passing by would not have noticed the small house, so detached from the main living quarters, and for good reason.

Jack was a loving husband and the father of three adored children. It was important to him not to let his children grow up to just be farmers; he wanted them to have dreams, to study, to follow a path that made them happy. Cadum was 5 years old and had blonde hair and green eyes as beautiful as the grass itself. As the sun rose in the distance, Cadum would put his boots on and wander the farm. He was a good child, never venturing near the shack. Bored of the farm life, the two eldest, Finn and Angus, slept in until the late morning most days.

In 1913 Jack Prior's wife, Mary, worked as a trainee nurse at the St Augustine Hospital, but these lands were not immune to misfortune, and the Hospital was no exception. Tragically, a fire struck in 1916, killing 20 staff members as they tried to rescue patients from the flames. A beam collapsed and crushed Mary as she ran to save a patient from the fire; she died instantly without suffering. The patients who survived were taken into the homes of nearby residents until they could be transferred to other facilities.

With three kids to support without their loving mother, Jack didn't know how to cope with the loss of his wife. Jack did the only thing he could; he accepted a patient from the hospital. The knowledge that he was carrying on Mary's legacy gave Jack some peace of mind. He took in Cassandra, a young woman in her early 20s. Cassandra's legs were severely burned, though not by the hospital fire. She did not open up to Jack or the kids about her burns, and Jack respected her silence. He was only there to help and care for her. It was Jack's responsibility to

change Cassandra's dressings every day as well as administer her liquids and pain medications.

Cassandra: Girl on fire

Gwen lived next door to Jack Prior and was a good woman at heart, donating most of her spare time to the homeless and poor. In her spare time, she knitted blankets and delivered what spare meat and eggs the farm could afford.

Gwen asked for help one dark and dreary night from the spirits of the earth. Gwen's husband had become more physically abusive since Jack had built the shack, and she asked for a spell to stop her husband's abuse. But before Gwen's cries were heard by the elders of The Strain, Medusa heard her, and set Dietrich ablaze. Years of studying the sensibly sized book when Medusa was a teenager gave her an extensive knowledge of rhymes to be used at a whim, but like always, each spell came with a certain cost. Medusa couldn't just conjure up a spell to free herself from her deathly tomb. She had to linger in wait for the right moment, and bend time to her advantage.

When she cast the spell, Dietrich happened to be holding Cassandra, their newborn baby. Alcohol started to bleed from his mouth, setting fire to his internal organs while his outside slowly melted like a wax doll. Gwen ran and put out the fire on Cassandra's blanket, clearly too late to save her husband. Cassandra's legs were badly burned, but they began to heal.

Medusa did not just give out free black magic to amuse herself. Those who had been born as sacrifices would sluggishly be robbed of their life. Cassandra was now cursed. Every year, the curse would come on the eve of her father's death. The non-existent wounds would reappear on her legs and begin to increase in size, slowly consuming her body until she would reach the age of 30 years old.

As Cassandra grew up, she became curious as to why her wounds gradually appeared once a year, growing in length and pain, then disappeared again. After becoming aware of the growth, she started cutting her legs to make a self-inflicted tattoo of where last year's burn

had progressed. She checked this to be sure she wasn't going crazy and discovered that she was indeed not insane.

To make the curse less aggressive, Gwen tried to transfer it onto her own body over the years that Cassandra grew to be a teenager. Due to her obsession with the curse, Gwen became malnourished from insanity. She spent every waking hour trying to fix her daughter's curse. Realisation of the curse came to Gwen in her last moments of life and death. She needed to create a protection spell around Cassandra, a spell to counter what was happening year after year.

Finally, Gwen cast a spell that would end her life, but that act of purity would slow the growth of the burns and allow Cassandra to live a full life, even if she did harbour pain on that day once a year.

On the morning following the hospital fire, Cassandra awoke at the Priors' farm. This morning, Cassandra, in her monthly vulnerable state, convinced Cadum to venture into the woods for a little fresh air. Persuaded by Cassandra's soothing nature, Cadum helped her out of bed and led her to the forest to The Shack. He knew he was not allowed to venture near The Shack, but he was chaperoning a woman who needed some fresh air. Cadum, seeing Cassandra's newfound freedom, soon lost the worry he had had earlier. During their peaceful walk, Cassandra stopped suddenly, holding onto Cadum's hand intensely. Cassandra put her other hand against her chest and spoke in a language Cadum had never heard before "Proferte quod meum est possessorem in perpetuum silvæ et mortem iurate."

Cadum was uneasy as Cassandra said those words in that wicked tongue. As if possessed by something else, Cassandra's free hand started convulsing violently and twitching, transforming into that of a bear, her nails growing to claws, blood running from her skin.

Cadum shuddered in horror. Cassandra's grip was so strong that he couldn't run, and he screamed at the top of his lungs. Cassandra instantly silenced him, slashing his throat in two. The blood flowed from Cadum's split throat like a broken sink pipe flowing in every direction; a thick warm waterfall of red liquid soaked into the earth.

An overwhelming feeling took Jack's soul as he heard the distant scream that was cut off so quickly. He grabbed his gun and ran towards the scream he had heard. The Shack had always given Jack a sense of unease, partly because there had been so much death. When

he approached The Shack, he found pieces of a child's body, dismembered. Jack cried out in agony, and his older children awoke to their father's wailing and ran towards him. As Jack turned back to the boys, he instructed them not to look, and to go check on Cassandra in case a bear had entered the farm.

When the boys reached the barn where Cassandra had been staying, they noticed that she was covered in blood and looked older than the Prior children had seen on her arrival. Her right hand was like a bear's paw. Cassandra raised her sinister head with the spare hospital bed behind her now encrusted with dark stains. Angus and Finn screamed as Cassandra lunged towards them. The brothers huddled together in anticipation of their imminent death, knowing that what followed was not something either would want to see in the final moments of their lives.

Jadis: In your eyes

Throughout history, three different high priestesses guided the High Strain leader at the time of their reign. Divine energy was a part of Freya, Ingrid, and Sigfrid. Freya had a loving nature for people, the earthliest of the three priestesses. 'Freya' is said to represent passion, patience, and calm.

It was time.

The earth had opened evil once again.

Jadis, Rita's daughter and now the leading clan member after her mother's death, chanted together with her maidens. Joining hands, they started to dissolve into the soil, becoming one with the root system below. Like interstellar galactic warriors they drifted beneath the earth to their terminus. Jadis, Ingrid, Freya and Sigfrid reformed from the roots below the shack. Cassandra hit the newly developed wall of roots that created a barrier between Jadis, her maidens and the two Prior boys. Cassandra's Bear manus was met with a colorless thud. One of her claws shattered with a loud crack from the brute strength of the wooden wall the sisters had fabricated.

Grabbing Angus and Finn, Jadis immediately lifted the children from their huddled state and dragged them towards Jack where he knelt crying at Cadum's torn body. Jadis placed her hand on Jack's shoulder while creating a mirage in the two boys' eyes, so they did not see the details of their youngest brothers' intestines and torn ribcage on the floor of dirt. In her might and wisdom Jadis whispered to Jack, "Run, and never look back."

The three priestesses focused their energies on holding the wall that kept Cassandra occupied for the present moment, and chanted "Aggrediemur omni vi, donec nihil sit adhuc."

Due to Cassandra's deteriorating body and mind, she was now a vessel for Medusa's use.

Medusa devoured every breath, every piece of Cassandra.

Medusa embodied Cassandra, taking complete control of her. In her new form Medusa clapped her arms together in full force, causing the rooted wall to shatter. Each priestess was flung backward with the force of the explosion.

Now overwhelmed with rage, Medusa plunged straight through the wooden barn roof, causing the arched structure to collapse into ruins. Watching the barn's demolition from above, Medusa relaxed, enjoying the destruction she had caused. Conceited in her might, she started circling in the air above. Tornado-like spirals grew in numbers over the farm's boundary. Becoming entangled with each other, the tornados combined, making a storm so fierce it was able to inhale the three high priestesses like they were cattle.

Spinning in a disarray of chaos, Sigfrid centred herself in the black vortex of unknown. She then continued to project herself towards Freya in the stormy whirlwind of wreckage. Freya and Sigfrid embraced each other and continued their endeavour to reach Ingrid. Once the three held each other's arms in a tight embrace, and the storm swept up splinters from the cabin, the three priestesses collectively gathered them. In their last stand, the most important beings on earth wrapped themselves together with splinters that had come from the ground, creating a flying cocoon. Sigfrid, Freya, and Ingrid chanted within the sheath that they had now formed.

Having saved The Prior family, Jadis looked to the sky to see the destruction caused by the tornado that was now wreaking havoc upon her lands. Miles away, the tornado characterized an apocalyptic event on Earth. As Jadis watched the horrific scene on the far side of the Forever Forest, she knelt beside the Shack and smashed her hands into the dirt with all the strength she had left, her fingertips connecting with every root system in the Forest that was Forever.

As Jadis screamed her mighty cries, she asked for sacrifice. Soon the roots untangled, letting go of the ground they had been rooted in for so long. Within just a few moments of contemplation, Jadis decided it was time to strike, destroying Medusa forever. As the priestesses sat entwined in their wooden cocoon, they knew that their sacrifice was necessary for life to continue. Jadis would never strike knowing they might still be alive within the tornado. Ingrid drew a dagger from her inner thigh, a dagger enchanted with an anticoagulant poison. In one swift move, she slashed straight through the main artery in her upper thigh. Within the spinning sorcery Medusa had crafted, blood rushed like a peaceful waterfall from the cocoon that had lost all gravity. Then Freya, then Sigfrid became martyrs of strength, wisdom, and peace. As the three priestesses' lives slowly drained away, the roots that held them in place within the tornado disassembled seamlessly, their blood slowly leaking into the tornado, turning it into a bright crimson colour.

Jadis, feeling the death of her sisters, launched the group of trees like missiles towards the woman she knew to be Medusa. With extravagant force, the trees gained direction towards the target as they reached the top of the tornado, absorbing the blood of the fallen priestesses. Within the trees, the colossal, deafening roar of the blood of the three erupted. The trees compressed Cassandra into insignificance. Medusa's broken spirit was violently flung into the grime beneath.

Jadis awoke to the sound of thunder, her body frozen and stiff, oblivious to what was going on around her. Conjuring a walking stick from the splinters of fallen trees, she summoned up her courage and stood. The lost souls of the High Priestesses whom she now no longer shared this world with, moaned in her ears. As Jadis yielded to the pain, she detected a slight manifestation of evil stagnating on the plain where she stood.

Her agony was a distant memory as she walked along the shredded hillcrest towards the manifestation. Having reached her destination, Jadis swayed her arms in a circular motion. She gathered the remaining splinter dust from the trees and sprinkled it around the spot where Medusa had fallen. Medusa slowly disappeared into the earth's core. Jadis had embalmed Medusa's spirit deep within the Earth. Replacing the void with newly harvested Earth, Jadis erected a simple monument. A monument to pay respect to her sisters, to the Prior family, to the trees of the Forever Forest for their sacrifice, and lastly to remember her mother who was slain on the very same site. The monument would bear the burden that lay subservient beneath, consigned to oblivion. Jadis vomited every colour, each taste and all breath to secrete Medusa into the depths of her new, uninviting tomb.

Run and Never Look Back

In 1835, Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri: American comic writer, reporter, university professor and author whose journey chronicles gained him global fame. Samuel encountered petty exploitation and dismissive attitudes towards history. As he travelled, he was soon enraged and concerned at how lost the Earth had become. Years later, the Missouri Council acquired the cabin where Clemens was born.

"I'm here, I'm here," Jack cried, as he hugged his two eldest sons, Finn and Angus.

Jadis, with piercing, fear-filled eyes, whispered at Jack, "Run and never look back."

As Jack surveyed the decimated barn, he realized he only had one task left: to protect his remaining children. He flung them, both crying, under his arms, allowing him to run faster. He headed toward the river beyond the property line, where he kept a boat. As he ran through the forest, he heard sounds he had never heard before. He was holding himself upright while the clouds above darkened, gusts of wind trying to flatten him.

Jack looked behind. A tornado of great size approached the boat. He told Angus and Finn to hide under the plank seat while he threw the tarp over them. The waters of the river became unsteady, and Jack became concerned that the boat would capsize. The river was known for the alligators that constantly lined the bays around it.

A huge explosion radiated in the distance. Jack was knocked over and his head hit the seat in front, knocking him unconscious. The two boys dragged their father underneath the seat with them and gathered the tarp around tightly, slowly drifting on the stream south towards the Gulf of Mexico.

Jack awoke soon to find that while he had been unconscious the boat had drifted ashore, and an unusual character named Samuel Langhorne Clemens had somehow joined their journey to the south and offered to help. While he was an odd and funny man, he wanted to join the trip so he could note what happened on the long journey. He helped the boys patch up their father's wounds, allowing them to continue. The company and responsibility of another allowed Jack to rest his injuries as they sailed slowly south.

As Jack recovered, Langhorne told Angus and Finn all the stories he had recorded in his books. He described his adventures as a young boy, talking about himself and his best friend's attempts to emancipate themselves and escape literal slavery. Clemens told the boys how they strove to break free from the constraints of society, both physical and mental.

Langhorne's story held the attention of Angus and Finn throughout, teaching them to listen to their own consciences and follow their own moral codes instead of following society's rules. To be tolerant of others and judge people based on their character and merit rather than based on their skin colour or class. The two boys enjoyed Langhorne's story about his young adventures of traveling and begged for more.

Jack needed time to recover from his head wound and Langhorne knew it would keep them distracted on their long journey. As for the author's second story, he decided it would be a comedy set in the Wild West, with hilarious misadventures along the way. During the Civil War, Clemens had fled Hannibal for the silver mines of Nevada. In his travels, he encountered Mormons, Pony Express riders, gunslingers,

and stagecoach drivers. He eventually told Finn and Angus how he ended up on the California goldfields, where he struck gold with the mining camp tall tale.

Now that it was getting late, he covered the children in his spare clothes, and soon he awoke Jack to feed him fish that he had caught that day. As Jack recovered from his head wound, he listened to Clemens' next tale of adventures as the boys pretended to be asleep so they could listen.

It recounted Langhorne's life on the river. Before the American Civil War, he had been a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi. After the war, traveling from New Orleans to Saint Paul, Langhorne described with great affection the science of navigating the ever-changing river.

By now, they had drifted about 40 miles south with the currents, unnaturally strong from the tornado that had left them homeless. Another 10 days would be needed to reach the Gulf of Mexico.

Cuba was to be the Prior family's new home.

Mary's parents had paid an official to ensure the safety and arrival of Jack and the children if they ever fled to Cuba. The only thing they had to do was state their names, and they would be granted access. Once they reached Cuba's coast, Angus and Finn made their way into town, where Jack took them to Mary's birth house. Jack was welcomed by Cassius and Aby. Both boys embraced their grandparents as amends for their mother's lost soul. The boys told their grandparents of the stories they had heard along the way, but when asked by Cassius and Aby where the tales had originated, they could not recall how they had heard them.

For the next 30 years, they were all happy together. They made new memories and built new relationships. Although the Cuban revolution of 1953-59 affected the family slightly, Cassius and Aby had already established themselves well within the government and communist party. As autumn set in on the same date each year, the years passed with clear intentions. Angus married a young woman and moved to the Czech Republic. The boy Ales was his only child. After struggling with love, Finn married Brendon, his partner. Finn was given away by Jack at the wedding.

CHAPTER FOUR: Medusa and The Monument

A haunting slowly dawned upon Medusa's bewildered state; she had now become lost in a maze of huge quantities, an endless labyrinth of desperation with no way out but into the darkness ahead. Feeling nothing with her hands, trying to stamp upon the non-existent ground, she could find no surface at all. This world had been constructed by someone. Medusa did not know the truth of nature nor peace; she was never given the opportunity to embrace it. She awoke not knowing where she lay: certainly not her hometown of Arcadia, certainly not the bivouac she never got to grow up in. A new universe lay before her, a vast circular black plain that was dense and unforgiving. Her lungs were filled with a thick layer of decay; seeking any light she could in this new mausoleum, she became quickly irritated, her skin crawling. The day never dawned: pure darkness was trapped within. The only thing that Medusa ever knew during her short-lived life was pure morning, reborn forever. A shadow of a woman, raped of any sort of upbringing, religion, or hope.

Breath was not required in this large open space. Movement was subject to other objects. Screams or sound would never be heard; silence and tranquillity dominated. Most people would go insane if they suffered this open, peaceful realm. She was held constantly upright in this endless space.

Medusa summoned a strike of lightning in a place that had no atmosphere, light, or plasma, striking unseen magnets in proximity. Reshaping their charge, Medusa soon became unhinged in her balance, thrown upside down, sideways and every way between. There was no balance anymore, and chaos now ruled this realm. Medusa was tossed around like a rag doll with no choice but to accept her fragile fate. It was almost as if she was flying into space without any form of protection as the pull of gravity overtook her weak state, Earth now appeared as a backward fringe, opening a gratuitous gateway in the wake of sound, and she slipped away into an unknowing, peaceful sleep.

Pure morning, pure morning, pure morning, pure morning.

Re-awakening, Medusa realised that this Monument had layers, and to venture forward she would have to pass the tests of each layer, undoubtedly to face her true fears.

A bathtub slowly appeared to the young Medusa. She thought of what kind of sick joke this new realm could hold for her. An innocent being swayed in front of a hungry priest, ready to devour her in any way possible. The priest represented the repression of a deity, making connections between that of the real world and that of Medusa's memories. An adornment lay on the priest's neck: a chain of the Heibai Wuchang, a pair of deities in Chinese folk religion that escort the spirits of the dead to the underworld. As suggested by their names, both wore black and white, just like the priest.

Purification removes uncleanness to allow the purified individual to become unblended. The only way to be truly pure is to believe that Mother died in your place to save you from impurity. You then become purer in living as a redeemed child of Mother as you work with the Spirit. Medusa's heart warned her not to enter the half-filled tub of water. As she neared it, she grew less concerned. She was an entity that thrived on pure destruction. Hatred was embedded in Medusa. She believed any kind of reincarnation would have no effect.

She soon approached the older man in a black suit with a bright white collar. Seeing the delight on the face of the Vatican Priest, Medusa realized she had shrunk significantly, her hands and feet now being the size they were as a child. She was her ten-year-old self again. The Vatican priest bowed his head in purification, without speech or another demeanour. She was disgusted by his presence.

The strong were scared and the weak were trapped. The results varied according to the path taken. Lit like a theatre stage, Medusa and the priest were the only two who featured in this scene. A bright light hit the floor with a white fluorescence which exposed the harshness of the huge white bathtub that appeared to be made of stone. Despite her broken memories from her once-naive childhood, Medusa was not concerned whether she would come out the other side intact. In the chamber as she drew near to the tub the air became heavier, hotter, and denser. Medusa stepped into the stone bathtub and her lower limbs burned as the steam emitted from the cracks at her feet. Knowing there was no escape to the outside, she pushed onwards. The steaming hot water showed signs of fumarolic activity. Magma gushed throughout the openings in the stone bathtub where she stood.

Her body decayed rapidly into the tub, which swallowed her tenfold, transfiguring her into a transient tether.

As Medusa slowly dissolved in the holy water, now blood-soaked, she was blinded by a new overbearing bright shadow, that smelled of an iridescent odour pleasant to her.

Pure morning, pure morning, pure morning, pure morning.

Your brain must sort through a flood of sensory information when you are awake. Our ancestors had to make the most of their limited data-processing resources by evolving a brain that focused on spears or lurking lions rather than the broad sweep of a savannah landscape. Consider it as a spotlight of attention that illuminates important sensory information in the brain, which then enters conscious awareness. The mind's spotlight is the world around it, with awareness as its focus and the degree of wakefulness as its intensity.

Just as dawn broke, Medusa awoke from a nightmare wrought with a cacophony of horrible sounds. A nameless city and a sandstorm hovered, and amid the stillness of the landscape, a red sun pierced through. In a desert of white heat, rivers of fire and rainbow-coloured flumes of flame, a floating brass city, molten metals and glass towers rose. Having been tortured by the previous layer's heat, Medusa awoke with crimson eyes, for the lava that had lashed upon her eyes in her final moments in the stone bathtub now stained them.

As Medusa regained her grounding, she looked up towards the sky, and a rainbow-coloured flame shot towards her. She tried to avoid it, but she was soon overwhelmed by its sheer magnitude.

Medusa was unaffected by the flame, but the sand beneath her melted, creating a wide diamond-shaped glass floor. The Dragon of Rainbow Flumes had pathed her way to the floating city. This floor accelerated violently upwards before Medusa had time to resist. The intensity from the force of acceleration caused Medusa to pass out as she knelt with her staff held high. The air was ripe, filled with the smell of peaches and blood.

Reaching her destination, Medusa stepped off the diamond plate, viewing the distorted structures: high rises and floating devices, incapable of revealing any significant mark of the past to tell of who or what had built the city. Medusa felt nothing wholesome about the city. It shed a longing for some sought-after proof that indicated that this city was truly special. Shimmering, reflecting off the white-hot desert with the river of fire below it, and the rainbow-coloured flumes of

flame from The Dragon of multi-coloured flame swept through the city; the inner-city became psychedelic. While wandering through the mirror maze, Medusa found that the city itself was a pattern, composed of repetition and tessellation, using repeated equilateral triangles, appearing infinite.

Medusa soon reached a water feature that seemed to be in the centre of the brass city. her spirit withered in a world devoid of existence, scooping handfuls of the water. Looking into the water, she could see her reflection.

As she became more hydrated, Medusa's mirror image began to emerge above the water line, holding a handful of algae. *"Hello Medusa, I am Erica Fisc. Open your hands and inhale these algae. It will sustain your longevity."*

The algae had established communication for Medusa; Erica Fisc was now connected to her as she slowly submerged back into the depths which seemed to run underneath the brass city. "Years ago, I figured out how to get out of the lake. I have been trapped in this realm for decades, searching for my release, watching the dragon of colourful flumes fly over my prison every day. Death and organisms are all around me in the water, beneath the green. Search for the real reflection and retrieve what is necessary to break free."

Medusa pondered on what stood out the most in this never-ending reflective city. Her first thought came to that of the multi- coloured flames of the dragon that had turned the sand below into glass. The Dragon of Rainbow Flumes would naturally be a fearful sight. She was sure that many ran from it and never returned to brass city, yet she wasn't harmed in the slightest. The rainbow dragon and the sand had interacted. The Rainbow Dragon was the key to all!

The Dragon of Rainbow Flumes was covered in a seabed of salt from its interactions of swimming amid the dunes below the floating brass city. Medusa focused what little strength she had left to extract the salt from the non-existent surfaces of the dragon. The salt Medusa had extracted soon stained the reflective brass surfaces she was surrounded by, corroding the metal far more effectively than she had anticipated.

Once the salt began eroding the strata of the streets, it penetrated the deeper wells of the underground city's water supply that had once

stood strong, hastening the destruction of the tactless city, freeing Erica in the process. Glassy orbs stared horribly into Medusa's eyes; her arms could not fully obey her will, throwing her inner being off balance. She became agonizingly aware that the same carrion dragon with its hideous hollow breathing had become a savior in her desire to betray her instincts. As the brass city fell from the sky, eroding into fragments, the dragon turned blue from the release of the salts that Medusa had freed from the creature. The dragon now free from its hellish empty city, had swooped Medusa and Erica up before they had fallen from the brass city that was crumbling quicker than a Transformer movie.

The oversized blue dragon had become Medusa's hero, an angelic wing-like structure of a beautiful shimmering colour. Medusa had saved the dragon from the constant swooping of loneliness of the brass city, as well as Erica from the deeper wells of the city. The decaying body of the now blue dragon was half as large as the bridge above that lay in the sand where Medusa had originally woken. The blue dragon lay decomposed under what seemed to be a version of the Golden Gate Bridge. Her saviour was no longer incorporeal; it had become flesh and bone and with its years of existence decayed instantly. Time can be a horrible thing, but she knew that whatever colour this dragon had originally been, it was once again free, and that's all it had ever dreamed of being. Erica and Medusa climbed the mountain side to cross the bridge that would lead them back to earth's crust.

Sidja: 1920's Onwards

A mosaic of memories manifested itself in melancholia, and misinformation became mayhem. An apparent distaste grew onto this world that no longer cared about disabling destruction, diverging from its true nature. As the Second World War raged around the globe, Jadis sat in solace, withdrawing. There were modern technologies and new generations. The Opposed were ravaging Mother Earth every day, using unnecessary resources to sustain a war that would only repeat itself. As a result of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the Earth knew no one held power other than destruction. The only thing Jadis could do was go back to her birth town. All seemed lost.

The Missouri Department acquired the cabin where Clemens was born, preserved as the Samuel Langhorne Clemens Birthplace. Despite Clemens' death, the council took three years to purchase the deed to the cabin. Inspection of the main living quarters revealed the barn had been destroyed. There are records of a tornado that swept through the region in 1916.

Almost no one remembered when Sidja began working for the Missouri council. If you had asked any of the staff members at the facility, they would have known that Sidja was there, but little else about her. Sidja obtained the deed to the house by filling out the requisite forms. She believed it was a part of history that should be preserved. She hired three historians to locate the exact site where the cabin once stood.

With help from the Division of World Antiquities, recognising scholars as native Floridians, with strong ties to the community, her budget allowed her to find the house where Clemens once lived. The names of the historians were Fifer, Darius and Sygriac. Fifer was a lover of all things artsy with a particular interest in music. Darius covered primitive topics, such as housing, while Sygriac covered all things linguistic, with a love of dialects. The three historians handpicked by Sidja were descendants of The Strain Clan. Together, they would find the exact location where Mr. Clemens grew up.

When Sidja's historians found the cabin, the deed was placed in Sidja's name. Within days it passed through the council; to anyone else, it would appear to be a mislodgement. As she was the head of the historical department for the council, no one really questioned why her name and not that of the council was written on the contract.

Sidja vanished as quickly as she had appeared at the council and was soon forgotten by those who worked with her. This was because Sidja was Jadis. As a result of the memory spell around her, colleagues and community members were able to easily forget her existence.

Jadis had teamed up with Darius, Sygriac, and Fifer shortly after the loss of her priestesses at Prior's farm. Now it was time to regain control. She went back to her clan, telling them to disperse around the globe, to assimilate into the human community. They spread everywhere, taking back places of history that had magical qualities, to keep them safe from the prying eyes of the Opposing community.

Jadis had acquired the shack and the earth that it sat on that once housed Medusa below. It was Jadis's decision to keep the most powerful puzzle piece of the magical world safe.

The Monument served as both a lesson and a distraction for Medusa, allowing Jadis to regroup and gain time in the not so far distant future. Jadis's next plan of attack was to approach the Department of Witch Affairs.

Jadis: The Department of Witch Affairs

The American government created the Department of Witch Affairs during the 1700s. There was some truth in the lies propagated during the witch trials. Multiple villages reported that some witches had been burned at the stake, yet didn't die, instead absorbing the pain. The 1700's faction was small at the time, but enough to monitor any witches that had indeed survived the massacre of those trials. It wasn't until the nineteen hundreds that the department grew enormously, now having special forces in all 50 states. New Orleans was its headquarters, chosen due to the large amount of witchcraft activity in the area, being close enough to Florida but fair enough away if shit hit the fan. Their sight and power were vast. The Department foresaw that they would never be able to control such a network, opting instead to coexist.

Jadis realized the prudent course of action was not to subject one another to violence. Instead, the two parties could work together to save something far more important: the world. Jadis taught her knowledge to the head scientists at DOWA, and Torpid Hubs were invented; oval-shaped cocoons filled with amniotic fluid from still births. Clan members became inactive when they were submerged in this fluid, as if they had slipped into a deep sleep unaware of their other senses, completely entranced in silence.

It was Jadis's choice to walk through the agency doors to meet Franz Ferdinand Junior, the head of the department. The young man had learned the scriptures of the department as soon as he could read and was faithful to the cause. Blood descendants of the original DOWA made up his family lineage.

Franz Jr.'s connection to the land was something he had felt since birth. One day his father noticed that Franz Jr. was saving ants from the kitchen sink. A hand-made French La Cornue range had obstructed the path of the ants to their new underground sanctum. Franz Jr. wished the creatures had a clear path to what was meant to be their new home. The young Franz taught an old man a little piece of wisdom that day, by saving the tiny creatures one by one. The dribble from the leaking sink had obscured the path of some adventurous newborn ants, wanting to explore outside the line they had always been told to follow. Parents of the children had run to their aid, getting trapped in the droplets that had led them to the bottom of the expansive silver pool.

“Why are you saving those ants?”

As Franz Jr. placed one creature after the other to safety, he said, “It matters that I just saved this ant’s life.” He pointed to the father ant. “It also matters that I just saved his daughter’s life,”

To Junior, everything seemed significant, a world within a world, so he always tried to understand from the other point of view that he may have been missing before acting. He suffered from a mild heart condition and clotting problems in the brain caused by blood vessels in the heart. In his youth, he had a stroke that caused Achromatopsia. It made everything a lot clearer in Franz’s mind. As if fate had given him a gift, at the exact right moment in time.

Erica: Life on Earth

Pure morning, pure morning, pure morning, pure morning for two

In her newfound freedom, Erica Fisc's soul ached. Adjusting to the realities of the world proved difficult. Symptoms of isolation and helplessness characterized her experience. She soon had intrusive thoughts, denial, impaired memory, and became overly cautious as a result of sensory overload. At this point, Erica’s taper had begun to run low. Observing the dwindling light, she thought about her imminent end of life as she stood there in a state of confusion. In just a few minutes, the vast expanse of this floating world enveloped her in total darkness.

Erica thought to herself:

When life on Earth seems like an unwanted place, try living under a dark lake for an endless prison term. In a mysterious beyond, there's always the promise of better things to come. At least On Earth, we can take deep, cleansing breaths.

We have solid ground to stand on.

Seasons come and go,

The gravity of the earth does not turn us into spaghetti.

A pleasant breeze can be enjoyed!

Her new reality showed more promise than the one she had been born into, and life in this new realm didn't seem that bad.

When Medusa arrived back on Earth, she wasn't looking forward to bumping into Strain leaders, especially Jadis. Medusa had been disgusted by humanity, but this new world she had entered, this new era of existence, felt like her true home. Her blood was infused with the destruction of the previous centuries. This fruitful hatred was created without her manipulation, Medusa's insides were tickled by climatic catastrophe, nuclear war, global pandemics, global system collapse, asteroids impacting the earth, super volcanoes, synthetic biology, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and bad governance. Considering that antisemitism has persisted in many forms for over two thousand years, Medusa imagined what fun she could have with this new group of slaves. In the Nazi era, nationalistic antisemitism amounted to genocidal hate, yet the Holocaust began with words and ideas: stereotypical portrayals, sinister cartoons, and slow-spreading prejudices. Overpopulation, resource overuse and conformity in a broken society were adding to the suffering of Mother Nature every day.

Chernobyl Bhopal
Kuwaiti Oil Fires Love Canal

The Exxon Valdez Tokaimura Nuclear Plant the Aral Sea
Seveso Dioxin Cloud Minamata Disease
Three Mile Island

The list of environmental disasters Medusa became aware of as she felt the Earth's pain inspired her fancy; she thought of Mother and how she was suffering.

Dodo.
Great Auk.
Steller's Sea Cow.
Tasmanian Tiger.
Baiji White Dolphin.
West African Black Rhinoceros. Woolly Mammoth, Sabre-toothed Cat.

The Monument seemed to have been Medusa's saving grace. Reflecting on her short time there, it allowed decades to pass in the real world, a world that was now made for her. Medusa's delusion grew as she learned of all earth's future and past failures, as it had already been written.

Erica felt the distaste of Medusa's destructive dreams. Medusa's thoughts upon the earth enraged Erica, so she bound her to her former residence, the one and only Shack.

BELT TWO: BILLENNIUM

CHAPTER SIX: Renegades

Dearil Diamond sat in the back seat of the orange Oldsmobile Cutlass while his father Kurt Diamond drove and his mother Frances Cozbi sat in the passenger seat. The year was 1979 and the family had decided to embark on a road trip through North Dakota. Frances and Kurt were arguing as usual, while Dearil focused on reciting his music sheets. The I-29 runs 217 miles along the eastern border of North Dakota. During the winter months, when roads are slippery and most dangerous, this family's adventure began.

Frances refused to change her last name to Diamond, so she hyphenated it, allowing her son Dearil to take his father's last name in whole. Even though it sounded horrible, Frances had never felt a real connection to Dearil; he was his father's son. It seemed to Frances unfathomable why she had fallen in love with Kurt. After that, the pregnancy happened so quickly that she had no time to think about leaving. However, as Dearil grew older, she grew resentful of the life she had chosen for herself.

Continuing to argue with her husband, Frances knew a trip would never fix the deceit she felt for her husband and child. In a fit of hatred, Frances grabbed the wheel from Kurt and turned the car into oncoming traffic. Kurt was killed instantly when the car collided with the side of the semi-trailer. The back wheels ran over the driver's seat, crushing him. When the car was ripped to shreds, Dearil, sitting in the middle seat at the back, was dragged under the truck's hub and spat out the rear into another car travelling right behind the semi. Due to the distorted nature of the shredded car, Frances was now lying sideways in her seat. This was slowly being inhaled by the other back wheels of the truck. The truck driver felt the damage that was occurring underneath his truck, slamming on his brakes the wheels

went into automatic reverse, spitting Frances's side of the car into a field off the side of the freeway before coming to a stop. The truck driver's quick reaction to the accident had saved Frances from being pulverized by the truck's wheels just like Karl.

Frances awoke three days later in Sanford Hillsboro Emergency Center. Pulling the tubes from her veins and the sheets from her bed, she threw them on the floor. Changing quickly into her bloody clothing that sat in a plastic bag on the side table, she covered herself with her large maroon puffer jacket, somehow still intact, nearly collapsing from the activity before anyone noticed her movement. It was her chance to be free. When Frances passed by the children's ward, she saw Dearil lying in one of the ICU beds, attached to multiple machines, almost unrecognizable. As Frances looked at Dearil's broken face she felt in her jacket pocket. In it she found an old debit card for the joint account that Kurt and she had shared. Frances gazed at Dearil, then at the card, which had almost reached its expiry date.

It didn't take Frances long to decide what to do. Without hesitation, she checked into a motel down the road, cleaned herself up, and headed straight to the bank to withdraw the maximum amount. She then went down to the local car dealership to buy an old van. She had paid in cash, using a tip to tell the young guy who sold her the car that he had never met her before.

There were multiple injuries caused by the pileup on Interstate 29, and the hospital was unable to cope. Frances was not noticed missing until she was well on her way south in her black, second hand 1975 Chevy van.

During the chaos that followed the multi-car accident, Frances' disappearance investigation was ignored for some time. Nurse Ruth, who was in her 60's, gave her "professional opinion" that Frances had amnesia and walked out of the hospital by herself.

Three months after the car accident, Dearil woke up from his severe injuries and the nurses and staff decided to tell him that both his parents had been killed. No one knew where Frances was, or even if she remembered having a child. As Dearil had no other kin, he had no choice but to go into foster care.

Since Frances was so afraid of being caught, she drove for 17 hours straight until she reached Nashville. She spent the next few days

commuting to Walmart and dressing up her van for sleeping in. She also drove to nearby towns in designer clothing she had found in local thrift shops, wearing large sunglasses and a scarf around her head as if she were significant. Her strategy was to use street boys to open the bank doors for her by giving them twenty dollars as if she were wealthy and just passing through, and nobody questioned her.

Early in his aviation engineering career, Kurt had invented a flaperon that served as an aileron and a wing flap at the same time. By employing a flaperon instead of a separate aileron and wing flap, aircraft weight could be reduced, and fuel consumption could be reduced. Kurt Diamond had become filthy rich as a result of his invention, which saved the airlines millions of dollars.

Thus, after spending a few days in Nashville, Frances had been able to withdraw \$100,000 before the bank system had been updated internally with the amount of money she had been withdrawing day to day. In Marysville, Frances kept a low profile for a few months, camping off grid and gradually securing a job at the local veterinary hospital under her maiden name Frances Cozbi, changing her entire personality and appearance. She gradually became one of the locals after learning a few of their names and securing a 40-acre property up on Orchard Point for \$62,900. Frances became a trainee nurse under the local veterinarian, Humphry Tallon.

It was not until Frances' 7th year at the clinic that Mr. Tallon fell ill, and with no family to speak of, left the practice to her. Although she was no veterinarian, Frances had learned a lot over the years, including medications, treatments and administering IV fluids. As a result, she sold her new practice to a vet in a nearby town who was franchising their practice and used the money to set up the shelter on her property, which she continued to operate.

Dearil woke up with a strange sensation in his throat. He turned to his side to see a nurse sitting complacently, turning up his drip. This instantly lulled him back to sleep. Nurse Ruth removed his intubation tubes while he was sleeping as well as the equipment that had kept him alive for the past three months.

Ruth watched over Dearil in the pediatric ward, considering Frances' accidental release into an unknowable world, Ruth owed him at least that much. One day, she even contemplated adopting him, but

at 65 and living in a small town, she knew he wouldn't have many options to be himself, especially after she discovered his love of the violin. The foster company did not like the fact that Ruth interviewed every foster parent that came to visit. However, they understood that she was willing to keep him at the hospital, if necessary, until the right family was available to take him in. Despite Ruth's intelligence, she was still a simple person compared to the outside world. Ruth felt Dearil would be able to follow his dreams of becoming a recognized violinist if he got out of Hillsboro.

Mrs. and Mr. Herman, with their fancy clothes and educated words, arrived from Florida. Ruth had no idea that all the couple wanted was another payout from the government for a child they didn't care about. It seemed like they were good citizens in their community, Mr. and Mrs. Herman came highly recommended by the community, helping delinquent kids who had been thrown into the system.

Hereditary

During autumn of 1963, Ales and Darja Prior met in a small stone and wood bar close to Pilsen, in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. By the end of the season, they knew they would spend the rest of their lives together. They completed their local work and obtained visas to America, where they settled in a small town called Niceville, Florida. The couple began their family with the birth of Fidel in 1972.

Right from birth, Fidel's hair was filled with grey strands as if he had been worrying about his next triumph before he had started his first. Despite wearing hand-me-downs from his father, he was good at defending himself in an argument from those who tormented him. Regardless of where Fidel went, he always wore boots, his long hair reached his shoulders and the emo haircut which he had recruited distracted attention from his unflattering nose and chin.

When Fidel had a moment to himself, he would declathe in the bathroom and admire his own strong physique. He had inherited his father's brute strength, with a wide chest, hard pecs and nipples with large, luscious areolas.

As the oldest child, Fidel was left in charge when Ales and Darja toured the country to spread their communist views. Growing up in a large family Fidel was rarely noticed. He was more interested in books—true crime to be exact—and music, that usually filled his days. As he had nine housemates, there was never silence. Everyone had a job; Fidel's was to act as the common denominator between everyone. During his school days he was usually left alone; the jocks didn't beat him up, and the cheerleaders seemed friendly. It was this independent mindset that Fidel disliked most about school. He believed that the system wanted everyone to think for themselves, with no common goal.

Life was soon to become a new hell for Daniela, one of Fidel's eldest sisters, as his feeling of empowerment came from raping her. She soon discovered she was pregnant and began to withdraw.

Her sister Sandra, who shared a room with her, tried to share her concerns "Think about the repercussions, Dani, especially for the child, imagine if it ever finds out who its true father is!"

Dani raised her head high. "It won't matter, because he will be loved."

"You're calling that thing a "he," now?" Sandra pointed at her growing abdomen, "It's an abomination, unnatural. Dani, you must get the abortion."

As Daniela was Fidel's outlet at home, Sally was at school. He thought that Sally was the most problematic of them all. He believed she was far too strong, constantly looking at Fidel as if she had control over him, as if he were weak. He found Sally's whorish worship disgusting as she strutted around Niceville High.

In the endless hallways of linoleum, there was no sunshine and no order, just pure chaos. According to Fidel and his family values, people like Sally could not coexist in this post-modern society.

As if the lack of credibility Sally held in his mind mattered, Fidel expressed his opinion to her. Nearing the end of the school day, they were both in science class together.

He snuck up behind her while leaving class as the clock struck 3 pm and yelled, "Sally!"

“What, Fidel?”

“You disgust me. The simple way you talk is vile.”

Sally looked down her nose at him. “Fuck off, you psycho!”

Sally:

As a child, my mother never told me about my father. My grandmother co-parented me, and I was home-schooled, so I attended religious groups in the area for some social interaction.

The church I attended after home school had a building with a small vegetable patch off the back. The church looked more like a miniature castle than a welcoming place of great stature. As a result of the flood grounds on which it sat, the building was slightly elevated. The entrance was flanked by a flight of nine steps that led straight up to the two French doors. Directly in the middle of the steps was a railing that divided the route in two directions: one way up, one way down. From the street, I stood gaping up towards the very top turret, which embodied the lost souls buried in the surrounding cemetery.

The miniature castle had many rooms, one leading off another, which made for a fun hide-and-seek game when you were a child, or a place to hide filthy, personal secrets you didn't want to be exposed. Green and crimson stained-glass windows reflected against the shiny, wooden plank floors inside the main hall. During the Father's sermons, I would often get lost in the markings on the wooden floors, wandering to distant places and discovering new planets. Directly above the altar where sermons were given, the roof turned into a dome. A raised circle was carved into the architecture, separated into uneven quarters: nine pieces. Each section contained a letter, and the letters spelt Sacrifice. An odd artistry, yet we were in New Orleans, a city with a history of the damned and unforgiven.

Towards the end of my tenth year, the relationship between Mr. Hill, the minister, and I became one of undesirable fornication. In summertime, as the days grew hotter and as the sun set in the afternoon, the veggie patch became a place for me to unwind. Following the day's harsh heat, the sprinklers were turned on to keep

the patches hydrated. Mr. Hill let me strip down to my underwear and run around the fields examining shrubs that were wilting. When I arrived at the sunflowers, I always felt as if something magical had entered me and taken over, as if I had passed out from the heat. There was no choice but to lie down on the soft rows of dirt beds and place my head there.

Not long after that we moved to Florida, and I started Junior High immediately at Niceville High thanks to my mother and grandmother.

At the end of 1988, I was a senior at Niceville High, I had not attended a church service in over 7 years, Momma and Granny, although both still religious, did not mind that I took my own path.

Rifle 1988

In the town pub the night before, the DJ was playing Joe Liggins' cover version of "Pink Champagne," originally sung by Lionel Hampton in 1950. At the bar, Fidel and his group listened to the song attentively as though it were the last time they would hear it. They decided to name themselves after it. No other song had reached the four of them like that before.

Fidel felt Dani withdrawing from his sinful love, and he knew Sandra was in her ear about escaping. His mother and father were never home, always on some tour to spread the love of communism while he was left to be the dutiful house husband of 7 siblings he could not connect with. School was a fictitious waste of time that housed the walking dead, lives easily destroyed from pitiful words that spiralled into exhausting self-doubt. The world was so lost, and it needed to be taught a lesson.

The next morning, Fidel walked into Niceville high with the sun shining behind him, the birds chirping erratically. The trees above him waved in weakness as he walked towards the entrance, unwarranted victims soon to be met with their unfortunate fate. Fidel hit the swinging doors of the entrance to the school with his boots. As he entered, he raised his machine gun and started to fire with no end goal in sight.

Sally:

My teacher kept reiterating the basics to the other kids, but I was coming first in my class, and I wasn't paying any attention to him. I listened to "Hole" by Celebrity Skin on my Walkman while I sat there. I grew weary of the facts being repeated to the other students over and over.

My music suddenly sounded quiet in comparison to the sounds coming from the hallway, full of deafening screams. I took the wire connected to the ear plugs out of my Walkman. The corridors of linoleum floors began to reverberate from the bullet sounds. My science teacher, Mr. Carlo, ran to the door and peered out. The fear in his eyes when he looked back at us told us that it was too late, he sought his freedom and left us behind to be murdered. Mr. Carlo ran toward the fire escape and managed to get away unscathed by the erratically dispensed bullets.

When the gunman's sounds drew closer, panic spread throughout the classroom. Any attempt to escape was met with bullets. The remainder of the class decided to hide at the back of the room gathered behind a row of desks, praying to anyone who would listen while one girl ran towards the door and locked it. Despite her terror, Janet, the school cheer captain, still looked surprisingly good as tears ran down her cheeks. Janet would be remembered because she was beautiful and a cheer captain. She would be immortalized.

We hid in silence as blood slowly trickled beneath the door, seeping into the room. We heard the clanging from the shooter's key chain hooked around his waist connected to the keys that sat safely in his pocket. He shot the doorknob and lock out and entered the room. The barrier of tables lined up at the back of the room offered no protection. Lifting the machine gun, the shooter opened fire. There was such an intensity to the sound of bullets that the silence afterwards was peaceful. I felt a sharp pain through my shoulder. I was covered in blood, and my head lay on Janet's corpse. Even in death she looked stunning.

When the shooter approached to inspect the results of his wrath, I dared not open my eyes. As I felt his breath above me, I accidentally squinted, and my eyes opened. In that exact moment of fear, I saw Fidel's face. Then he's head exploded into a pink fog that covered the

room. Brain matter fell like heavy snowflakes, and the gun he was holding fell next to my left arm, the warmth of gunfire still in the air.

The shooting of 1988 was a supernova of unwarranted historical tragedy.

CHAPTER SEVEN: The Vermilion River Killer 1991

Located in Calhoun County, Florida, Marysville is a small, unincorporated community. It is parallel to County Road 69. In 1991, the naked body of a woman in her mid-forties was found in Lots Mill Creek, just shy of the town. The scene was attended by Detective Savannah Handorf and Detective Fred Bass. The body had been decomposing for at least a week, but from head to toe her flesh had been stained crimson. The autopsy stated that large pieces of muscle tissue had been cut from the body in the shapes of teardrops, surgically removed. The autopsy also revealed that she had ingested copious amounts of oil, essentially drowning in it. She had been stripped naked, dyed crimson, and dumped in the creek without any form of identification. No clothes to prove what state or city the woman may have come from. Dental records and fingerprints were run through the national database without results, then through Interpol in case she was visiting from overseas.

While looking through missing women cases from the last few months, Savannah and Fred did not find any related matches to the cut up crimson woman found by locals in Lots Mill Creek in the early hours of Sunday morning. Marysville was known for hunting birds, using their feathers to make various clothing items. In fact, the town was so small that everyone knew everyone in it. No one had noticed any new visitors the week the victim had been found, and no strange cars or anything to indicate it was other than the mundane town that it always seemed to be.

The town of Marysville was home to only three hundred and thirty-two people at the time of the murder, including the two detectives. To be honest, the residents were mostly happy to have something else to focus on rather than making feathered coats. Savannah Handorf and Fred Bass had heard all the usual talk before, from gossip to backstabbing; the small town still held small views.

A Vietnam veteran, Reggie Norman, from Lot 35, who was usually stoned or drunk, went to visit the Detectives at the local police station in Marysville. Saying he had noticed an unusual amount of activity down near his docks during the last week of the murder. "I swear I could have seen a group of coloured men dancing around a lit-up boat, down by the shore just off from me dock, in the wee early hours of the mornin'." Reggie had been known to make statements of "unusual activity from coloured men on his property," ever since he had come back from the war. Just to be safe Detective Savannah Handorf and Detective Fred Bass sent a forensics team to Reggie's shoreline where the unsafe dock barely stood. No evidence was found, due to the harsh downpour that had occurred the week before the murder.

The Detectives felt even more empty handed after no witnesses came forward after a plea to nearby towns for any information regarding the case. At this point, all they could do was examine the hard facts. The Detectives soon started to search for nearby oil wells, to investigate any suspicious activity around those sites during the last few weeks.

The second lead was to investigate the reason the victim had been doused from head to toe in crimson. The toxicology report found that the element used to stain the victim's flesh was indeed natural. Nevertheless, it did not narrow the case down to a more conclusive result. If anything, it hampered it. Crimson staining could be achieved with several natural elements. Crimson is one of the most treasured colours in the plant world. Savannah started to rattle off the list of twelve to Fred:

"The Brazilwood tree, Caesalpinia Echinata, is native to Brazil and South America. Boiling the wood in water to create a dye bath can produce a deep red hue.

Hypericum perforatum, commonly known as St. John's Wort, is now available over the counter for mild depression. They bloom from late spring to midsummer. The plant can be soaked in isopropyl alcohol to create a red dye bath.

The Sumac, Rhus, grows in subtropical and temperate regions, primarily in Africa and North America. They are easy to propagate and can grow to

become large trees or shrubs. Sumac dye can be made from every part of the plant."

By the time Savannah mentioned the fourth natural element that could have been used to stain the victim, Fred told Savannah to politely shut the fuck up and move on as it was clearly a dead end. They would not be able to figure out the science behind what natural element was used. The reason would present itself when the time was right, and that would be with the killer's profiling.

The media was quickly alerted to the discovery of the crimson lady in the river. Unfortunately, no further information was found despite all the media attention. A cold case followed with no leads materializing about the crimson lady who disappeared from the media as quickly as she had come into view. A year after her body was discovered, the council ruled the case unsolved and buried her without a headstone in the local Old Shiloh cemetery.

Since no one knew anything about the crimson lady, she was lost to the misery of the small town's cemetery and the roar of determination to be finally identified. In Detective Fred's opinion, the case could have been the next big conspiracy theory about a missing person since the 1971, Lynne Schulze, Middlebury, Vermont case. Fred had so many theories about who the crimson lady was, and why she had been killed in such a brutal manner. Savannah and Fred visited the grave once a month to honor the unknown lady buried beneath. They didn't feel that they had failed this woman yet. It was the wait that disappointed them both, and the knowledge that the killer would strike again.

Kelly, Fred's wife, conceived two girls and Fred was overwhelmed by their union. His youngest daughter Emily was eleven and his oldest Lucy was thirteen during the 1991 case. Kelly was a nurse at the local hospital not far from where they lived. They couldn't afford such adventurous schooling as a private education for the girls. By now, it was family tradition anyway, all having attended public schools. Emily and Lucy were not interested in science or conspiracy theories, and neither were they interested in Kelly's field of medicine. But Fred and Kelly loved them all the same, and all their worries and fears about being able to raise their children right, slowly faded as the two girls matured into smart young women.

Savannah had adopted two German Shepherd-cross Kelpies six months before the first Vermilion River killing. While Savannah visited the pups multiple times to decide whether she would take the two or just one, she frequently interacted with Frances Cozbi. The fact that Frances had scars all over her face and up her arms made Savannah feel comfortable around her. Yet Francis still looked directly into Savannah's eyes when she spoke with her. In other words, Frances didn't fear what she couldn't change. Frances owned the shelter which Savannah frequented; any dogs that were not adopted after a year were integrated into Frances's 45-acre property.

"You're like an understated superhero!" Savannah regretted her statement as soon as she said it.

Frances laughed, "Understated for sure, but I have 35 dogs on the property. They range from 1 year to 17 years old. It's pure mayhem as well as excitement. I had no idea I would end up living with 35 dogs, so I started naming them according to the names of the 35 Buddhas of confession, hoping to confess each adoption."

Savannah smiled. "Oh, that's interesting. So, you're a Buddhist, huh?"

"Oh, fuck no!" Frances grinned. "I just didn't want to die without confessing my sins."

While Savannah filled out the paperwork, the two laughed together.

Savannah, who was very self-aware, did not know whether she was getting the two dogs for company or protection. She had wished she could take them all home, but that was neither feasible nor economical while working as a detective. Until Savannah was able to learn more about their personalities, Dog Three and Dog Five remained with their numbered names.

Savannah named the girl pup Toby three days after her initial adoption. Toby was a tomboy at heart: intelligent, loved getting dirty and was always pushing Savannah to see how far she could go before getting reprimanded. Despite being a cross between a German Shepherd and a Kelpie, Toby was all Kelpie; lean with short hair, balancing on windowsills and herding anything she could find. In the nighttime, Toby, who was so small, would put her head on Savannah's

neck to stay warm, and every time Savannah rolled from side to side, Toby would trot around the bed to lie on the opposite side, never being crushed.

Initially, Cletus was a scaredy cat; he didn't warm up to Savannah until they had been living there a month. Cletus slept under Savannah's bed every night until that exact moment one month from being released from the dog shelter. Then he decided to jump onto the bottom of the bed and slept there all night. Cletus wasn't the smartest in training, but he was loyal as fuck. He tried to learn from Savannah no matter how long it took and would not stop until he had grasped her teachings. The only person Cletus liked was Savannah, and of course Toby. If Detective Fred came around occasionally to pick up files or debrief, Cletus would bark when he reached the door or if he moved. So, Fred would stay seated and then Cletus would sit and growl continuously at him. Cletus didn't like men no matter how much Savannah tried to make him feel more friendly towards them.

Both Emily and Lucy loved visiting Aunty Savannah whenever they could. They were so fascinated with a woman being a detective. Fred raised his eyes whenever they started to question Savannah, but he enjoyed it at heart and Fred honestly thought Savannah loved the attention anyway. So, he never pointed out that he was also a detective, which they knew, just not a female one. Lucy and Emily loved playing 'Who Dun It?' with their family and Savannah, and of course Savannah's two dogs. It somehow seemed that Fred was always convicted of killing Cletus, which did not make sense in a real criminal trial, but it was the simplicity and the possibility of it all that Fred loved.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Ruthless 1992

Only 18 miles from Marysville was Selman, a community in Calhoun County, Florida, located just off State Road 69. A male body was found in nearby Graves Creek. Face down, stained crimson, with multiple surgical cuts in the shape of triangles delicately removed with fragments of muscle tissue. The body had been thrown into the water naked, but the cause of death was not from the severe injuries or the

removal of flesh. Death occurred from being injected with copious amounts of polybrominated biphenyls over the course of a few weeks. This not only poisoned the victim but also allowed cancerous cells to form and grow erratically. Detectives Savannah and Fred soon discovered that the man was Jacob Graham, the CEO of Jamble Pty Ltd. in the state of Michigan during 1973; he was in his late 50s.

Because of Jacob's company, 1.5 million chickens, 30,000 cattle and other animals ingested polybrominated biphenyls instead of a nutritional supplement. "Cattlegate," the scandal was called. PBB can persist in the human body for years or even decades. Jacob was arrested and charged after the announcement on CNN that he had poisoned thousands, knowingly endangering the state of Michigan and its citizens. After taking a deal and losing his fortune in the settlement, he became a recluse. Tragically, during the trial his wife committed suicide, confirming Jacob's guilt. In addition, he never again heard from his two children, who had left the country.

After the judgement that had been handed down to Jacob by the State of Michigan, he tried to reflect on the past damage he had caused. Each day, he took a few small steps to fix his biggest mistake in life: planting a tree on his property, removing old bear traps from local sanctuaries and clearing rubbish from the creek bank that ran past his property. The fact that his family would never bend or break to forgive him didn't stop him from wanting them by his side. Jacob had nothing to look forward to, like a simple kiss on the forehead to his children each morning before work.

It's safe to say that the list of suspects for his murder would be miles long; he was one of the most hated people in the country. The autopsy proved that it was indeed the same killer that Savannah and Fred had encountered in the 1991 Jane Doe case in Marysville. This was verified with the toxicology report and the specific tools used to cut and remove the flesh from the victim's body. When it was determined that it was the second killing of the Vermilion River Killer, the FBI set up a task force to assist in any way possible, with their profiling techniques and state-of-the-art scientific testing labs.

Because the two murders remained within the state's authority, Savannah and Fred were still in charge. The case had not crossed into federal jurisdiction yet.

It was now vital that they establish a timeline of Jacob's previous twenty years of life so they could track his past movements. After the Michigan courts had settled his case, he changed his name to Johnathan Haberfield. He moved to a small town called Salem, where he hardly interacted with the community. Buying a small house on a large plot of land, he was hidden from the road and the dense plot of trees concealed the house even from satellites. When they located Jacob's residence, the team immediately examined it to determine whether the murder had occurred there and the body dragged to the lake where it had been discovered.

The property was overgrown and wet, and Jacob's car, which was registered in the name of Haberfield, was parked neatly in front of the house. The forensic team did not find any residue in the car, so the killer must have used his own vehicle to dump the body into Greaves Lake. When the forensic team entered the house, they were assaulted by the stench of faeces and urine through their protective masks. The smell almost unbearable, as all the windows and doors had been sealed with duct tape in an attempt to soundproof the house. This was a little odd since the house and block were so remote. On entrance to the living room, it was clear to the forensic team that Jacob had been tied to an armchair in the middle of the cork-floored lounge room for weeks. A search of the kitchen and surrounding rooms revealed used needles. Except for the room where Jacob was held captive, everything else had been bleached. Some partial fingerprints were found around light switches and doorknobs, but nothing definitive enough to point to a suspect.

Angry and disappointed with their attempts to bring anything new to the table, Savannah and Fred returned home to wait idly for another year for another victim to appear in an unknown creek. The case had officially been closed in Selman, and Savannah was delighted to go home after a long trip. She was excited to see her family members Cletus and Toby.

Seeing the smiles on his three girls' faces made Fred feel loved every time he returned home. Emily and Lucy had been asking Fred and Kelly for a year to adopt a dog like Aunty Savannah had. Kelly and Fred had made the two teenagers a deal that year; if they kept talking about it next year (which was unfortunately now) they would go to Frances's shelter and adopt one.

Upon arriving at Frances's farm, Kelly, Fred, Lucy and Emily were greeted by Savannah and Frances who led them to the shelter at the back of the property. While the adults talked about their boring lives, the girls were completely captivated by a stunning Shar Pei/Mastiff mix. With the face of a Shar Pei and the body of a Mastiff, she had a gorgeous strawberry colour with white patches. Her demeanor seemed sad, but she was a happy dog who loved to interact, especially with Emily and Lucy, and they all fell in love instantly.

“Mum, Dad!” Emily ran towards the huddled group of parents as if they were trying to be secretive, but Lucy and Emily could hear every word of the conversation. “We’ve picked”

“What? Already, that quickly?” Kelly remarked. As the two girls dragged Kelly away from Fred, Savannah and Frances to the Kennel where the dog sat, wagging her tail so viciously in excitement it whacked the sides of the metal enclosure. Kelly said, “And her name will be Lynny.”

Though it seems odd to associate a dog with a person, Kelly felt this animal had the spirit of her late mother, Lynne. She was the only member of the family with bright strawberry-colored hair, always happy and patient, and was a very loving mother. Having her taken from them at the ripe age of 51 from breast cancer was heartbreaking for the whole family, especially since Kelly's father had been an alcoholic and died at forty in a bar fight.

Lynny was six years old and had been found on the side of the road, a lovable lost soul wandering around Marysville without a microchip or registration with any local council. She enjoyed the spacious accommodations at the Bass residence. She even slept on the ends of the girls' beds at night, switching between the two rooms each time. Additionally, Fred felt safer leaving them alone while he traveled on his cases with such a loving dog that would always protect them. Cletus had also made Fred re-evaluate his beliefs that animals truly did love him, so he was even more pleased by the fact that Lynny loved him undoubtedly.

CHAPTER NINE: 1993 Rotrosen and Rothberg

The next time the killer struck, he dumped two bodies in Deфеated, a community in Smith County, Tennessee, transferring the case to Federal Jurisdiction. The Vermilion River Killer task force was now officially run by the FBI, with Detective Savannah Handorf and Detective Fred Bass as lead investigators.

Deфеated Creek flowed into Cordell Hull Lake at a marina. It had boat docks, ramps, rental cabins and numerous recreation facilities. As a result, many came here to hunt the wildlife that was going extinct, but it drew tourists that the town so clearly needed, so no law enforcement intervened. The area was still quiet, with only a few rentals to hire out, but the location was convenient, with easy access to the highway and by boat. ‘

Savannah and Fred drove eight hours from Marysville, Florida, to the small town of Deфеated, arriving late that afternoon. The police department’s budget simply could not support flying the two detectives from place to place. Besides, Savannah hated flying. Rather than miss all the intricate details along the way, she would rather concentrate on the journey at hand and see the forever-expanding city where she did not grow up. She would then reach her destination knowing how she got there.

While they bickered in their usual uncomfortable yet friendly manner, Savannah refused to allow Fred to drive any of the eight hours. Fred mostly wanted to drive because Savannah owned a 1985 Datsun 240Z, which was chrome, edgy, and sounded like the jets of an airplane. During the ride Fred jokingly said: "And how is this any different from flying?"

In response, Savannah rolled down the windows and accelerated to 100 mph as Fred started to look ill.

Upon their arrival, they checked into their separate rooms at the motel and grabbed a quick meal in town, Savannah finally letting Fred drive to the local café down the road.

The two awoke early the next day to attend the meeting of the assigned task force to the V. R. Killer case. They met outside their rooms on the motel path at 5am.

Savannah walked out first, wearing a long beige skirt embroidered with a landscape of mountains and autumn trees around its hem. She had paired black combat boots and a white blouse with a long dark green blazer with gold buttons.

Fred came out of his hotel room a few seconds later.

Savannah instantly raised her eyes as she saw Fred's gray suit and tie that made him stand out like a sore thumb, which in this small town would have drawn unwanted attention to the high-profile case. She was not pleased with his lack of stealth. "Jesus, Fred, you are smarter than this. Go change into something more casual."

Fred nodded like a toddler and turned around and re-entered his hotel room. A good few minutes passed before he re-emerged, pouting.

Savannah smiled. "Finally, some common sense, Fred. You look good in that shirt and sneakers. No wonder your wife married you."

Fred smiled, knowing Savannah, as harsh as she was, always meant well, though the justification of her afterthought didn't necessarily sweeten the deal. But in her own defence, she added what she could to show that she did, in fact, care.

As Fred smiled back at Savannah, she bluntly said, "Fred, keys!"

Fred quickly ran back inside his hotel room and retrieved the keys that he had accidentally kept from last night's outing. Savannah had been so tired she did not notice the missing keys until now.

Fred threw the keys in the air and Savannah caught them without hesitation. "Thank you! Let's roll."

Upon arriving at the task force communications office that the FBI had rented, Savannah and Fred sat down to read a summary of the first report of the murders that had transpired two days earlier. Buck, Head of the FBI task force, recited the highlights of the case directly after the summary.

"The first victim identified was Samuel Rotrosen. He was in his mid-70s."

Savannah took note of the victim's long white hair and kind face. He looked as if he enjoyed eating a bit too much in his later years.

Buck continued, "The second victim was Pincus Rothberg, who was of a similar age."

In his autopsy picture, Savannah noted that he looked healthy and had a sharp-edged face with a well-trimmed beard.

"According to the report, after Samuel was untangled from Pincus, it was discovered that a metal bar was inserted into Pincus's urethra and then into Samuel's rectum," Buck explained.

Savannah said, "Jesus, even the gays aren't exempt." In the most inappropriate and forward manner she could have imagined.

Savannah quickly looked down at the floor, pretending nothing had been said as Fred and Buck turned around to face her.

Buck continued, "Anyway, the barbed wire that was used to tie them together cut deep into their flesh, keeping them from separating. Crimson was dyed over their bodies, and flesh was sliced from them, forming a full circle without touching by cutting two semicircles in half. Both semi-circles were surrounded by a larger circle."

Within a brief time of searching their identities, the FBI realized that both victims were part of V Montrose Corporation. Detectives Savannah and Fred went to dig up information about the company.

When the task force reconvened in the board room later that afternoon, Savannah took the lead and discussed their findings. "From the late 1940s to the early 1970s, millions of pounds of the pesticide DDT were discharged into the ocean around Southern California from the Montrose manufacturing plant in Torrance, polluting sediment on the Palos Verdes Shelf off the coast of Los Angeles. Media outlets received a 1993 list of all the Group's pending investigations and their environmental impact."

Savannah started to see the puzzle unfold in front of her. Jane Doe had drowned in oil. Tear drops were cut from Jane Doe's flesh, a sign commonly used by oil and gas companies. This opened a new lead, to examine whether Jane Doe had held a high-level position during her working years. Samuel and Pincus both worked for a large corporation

dealing with pesticides, and their flesh had been cut into symbols of a circle with a horizontal line through it. The universal symbol for pesticides, usually depicting a human spraying chemical onto the ground.

A team of investigators worked around the clock looking at every major oil or gas company in the United States prior to 1990. For access to secure areas, these companies usually implemented photo ID cards, which made the FBI's job easier. In the third week, the task force made a match to the photo of the autopsy picture of Jane Doe. She was Aspley Jones, the head of a large oil company in California. Once her marriage ended and her husband took their daughter to Canada, she dedicated her whole life to the corporation.

The body of Jane Joe was exhumed from the Marysville cemetery. The next step was to take DNA and skin samples from what remained of her half-embalmed body to prove that it was, indeed, Aspley Jones. Having solved the 1990 Jane Doe identity, the FBI felt as if they were making substantial progress.

Savannah and Fred, with Buck Langdon's help, were tasked with creating a profile of the Vermilion River Killer, now that they had definitive information. Savannah and Fred knew the basics of creating a profile for a serial killer, but they had never had to create one before.

Savannah, taking the lead, asked: "Buck, please explain every detail to Fred and me in forming an accurate profile."

Buck readily agreed to Savannah's request as they shared a smile between coworkers that seemed a touch deeper than just a friendly grin.

"The assimilation phase involves reviewing all available information regarding the crime."

Savannah then rattled off something that now became so clear in her mind: "The sexual nature of the 1993 murder."

Buck continued with his explanation. "Next comes the 'classification stage.' Is the murderer considered "organized" or "disorganized?" Murderers who organize their crimes exhibit advanced social skills as

they plan their activities. Despite being antisocial, they know right from wrong, are not insane, and show no remorse for their actions.

In addition, profilers must investigate closely the “signature” of the perpetrator, which is more idiosyncratic than the offender’s modus operandi. The signature represents what the perpetrator does to satisfy his psychological needs.”

Savannah: “This is the symbolic flesh that is cut from the victims, correct?”

It was a time for the underdogs to rise - true for those who had killed as well as those who pursued them. Both sides carried lost souls that would land in a wave of new dark worlds surrounded by misery and charming music. The bird roared, gold at its hand, devouring everything in its path.

After extensive research into related cases of flesh being removed from victims' bodies, none proved to be correlated to those of the Vermilion River killer. The closest the task force had come to anything similar were the 1920's “I'll Show all the Dames” Killings. Occurring over the period of 7 years, victims were found on the boardwalk of Atlantic city with parts of flesh removed from the victims faces, creating hysteria amongst the girls who performed in the bars on the docks. Unless the uncaught killer of the 1920's was now back with a new environmental vengeance at the age of 90, the leads had all dried up for another year.

Another year and another dead end. The case started to seem like it would forever stay frozen in 1991, never to show its true manifestation of evil.

Fred, Savannah and Buck were pleased to be reunited with their families once all the findings of the case had been reported to Washington DC.

When Buck returned to his apartment in DC it was empty, but he was looking forward to his scheduled child custody visitation. As a traditionalist at heart, Buck never grew tired of Nancy. Buck knew he worked too much, got involved in cases too much, but as much as he loved Nancy, he also loved his work.

Nancy hated Buck's love for classic country music, another characteristic she couldn't stand about him.

Their daughter Barbara, however, picked up the love for the genre as well, and since she couldn't listen to anything remotely country at Nancy's sister's house, she put some good old twang on the record player as soon as she arrived at Buck's apartment. The song Delta Dawn by Tanya Tucker was a favorite of hers.

Whenever the two children visited Buck's apartment it was more of a vacation than a scheduled visit, and if anything, they were glad to get away from Nancy and her "rules."

Buck's son frequently pressed him for details on the latest chapter of the Vermilion River killer. Brody was an odd teenager but Buck's wife, Nancy could not deal with him being "different" and refused to have him assessed. Buck took Brody anyway and he was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome. Once Nancy received the letter with Brody's official diagnosis on it, she ripped Buck a new one. She was also aware of Brody's disability, but she didn't want it on the national database so he could be looked down upon his whole life. Men can be arrogant and rude all they want, so she was going to put it down to that when he got older and call him a go-getter. Nancy was so sick of Buck's goddamn rules and regulations about being honest all the time.

"You've ruined his life, you idiot!" Nancy yelled at Buck upon his return from his investigation.

Buck frowned "What the hell are you talking about?"

Nancy shook her head. "Brody, you silly old man, you just couldn't let it slide, could you? Now he will have to indicate that he has a disability on every form he fills out!"

"And what's wrong with that?"

"No one will consider him normal again." Nancy responded.

Buck asked, "Who cares about normal anyway?"

"It's not one of your fucked up serial killers," Nancy said. "This is our son. I want him to succeed and be respected!"

This was the final straw for Nancy and her relationship with Buck. After the birth of Barbara, she had only ever stayed with him for the kids, but now that he had put his foot into ruining their lives as well as her own, she packed them up and drove to Baltimore to live with her sister for the time being. Nancy tore up the paperwork and spoke to Barbara and Brody in the backseat of the avocado green Cadillac as she drove north.

"Brody! You were never assessed for any type of disability. If anyone asks if this diagnosis is true, you tell them that Dr. Goodmore was a crackpot. After three more assessments, you were informed that you did not have Asperger. Barbara, if such a discussion ever comes up, you'll agree with Brody."

CHAPTER TEN: 1994 Roughing It

Hannibal is a city on the Mississippi River in Northeast Missouri. Located there is the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum, where the American writer grew up. It displays artifacts such as his typewriter and writing desk. Another piece of wisdom displayed in the museum is "The War-Prayer," written in 1905 but unpublished until after his death.

This essay suggests that war might be a zero-sum game.

In late 1994, three more bodies were found. The task force created to find the Vermilion River Killer understood the killer or killers were indeed targeting corrupt CEOs of companies anywhere from the 1940s to the present day. There were likely one to four killers, possibly members of some "Save the Earth" cult, Savannah thought, raising her eyes.

“The profile suggests that one of the killers is familiar with military procedures, due to the strict regime of the killings and the cleaning up of the kill sites after, so no significant evidence could be found. Another could be skilled in the medical field due to the nature of how the flesh has been removed from the victims. In addition to being highly organised, the killers are unlikely to have any criminal records, and their ages could range from 20 to 34. The killers are most likely males, with perhaps one being of non-Caucasian decent. Although there was evidence of sexual mutilation and rape, no clear samples of semen were found. In the FBI's opinion, all the victims had been dominated sexually due to their career choice, then killed for it.”

In reiterating the key elements of the case to Savannah and Fred, plus the entire task force, Buck said "It's time to get this mother fucker once and for all." All members of the task force had been pulled away from their families once again to investigate the next chapter of the case of the Vermilion River Killer. Whether the team could pull all the pieces together still remained in limbo.

The bodies discovered in 1994 all had unique shapes cut from their flesh. “This is different,” one of the task force officers said out loud.

As Savannah told the team, "Yes, it is." As she led the group forward, she said something that no one in the team would have anticipated coming from her mouth, not even Buck and Fred. “I know we are struggling. I know we are tired of waiting each year for another horrible crime scene to investigate, to be plucked from our own families, to live in a shitty motel and work day in and day out until we can report the facts of the case, with no hope or end date in sight, stuck in this spiraling shitstorm. But now we have an opportunity. We must look at this case strategically. We cannot group these three victims together; they are separate individuals regardless of how many links they share. The killers have left their mark on each of them. Why?”

In no time at all, the authorities were able to identify the three bodies that had been found in Marble Creek.

Buck led the discussion. "The three victims found had been brutally beaten, more so than the cases from 1991, 1992, and 1993." Buck was not stating a fact but was commenting, "This seems a lot more

personal than the previous years. Every detail matters here; if this is indeed personal, the killers may have gotten careless.”

Buck continued, “The first victim was identified as Akuji Freeman. He worked at a chemical plant for over twenty years. When his background was checked, they discovered he had been the union leader at Johnsons and Littler Johnny. Claims surfaced of the workers' children suffering breathing problems after birth. They were fifty percent more likely to contract cancer than the children of those who did not work directly with chemicals in the factory. An independent investigation into the ethics and history of the company revealed that the chemicals the workers were breathing in were highly toxic. The company refused to provide them with any protective equipment. For fear of losing his job, Akuji failed to approach Work, Health and Safety to engage in any sort of negotiations between the workers and company. The result was the death of dozens of newborns from the company's families over the next two years.”

Buck seemed out of breath, so Fred took over discretely, “Shapes of smoke were carved from Mr. Freeman's flesh. Mr. Freeman had massive amounts of chemical liquids inside his body. His oesophagus and stomach were burnt from the highly toxic chemicals he had been forced to inhale. Official cause of death was internal bleeding from severe burns from a chemical liquid.

“He had been living in Florida before his premature death.”

Savannah took the lead, trying to make Fred taking over from Buck less conspicuous, “The second victim was Marjorie Herman, who had been dyed crimson and her removed pieces of muscle tissue looked like a star with six points, though they did not have sharp edges; the star was created by three ovals that overlay each other. Marjorie, a foster mother in her early 50s, had worked full time as the head of a nuclear energy company in Florida. She had owned huge stocks in the Chernobyl nuclear plant, according to her financial records examined by the task force, making millions from the beginning profits and selling them before the meltdown that occurred in 1986. Marjorie's cause of death was not radiation. She choked to death on nothing more than a few simple bank notes.”

Fred nodded. “The third victim is Commander Jamar Reginald, a military officer for over thirty years ending up a captain in the armed

forces. The flesh that had been removed from his body looked like explosions, in the shape of small missiles."

Buck then jumped back in as if it had always been part of the presentation. "The Commander served in the Korean War. The cuts of flesh symbolize Napalm. Napalm was used extensively during the Korean War as a special type of aluminium soap. It was normally used in conjunction with gasoline, kerosene, and diesel fuel. The Department of Défense eventually phased out incendiary weapons around the same time the United Nations banned the use of flamethrowers and napalm against civilians. Commander Jamar's cause of death was due to his extensive third-degree burns, which looked like someone had attacked his body with a small blow torch."

"I want everyone interviewed, starting with the direct family members. Then we will work backwards from there." Detective Handorf told the task force. She requested that the three families be brought to Hannibal for the interviews. As soon as they arrived, the family members were separated from each other and kept in different rooms. In an interview with Marjorie Herman's husband at his hotel room, Savannah entered the room and began by stating, "Last year, in cases of murder for which the relationships between the murder victims and their killers were known, 54.3 percent of victims were murdered by someone they knew (acquaintance, neighbor, friend, boyfriend,) and 24.8 percent by family members.

Alan Herman looked at Detective Savannah as if she had no heart. His reaction immediately convinced her that he wasn't a suspect. She apologised for her abrupt entrance and her harsh words and said that he could be on his way home shortly. After Savannah left the hotel, she drove to the other side of town to meet Dearil. As a twenty-four-year-old, Dearil was estranged from his deceased foster mother and no longer visited his foster father. Detective Savannah Handorf reiterated her bad cop routine, stating the same thing she had told Alan. Dearil replied smugly, "Well, we're not blood, they only adopted me so they could receive more government benefits while they housed me. The pricks kicked me out when I was eighteen."

Detective Savannah followed this up with, "So you didn't get along well with either of your foster parents after that?"

Dearil replied, "We weren't on speaking terms; I haven't seen either of them for six years, and I didn't even know she was dead until you called."

Savannah, "Well, regardless, I'm going to need to see a plausible alibi or some evidence that you weren't near Hannibal at the time of Mrs. Herman's murder.

Dearil conveniently had receipts of a hotel room he was staying in during the week of the murder. "I travel a lot you see, I'm a professional violinist, a very good one. As soon as I left the Hermans' I stayed with friends who allowed me to renew my passion and soon started playing various gigs. I made a name for myself; I have now sold over 5 million copies of my second album that I released last year, called 'All the Colours of Champagne.'"

"What was your first album called then?" Savannah inquired.

"Ah, my debut into this new world, my proudest work, that was called, 'The Taste of Pink Champagne.'"

"Interesting," Savannah replied. "Do you like Champagne?"

"No, not at all," replied Dearil, "It's in reference to an old song."

Dearil's alibi seemed to check out and he was released the next day from his hotel room to return home to Florida. Investigator Savannah Handorf returned to the base where they were conducting their operations to write her report about the Herman family.

"It is highly unlikely that Mr. Herman or his foster son Dearil Diamond committed the heinous murder against Mrs. Herman or the two other subjects, Akuji Freeman and Jamar Reginald. Both subjects have an alibi during the time of death, as well as during the time when the body would have been dumped and began to decompose. Both members of high society, Mr. and Mrs. Herman had been happily married for over 30 years, with several character witnesses attesting to Mr. Herman's impeccable character. Dearil Diamond has been estranged from the family since he left at the age of 18 and has not had contact with them for over six years. This is either the biggest ploy in history for some cause we cannot fathom, or something evil is lingering in the midst that we are not meant to stop."

Cadell Freeman was the only survivor of the Freeman family; his father had been brutally murdered and his mother and three brothers had all inherited the cancer gene, which led to their deaths. It is oddly poetic that a man who had suffered such great loss from a horrible disease that ravaged almost every member of his family could simply sit back and allow more people to suffer in his workplace. The surviving son was interviewed by FBI task force leader Buck Langdon. Savannah believed a strong male presence around Cadell would help him open up about the case if he did in fact have anything to do with it. Buck had an odd connection with Cadell, as he reminded him of his son Brody, who had Asperger's, it was likely that Cadell had become quite closed off since everyone in his family had died tragically. Cadell was direct with his answers. He didn't seem overly affected by the death of his father, but when Cadell discussed his life, "To be honest I'm not surprised. Everyone I touch dies around me; it was only a matter of time."

He spoke of the death that had encircled his family since he was eight years old, "My mother, Teresa, died first. She possessed the hereditary gene that would soon kill my other brothers. Year after year they fell sick, and I watched them all slowly die, forever in pain. Because my father had to work in order to pay the medical bills, during my junior year, I became the full-time caregiver to my brothers. As soon as my parents died, my father couldn't stand to see me, so he worked all the time. It was impossible for him to stand up against that company; he had worked for them for 20 years and used those extra hours to pay back our debt."

"I have a son who is a few years younger than you are now. You keep saying 'we,' as if your father were still alive." Buck said.

"Having lost my last brother Travis, my father had no hope for the future. I guess I can't just let that one go. We have always been together."

After a thorough interview by FBI agent Buck Langdon, Cadell was not ruled a suspect in the case, following Langdon's extensive and invasive questions. Cadell also provided receipts from petrol stations far from the scene of the crime in the two weeks that his father would have been kidnapped and murdered.

Fred Bass was assigned to interview the Reginald family, and both he and Savannah agreed that Fred was the right choice. Having a close-knit family himself, Fred would be able to find common ground, while also interviewing Salome and Stephanie Reginald, son and daughter of the two.

Detective Bass entered the room and Stephanie became hysterical as soon as he entered. After backing out slowly, he retrieved Mrs. Reginald to comfort Stephanie while he walked to Salome's hotel room. "Thank you, Detective," Mrs Reginald replied, closing the door. "Give us half an hour and I'll be able to calm her down." Fred nodded and headed to room 142. The small beige room was certainly nothing special, but it wouldn't be for long. Salome led him inside. Fred Bass introduced himself and asked if he could ask a few questions about his father's disappearance and death.

Salome agreed and gave a brief account of his short time with the Reginald family. "My father kicked me out when I revealed to my parents that I was homosexual at the age of sixteen. I met up with my mother behind his back and she gave me money when she could. Being an army man, my father was very regimented and watched their finances like a hawk. I moved in with my now boyfriend Derek after Mum sold a few items here and there and handed me the cash. We have been together for six years now. My father and I did not understand each other, but I do not hate him for it. It is also hard for me to believe that this has happened. My father was well trained from the army and has experience in guerilla warfare, so this person would have had to be strong enough to take him down quickly or convincing enough to take him somewhere that had been prearranged."

"During the past six years, have you reached out to your father at all?" Fred asked.

"No, my mother had been updating me constantly about the situation. When I did see her, we concluded that now isn't the time for reconciliation. That will never happen for my mother now." Salome said in a hurtful tone.

When Fred returned to Stephanie Reginald's room after her mother had been present, he noticed she seemed considerably calmer than he remembered a half hour earlier. "Would either of you mind if I conducted your interview together?"

Mrs. Reginald and her daughter agreed.

Savannah offered Buck a farm stay after the debilitating 1994 case of T.V.R Killer, and Buck agreed, "Two weeks away from it all would be bliss, plus I miss having a dog."

"Frances will be so happy to meet you."

Buck took a big gulp. "Who's Frances?"

"My partner. I must have mentioned this before now?"

Buck, "No, no you have not." He gulped again.

"Anyway, fly down next week, we will grab you from the airport."

A week passed, and Savannah and Frances invited Kelly and Fred with the kids to join them on Saturday night for dinner with Buck. After dinner they retired to the deck with the open fire and stared up at the amazing view of the mountains. Having drunk too much whisky and wine they shared jokes about the absurdity of the case as Fred and Kelly's girls slept inside on the couch.

Fred thought he had the best joke:

"Two planets meet.

The first one asks: "How are you?"

"Not so well," the second answered "I've got the Homo Sapiens."

"Don't worry," the other replied, "I had the same. That won't last long."

Fred was pleased with his contribution to the evening, as laughter roared.

Kelly spilled her white wine onto the wooden deck as she yelled.

"If you live in an igloo, what is the most worrying thing about global warming?"

She waited and let the group think a little,

“No privacy!”

A new round of laughter erupted among the five.

Buck went next, “The first conclusive proof of global warming just happened. Recently on a cold, crisp day, a farmer in Iowa ventured out to check his crops and found 150 acres of popped popcorn.”

As she staggered out of her chair, Savannah yelled, “I wish I had some fucking popcorn right now.”

“Ok then, let Frances do the honours. Last joke, since this is her house.”

“Our home,” Frances said to Savannah. The two smiled at each other.

Savannah slurred, “What did the hurricane say to the other hurricane?”

“I have my eye on you.”

Savannah rolled on the deck from laughter, and nobody intervened.

“Finest till last, they say,” Frances chuckled. “What are the ten most beneficial things about Global Warming?”

1. Why pay for tattoos when melanoma is free?
2. No more pesky weeds. In fact, no more pesky plants.
3. Nile Encephalitis: not just for Egyptians anymore.
4. Furnaces convert easily into tornado shelters.
5. Helsinki: the new Riviera.
6. Middle East oil producers feel right at home— everywhere.
7. Golfers only need a putter and a sand wedge.
8. For those who can't get enough of global warming. One word: Venus.
9. Steaks, medium rare, on the hoof.
10. Three thongs and you're dressed!”

CHAPTET ELEVEN: 1996 Retribution

A New York Times article by Joseph Salem Lelyveld on the Vermilion River Killer and the direct links in how the killer picked his victims exploded in the media in January 1996. As a result of his writings and suggestions, the list of new high-value targets increased for both the FBI unit and the VRK task force: Any person who broke the laws of nature and caused environmental impacts on the earth, forever altering it, was now a target. After the article went live in January 1996, many CEOs of corporations involved in the oil, gas, mining, pesticide, and coal industries resigned. Chaos soon spread amongst the corporate world as citizens flipped right, left, and centre.

The Vermilion River Murders became major news around the world as the hunt for the killers expanded.

As Savannah and Fred became the talk of the town, locals started visiting Frances's farm more than necessary, hoping to catch a glimpse of their favourite detective. A few frequent visitors ended up getting sucked into the whole adoption process, and that year was Frances's best ever for adoptions. As a result of the frequent visits, Savannah felt uncomfortable in her own home, and tensions between Frances and Savannah rose. Savannah was not completely on board with this concept of her being some great Detective hero; they were not even close to solving the case, but she could not go around yelling this out to the media.

To gain her footing, Savannah decided to leave Frances's farm for a while, so she decided to stay with Fred and Kelly and the girls. Lucy was now 17, Emily was 15, and Lynny was nine. In her old age, Lynny still had the spirit of a young dog, but her arthritic legs and hips showed she was in some pain and slowly deteriorating. But like all good mastiffs, she didn't complain or whine, she simply pretended that there was nothing wrong so she could be with her loving family. Fred, Kelly and Savannah did not realise that Savannah's stay would cause a shitstorm of rumors within the media. The media destroyed both their professional relationships by reporting that they were lovers and had been having a secret affair which Kelly ignored because she loved her family. Lucy and Emily started getting hassled at school from other students. The teachers suddenly became unhelpful and harsher in their comments on the assignments the girls handed in for marking.

To make matters worse, the frequent visitors continued to wander the farm where Frances lived alone. In her confidence and loneliness, Frances told a stranger that she was Savannah's lover. The next morning, after the article appeared in the newspaper, Fred tried to hide it from Savannah. Seeing that Savannah was taking her very first sip of black coffee, Kelly grabbed the paper from the recycling bin that Fred placed there. She swooped it in front of Savannah and as she glanced at Kelly she said, "Thank you."

Savannah gathered her belongings and left the Bass's house as Kelly said, "Fuck them up, girl." When Savannah returned home to the farm and Frances, she apologized for running off, and Frances apologized for the article that had been front page news.

Savannah shook her head. "Don't apologise for the truth. I'll rain fire upon them and the Vermilion River Killer."

Through Buck's help The FBI and Washington issued a press release inviting all media outlets to Frances's farm. Savannah had had enough games; it was time to take back what was hers: her frame of mind, her strength, her life.

Walking up to the makeshift podium upon Frances and Savannah's balcony, she spoke.

"I'm Savannah Handorf, and I'm here to recruit you! Let's start with a political joke. I can't help it. I can't help telling it. If I tell you nothing else, you might be able to laugh a little before you go home.

"Question: What is the difference between capitalism and socialism?"

"Answer: In a capitalist society, man exploits man, and in a socialist one, it's the other way around."

"A few months ago, Donald Trump said that California's drought was a result of the gay community. I know he was wrong. What are we doing here? How come gay people are here? And what has happened here? I am suffering through something that you won't read about in the paper or hear about on the radio. Let me tell you that what you hear and read are what they want you to think.

“It is impossible to change people's opinions without opening the doors of dialogue. It is likely that more was written about homosexuality and gays in those two weeks than ever before in the history of mankind. When you start a dialogue, you start to break down prejudices.

“Gay people have been slandered across the country. The picture of pornography has been painted over us with tar and feathers. Child molestation was alleged in Dade County. Having friends represent us no longer suffices, no matter how good they may be.

“This was already decided by the black community a long time ago. A myth against blacks can only be dispelled if black leaders are elected, so the black community is evaluated by its leaders, rather than by the myths or the criminals. No Spanish community should be judged by Latin criminals or myths. Asian criminals or myths should not be used to judge the Asian community. We must not judge the Italian community based on mafia myths.

“Because I am proud, I use the word "I." I am honoured to stand here tonight in front of my gay sisters, brothers, and friends. There should be many legislators who are gay and proud of that fact and are no longer required to remain in the closet. A gay person upfront will not be scared of being thrown out of office and will not walk away from a responsibility.

“And you and you and you...you must give people hope. Thank you very much.”

Three Months Later

A tragic incident occurred in a mansion just outside the village of Kilbourne in West Carroll Parish, Louisiana, in late 1996. The bodies of ten men and women were found in Bayou Macon. The 10 victims were currently members of the board of the Burning Desires Corporation in Pennsylvania. They had been flown out for a company retreat that was so exclusive that to attend you had to belong to their secret society with an annual membership fee of \$250,000.

Each victim had rocks carved into their flesh. They were all stained crimson and either abused or mutilated. When forensics entered the mansion, they discovered traces of a paralysis drug in the guests' entrees, and that all 10 victims had suffocated to death due to smoke

inhalation. Once all the board members had been affected by the toxins, the killers entered the dining room and secured air vents and air drafts with masking tape, igniting a fire in a metal barrel full of coal, and then exited the room. The poisonous gas that was emitted from the coal fire caused the 10 members of the board to choke to death within minutes.

The four staff members who ran this expensive getaway were found after a search of the grounds. As they were getting ready to serve the entree, they were all hit from behind. They all instantly blacked out and awoke in the fire shed down at the back of the property. As confirmation that there was more than one killer, none of the staff members had seen their attackers. When they learned of their guests' deaths, they saw themselves as lucky and refused to assist in the investigation.

An insane media frenzy ensued, and at this point a survey indicated that 9 out of 10 people had heard of the Vermilion River Killer, mostly due to the Lelyveld article earlier in the year.

It was time to rework the plan. The FBI had their profile, but no killers in custody. It was hoped that with ten known victims and a large amount of relevant information in one killing site, the task force could link the victims other than by their status. It was time to start at the beginning, no matter how gruelling a job, and all suggestions were welcome.

Fred and Buck sat down with the taskforce in the board room, where Savannah was giving a rundown presentation from the beginning of the murders.

“The First Victim was the CEO of a large oil company in California. Aspley Jones continued to work for the company after her marriage ended and her husband took their daughter to Canada. In 1991, Aspley Jones was found dead in Florida.

“Only a year after Aspley's death, the second victim was discovered, in 1992 just off State Road 69, in Calhoun County, Florida, United States. The body of a male, aged in his late 50s, was found in Graves Creek, Michigan in 1973; it belonged to the CEO of Jamble Pty Ltd.

“The killer or killers increased their efforts in 1993, killing two victims. Samuel Rotrosen, in his mid-70's, was identified as the first

victim. The second victim, Pincus Rothberg, was also in his mid 70s. They were gay lovers, but also key figures within the United States. Both were members of V Montrose Chemicals. They were found in Tennessee in Defeated Creek. Upon further investigation, it was found that they both had grown up in Florida during the 1950s.

“With the killing of three people in 1994, the killers increased their ante again. Hannibal is a city on the Mississippi River in northeast Missouri. Marble Creek was the location where the bodies were found. The first victim was identified as Akuji Freeman. He had worked for over two decades at a chemical plant. He still lived in Florida at the time of his death and had one son. Foster mother Marjorie Herman was the second victim of the attack; she worked full-time as the chief executive of a nuclear energy company in Florida. Jamar Reginald, a military officer for over ten years before becoming a captain in the Korean War, was the third victim. During the time of his untimely death, he was living in Florida as well, where he had been stationed for some time.

“The bodies of the 10 board members were found outside the village of Kilbourne, located in West Carroll Parish, Louisiana, in 1996. When we obtained all their background information from local police departments, it revealed the true extent of the saga of the VRK with each board member having lived in Florida somewhere between 1970 and 1986.

“Clearly, the killers sought out Florida residents and perpetrators of unjust environmental disasters.

These killers came from the state of Florida themselves, so the FBI task force was going to move their investigation to Florida.

One of Savannah's favorite things about Frances was her dark sense of humor. Savannah cracked up daily at jokes about death and their never-ending existence. With the hired help of a few employees for the dog shelter, the strain of maintaining the orchard where they lived seemed to ease off a little. They enjoyed each other's dark jokes while they walked amongst the fruitful hills. Now that he had completed school, Brody flew to the farm and was living with Frances and Savannah. Having lied about his disability for so many years, he had trouble deciding what to do with his life. Savannah and Frances suggested that Brody come down to the farm and spend a few months

away from the city life, working with the dogs. Buck suggested the idea to Brody, and he glowed like a newly lit chimney at Christmas.

Brody had been living in the shelter's common quarters; many backpackers came through the area to work at the shelter to earn money and get a free farm stay at the same time. For Frances, it was a give-and-take relationship between helping others and giving back to the community.

Savannah asked Frances to marry her before she left for Florida. She wanted to be married before she left for what would, hopefully, be the last time she would have to sit on the bench of the task force for the V.R Killer. In that year, they decided to elope and invited the only family they had ever known: Kelly and Fred, along with their daughters Lucy and Emily. Buck and Brody were also invited.

During the month of September, the high temperature was around 21 degrees Celsius, and the low was never below 11 degrees.

Frances and Savannah woke up in separate rooms on the morning of September 13th. Despite their unconventionality, they still wanted to follow the tradition of not seeing the bride before the wedding day. From the deck, they had set up a few white wooden seats, a runway with white and pink rose petals. This led up to a white wooden archway with a green vine running along the latticework. It was also covered in purple and blue hydrangeas they had picked from their garden.

Cletus, Toby, and Lynny waited anxiously at the podium on the side of the stage. Frances stood next to the podium in a lilac suit, waiting for her bride to arrive. Savannah stepped right off the deck onto the petals that had just been placed. As Savannah walked down the aisle, Brody, the strapping young man he was now, gave her away. The rest of the guests all sat on the left of the runway.

Buck stood from his seat and walked over to the two brides perched at the podium. When he was an undercover FBI agent, he was ordained to be a wedding officiant. Who would expect the marriage officiant to be an undercover FBI agent in order to get a scoop from wedding attendees while they were partying?

Before Frances and Savannah said their vows, Buck opened with a few simple words. "Look at each other and reflect on this moment in

time. Before this moment you were acquaintances, friends, compatriots, lovers, dancing partners, and even teachers to one another; you have learned much from one another. Now you will say a few words that will take you across a threshold of life, and things will never be the same again.

Following these vows, you will say to the world, "This is my wife, this is my wife."

Frances spoke her vows,

*"The fountains mingle with the river,
And the rivers with the ocean.
The winds of heaven mix forever
With a sweet emotion.
Nothing in the world is single:
All things by a law divine
In another's being mingle—
Why not I with thine?"*

*See, the mountains kiss high heaven,
And the waves clasp one another.
No sister flower could be forgiven
If it disdained its brother.
And the sunlight clasps the earth,
And the moonbeams kiss the sea.
What are all these kissing's worth,
If thou kiss not me?"*

As she wept, Savannah followed,

*"Home isn't where you come from
It is where you are supposed to be.
There are some of us who have traveled the world in search of
it.
In a person, you can find it.
I have found it to be true with you.*

CHAPER TWELVE: Early 1997 Remand

The end of 1996 brought happiness and much joy to Frances, Savannah and Brody. Brody spent the rest of the year working on the farm with Frances and Savannah. He had decided he was going to study criminology, eventually becoming a corrections officer, a grueling job that required courage and discipline, to follow in his father's footsteps. Brody wasn't aiming high as the FBI; he realized that sometimes his disability limited his ambitions. The goal was to work on something practical first and if he was successful, he would continue that path to what he may want to achieve moving towards the future.

Meanwhile the VRK case was put on hold until early 1997 allowing the three to relax and take a breather from the grueling work. Washington decided that to send the task force to Florida just before Christmas would cause chaos amongst the media and the community. They opted for a more subtle approach in early 1997 to avoid a peak holiday which caused enough criminal activity.

Savannah found the landing a little bumpy as they flew to the beach resorts that lined the coast. As the two stepped off the plane onto the tarmac, the warm and sunny climate was a welcome change from Marysville's usual dampness.

Upon arriving at their destination, they met with the rest of the team at a community center that they were using as their research hub. First thing the task force did on their arrival was to map out the ten towns where the board members had lived during their time in the state of Florida. These towns formed a circle, and in the middle of the circle was a town called Niceville. Savannah and Fred wondered why the Task Force failed to notice that the victims of the 1994 murders all lived in Niceville. Rather than point fingers, they brought this to the

Task Force's attention. A follow-up interview with the 1994 victims' families was needed.

As the detectives arrived at Dearil Diamond's mansion in Niceville, they wondered why someone with so much money would live in such a dreary town. A large white and blue Lotus Carlton boat filled half the driveway as they walked up the extreme incline. On the side of the boat was painted its name, 'Pink Champagne'. Looking at the boat, Savannah and Fred raised an eyebrow at each other.

Dearil's PA answered the door and introduced herself, then led them up the stairs to a music room on the second floor. "Wait here please."

Dearil did not speak a word to the two detectives or look up from playing his violin.

Without waiting to be asked, the P.A. retrieved a folder. "I assume this is what you are looking for?"

After looking through the pages, the detectives nodded.

Detective Handorf started. "We still have some questions for Dearil, I'm afraid: new circumstances have appeared in the Vermilion River Killer case.

"I speak on Dearil's behalf during his rehearsal sessions, He will refrain from having any direct conversations with the police without his lawyer's presence. Here is a calendar of February. You can see the free slots here, here and here in white. Call the direct number below to schedule a meeting with Dearil and his lawyer." The assistant pointed to the bottom of the page.

Detective Savannah sneered. "What a ludicrous statement. Well, Miss Assistant, if you would be so kind as to inform Dearil after we've left that he should be expecting a search warrant of his premises, including the boat on the driveway, and that he will have to engage in an interview, regardless of whether his lawyer is present."

The assistant replied, "Feisty. You better go; we don't have all day."

From re-reading the files on the family before heading out for their interviews, Savannah and Fred were sure that Cadell Freeman

benefited the most from the death of his father. In contrast, his mother and three brothers had passed years ago from a cancerous gene prevalent in his mother's family. He was fortunate not to have received the gene. As a result, with the death of his father, he inherited the remainder of Mr. Freeman's savings and the deed to the house.

Detectives Savannah and Fred arrived at Mr. Freeman's house and were greeted by Cadell.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Freeman. I am Detective Savannah Handorf, and this is Detective Fred Bass. As you may recall, Buck was our boss, the head of the FBI task force for the Vermilion River Killer case. He had you flown out to Hannibal in 1994 to interview you. The purpose of this follow-up is to clarify with you some dates that coincided with other murders in 1995 and 1996."

Cadell told them to stay at the door, with no gestures or emotions on his face as he walked back inside. Soon he came back with a folder. As Savannah and Fred flicked through the file, Cadell was in the same unexpressive mood as before.

Buck greeted Savannah and Fred back at the community centre and had the team investigate the hotel reservations and receipts Cadell had supplied. The Task Force called the places Cadell had visited during the times of the murders to see if anyone remembered him arriving or leaving. With that work left in their capable hands, the two detectives departed to interview Salome Reginald. As Buck and the taskforce looked over the new evidence and compared the corresponding dates to the new murders of 1995 and 1996, it seemed a bit too precise.

In Salome's file, it stated that he had moved out shortly after the death of his father, but that he still lived in Niceville with his fiancé, Derek Coles. Salome had been with Derek for 11 years and had no contact with his family since he had been 16.

Upon arrival, Savannah and Fred were greeted by the two at the front door. Derek immediately rolled his eyes and went to sit down, while Salome ushered them in. "Welcome, officers."

Savannah smiled. "Sorry, Detectives."

“Oh, how silly of me, sorry I’m not used to the whole police world.” Salome then continued to extend the niceties and let the detectives into the house and served them tea.

Savannah got straight to business. “We are just following up on some loose ends to do with the 1994 VRK case.”

Derek sneered. “Jesus, with been through this all before. Is this because we go on vacation a lot, and just because it happens to coincide with these murders, we are forever suspects in this little dreary world of yours?” He crossed his legs and sipped on his tea with a smug look on his face. “Salome's father's death was a terrible incident, but good riddance to a man who thought if Salome were gay, he would be damned to hell. Salome came out at the age of 16, and his father wanted to kick him out onto the streets, like trash.” A tear now fell from his cheek

Svannah nodded sympathetically “How challenging it must have been to have a father like that.”

Salome handed them a small briefcase containing evidence of their holiday and receipts that accompanied it. “Now if you wouldn’t mind, I would appreciate it if you left. You can see how upset Derek is now.”

The next day the pieces of the paperwork puzzle started to fall into place for the task force and detectives. There were bookings at hotels where Cadell had never shown up. Dearil's paper trail of invoices and receipts were custom-made, and Salome and Derek's holidays were within an hour's drive of where each of the murders occurred. Detectives subpoenaed the petrol station security footage for receipts that the four had supplied, also flight bookings, hotel reservations and day trips they had supposedly taken.

As soon as the tapes had been shipped and arrived in Niceville, the team began comparing the times and dates on the tapes with those on the receipts and invoices provided by Cadell and Dearil. For every single piece of evidence they had, neither party appeared on any of the security footage. However, Salome was often seen leaving Derek at the hotel for hours on end while he ventured off on mysterious outings. These dates and times matched the victims’ times of death and the various times that the bodies were dumped in different rivers. The local judge issued arrest warrants for all three men as well as search warrants for each of their premises.

Among the first items taken to the forensic warehouse in Florida was 'The Pink Champagne.' Not far from Niceville, the FBI claimed the abandoned warehouse. They did this for their forensic teams to gather evidence that could be transferred to their main laboratory. The 1990 purchase of the large white and blue Lotus Carlton boat, Pink Champagne, appeared to have been a brand-new acquisition. Almost a relic of a bygone era, the Lotus Carlton was only made from 1990 to 1992. Boat enthusiasts called it a classic, which was one of the main reasons Dearil bought such a luxurious item.

"The homeowner should expect a search warrant after we leave, including the boat," Detective Savannah said.

Five minutes after detectives Savannah Handorf and Fred Bass left Dearil's premises, Detective Savannah rang Buck, "Put a trace on Dearil's mobile phone, NOW!"

Buck contacted Washington DC a few minutes later and was given permission to listen in on Dearil's outgoing calls.

Ten minutes later, Dearil contacted a professional cleaning service to remove fish blood stains from his prestige Lotus Carlton. As the FBI was intercepting the call, they acquired the boat pretending to be the cleaning service, advising that the boat would require three days of cleaning offsite. The FBI rigorously awaited the judgment of the local judge on the third day and were pleasantly surprised when the warrant was granted.

During the FBI's forensic search of the boat, the FBI found evidence that multiple victims had indeed been killed, or transported after death, on the Pink Champagne

The FBI, local police, and detectives Savannah Handorf and Fred Bass arrested all three men on February 19th, 1997.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Reckoning 1999

The 1990 blue and white Lotus Carlton Boat named 'Pink Champagne' became one of the leading pieces of evidence to support that Dearil James Diamond, Cadell Aaron Freeman, and Salome Jamar Reginald were the perpetrators that were known to the entire world as The Vermilion River Killer.

The case against Dearil James Diamond, Cadell Aaron Freeman, and Salome Jamar Reginald was led by Prosecutor Trinity Anderson. There were multiple first-degree murder charges filed against all three, as well as sexual assault, kidnapping, home invasion, stalking, eluding, intimidating, injuring, assault, aggravated assault, burglary and trespassing, fraud, homicide, obstruction of justice, sex crimes and other illegal acts. The FBI task force, with the help of local police and detectives Savannah Handorf and Fred Bass, supplied Prosecutor Anderson with more than enough evidence to get the death sentence for all three killers. With evidence from the three men's houses, giving the public a detailed look into the killings between 1991 and 1996.

The prosecutor summed it up.

"Pink Champagne was used as an excuse to create an ideal. That ideal was formed as a group of lost souls that were one Dearil James Diamond, one Cadell Aaron Freeman, one Salome Jamar Reginald and one Fidel Prior. This cult sanctioned the members to commit horrific murders under the name of collectivism.

"Fidel Prior wanted to tear down a society of mayhem by using more mayhem. Although this group's values differentiated, the members of it developed a bond of belonging, and with that bond came a sense of immortality in life or in death. It seems as if this bond appeared for the first time for all these four boys. Nothing was off the table, as ideas were tossed around like marbles on a wooden floor. Their hateful comradeship is beyond unnatural and resulted in The Vermilion River Killings from 1991 to 1996.

"DNA evidence shows that Cadell, Salome and Dearil all worked with Fidel to plan the 1990 shooting, even though the other three men did not take part in the final venture. Salome stole the bulletproof vest and guns from a small military base under the name of Captain Jamar Reginald using his swipe card. Entering the base in his father's uniform while wearing a mask to cover his face, he pretended that he had swine flu.

“As they practiced at the local gun range, Dearil provided the cash from the purse of his foster mother, Marjorie Herman. Her dodgy past made her hesitant to mention the missing money.

“Since his father was rarely at home, Cadell started studying herbology on his own time after the death of his last brother. He had created a new substance of valour by mixing a concoction of key plant roots into a snortable powder. (Let the record state that the key elements will not be submitted into evidence in the fear it will be recreated in the future.) The drug enabled the person who inhaled it to act out their sadistic dreams, a hallucinogen that was powerful and succinct. Fidel taught Cadell, Dearil and Salome about a universal common goal, a philosophical and political ideology whose aim was to establish a form and a means for achieving a common goal. With that ideology, the three became the Vermilion River Killer, one identity serving the same purpose. Thank you, Judge Rooney, my opening statement has now concluded.” Prosecutor Anderson sat back down next to Detective Handorf.

The judge stood up and declared, “We will reconvene after a recess of fifteen minutes,” and walked out the back of the courtroom.

After the short recess, the Defence Attorney hired by the Virgin River killers, Miss Ciara Marks, cross examined Detective Savannah Handorf.

Defence Attorney Marks remarked, “Detective.” She paused briefly to regain her composure.

“Oh, was that a question?” asked Savannah. “I’m a Detective, I’m glad we’ve established that.” As the Jury laughed at the defence attorney, Judge Rooney told them to be quiet.

Miss Marks asked, “Detective Savannah Handorf, do you believe these killings were indeed religious in nature?”

Prosecutor Trinity Anderson declared, “Objection, leading the witness.”

The Judge responded, “Granted. Rephrase your question, Miss Marks.”

“Detective, how would you classify these kinds of killings?”

Savannah replied, "They certainly do have a religious nature in part."

"In part, what do you mean?"

Savannah: "Well, the religious part is the dyeing of the victim's flesh. Have you not read the bible, Miss Marks?"

The jury laughed again, and Judge Rooney just stared at them, which prompted them to go quiet.

Savannah continued, "It was Psalm 22." It starts, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'

According to Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, Jesus cried out the same words while hanging on the cross. In verse 6 of Psalm 22, Jesus says, "But I am a worm and no man." What does this mean?

"Usually worms in the Bible are called 'rimmah', which means a maggot, but Jesus used TOLA'ATH, which means 'crimson worm' or 'scarlet worm.'

"Crimson Worms [*Coccus ilicis*] are unique worms that resemble grubs more than worms. To give birth (which she does only once during her lifetime), the female or mother worm seeks out trees, wooden fence posts, or sticks. Her body is then attached to the wood, forming a crimson shell. In order to remove her shell, she would have to sever her body and die. Once the protective shell and her body are in place, she lays her eggs. The baby worms, or larvae, stay under the shell when they hatch. In addition to protecting her babies, the mother's body also provides them with food - the babies consume the living body of their mother. When the mother worm dies, she exudes a bright red colour that stains not only the wood to which she is attached, but also her young. It's quite amazing when you think about it.

"The V. R. Killers used this dye to dye their victims. Yes, the killings are in part religious in nature."

Defense Attorney Marks thanked Detective Savannah Handorf for her detailed analysis. "It is a motivating force," she said, "to believe in religion, it gives people who want to do evil, to do evil, a reason why they do what they are doing. Do you agree with that

statement Detective Handorf? Yes or no will suffice." The Jury dared not laugh this time as Judge Rooney's gaze lingered on their faces.

Savannah was forced to agree.

The defence attorney asked, "Is it not true that your wife, Frances Cozbi's religion is Buddhism and that she has taken the Thirty-Five Confessions of Buddha from the Sutra of the Three Heaps and performed the ritual of purification by confession and prostration to these Buddhas."

Trial prosecutor Trinity Anderson, "Objection. Relevance, your honor?"

"Your Honor, my next question will be relevant," said Miss Marks

"Go ahead, Detective, please answer the question." Judge Rooney.

"There are odd habits among religions, but that does not mean you're hiding something." Savannah replied.

"Detective, does it not seem odd that the Defence has managed to link one of the killers sitting here today with your current wife, Frances Cozbi?" The court gasped in shock. "In 1990, Frances started dating you, did she not?"

Svannah answered, "Yes," but before could continue, Defence Attorney Marks cut her off. "And in 1996 you married, correct?"

Handorf answered, "Yes."

She was cut off again by Defence Attorney Marks. "And was it not in Francis's best interest to keep you at arm's length during this investigation so she could hinder you in the investigation and intern finding her son?" pointing to the Defence bench at Dearil Diamond-Cozbi of The Vermilion River Killings. "I present to the court Document 25, a filing for divorce in the Calhoun County Council of Florida for one Mrs. Frances Cozbi and one Detective Savannah Handorf.

"And is it not true that yourself and Frances Cozbi have since split, according to these documents?"

"That was a rhetorical question," she turned to the jury, "I ask you to find the Detective 'guilty by association' for concealing her lover's intentions and allowing Dearil to continue his crimes. I call for an immediate mistrial."

The jurors gasped, Detective Savannah stared coldly at Prosecutor Trinity Anderson, and Judge Rooney called for order in the courtroom.

Judge Rooney instructed Miss Marks and Prosecutor Anderson to approach the bench. As they walked up to the judge, he whispered angrily at Miss Marks. "Why was this evidence not admitted with your other documentation?"

"Judge Rooney, Frances Cozbi's connection to Dearil Diamond-Cozbi is described on page 678 in document 18."

In response to Judge Rooney's request, the bailiff produced document number 18 and turned to page 678 where the statement said, "When reviewing Dearil Diamond's stay at the ER in Sanford Hillsboro, one of the nurses caring for him, Ruth, would tell the child (i.e., Dearil Diamond) that his family had died in the crash so he might be able to move forward with his life." Nurse Ruth was surprised to learn that Frances was alive after the 1996 press conference at the Marysville Shelter during Detective Savannah's iconic, 'Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow' speech."

"Is this your defining evidence that Detective Savannah Handorf's involvement within this case undermined the discovery of one of the murderers as a result of her connection to her wife? Please return to your seats."

As Prosecutor Trinity Anderson and Defence Attorney Miss Marks returned to their seats, Judge Rooney said, "In regard to Defence Attorney Miss Clark's deception in hiding crucial evidence with one simple paragraph that is clearly meant to shock the jury. There will be no consideration of this statement in the jury's decision, and it will be stricken from the record. Is the jury clear on this?"

Jurors nodded in agreement.

Miss Marks told Judge Rooney, "I would like to proceed with the case by entering a plea of insanity for Dearil James Diamond, Cadell Aaron Freeman, and Salome Jamar Reginald.

Prosecutor Trinity Anderson accidentally said, "Bullshit," and then immediately, "I apologize, Judge Rooney."

"When the word bullshit is relevant in my court room," Judge Rooney stated, "There is nothing to be sorry for."

This time Judge Rooney allowed the jury to laugh.

"I call Dr. Park Elliott Dietz to the stand," Miss Marks stated.

"Dr. Dietz, could you please tell me a little bit about the type of work you do."

"Of course, people with mental illnesses or disabilities can't make rational or voluntary choices, so holding them accountable is unfair. Special treatment is needed for people with mental illnesses rather than sending them to prison. Penalties will not prevent them from committing further crimes. I assess the accused and determine their prognosis, and this is where I come in."

Miss Marks nodded. "In more formal terms, have you determined whether, at the time of their criminal conduct during 1991 to 1996, defendants Freeman, Diamond and Reginald, due to mental disease or defect, lacked substantial capacity to conform their conduct to the requirements of the law?"

"I did make such a decision."

"How did you arrive at your conclusion?"

"A mental disease or defect prevented The Vermilion River Killers from conforming their conduct to legal requirements during the killing spree."

"Can you give us some of the evidence that supports your statement?"

“Certainly... My reason for thinking that the defendants could not conform their conduct during 1991 to 1996 is, once again, the background. In my review for you, I indicated some of the evidence that these people were incapable of deliberation, that they had backed out in the past, despite their efforts to psych themselves up, before the potent drug changed them.

“First, their decision-making ability was intact prior to the 1988 shooting. Previously, they could make other decisions. These included where they ate breakfast and what they ate for dinner. Buying a newspaper and taking a shower were also on their list. They all made personal decisions of that nature. A voice did not barge in, commanding them to do so. Nothing within them compelled them to do so. As a result, they did not participate in the mass shooting that Fidel Prior perpetrated.

“We know from the facts that Fidel chose his bullets and loaded his machine gun. He chose the exploding [Devastator] bullets. This reflects decision making and choice. He is controlling his conduct, is taking the time to plan.

Miss Marks smiled. “Let me ask you ... at the time of the criminal conduct between 1991 and 1996, were the defendants unable to appreciate the wrongfulness of their conduct, due to the high toxicity levels of the hallucinogen that Cadell made?”

“Yes.”

“Are you able to describe the basis for your diagnosis of the defendant's mental illness?”

Dr. Deitz nodded. “A delusion is a false belief that is not shared by most others, unless it is built with the aid of mind-altering drugs.

“So, it wasn't just a fantasy and a fantasy that became an obsession. Both are true. Furthermore, they developed false beliefs in that context that were not shaken by evidence to the contrary. In addition, they based many actions of their lives on their experiences with drugs. “

The defense attorney rose. "Judge Rooney, I have completed my questioning, I will turn the witness over to Prosecutor Trinity Anderson for cross examination."

Trinity Anderson stood slowly, gathering her papers before even looking at Dr. Dietz, who still sat on the stand. "You're a doctor, Mr. Park Elliott Dietz?"

Miss Marks, "Objection, Judge."

The judge responded, "Sustained, Prosecutor Anderson, you better have a good reason for suggesting that this man isn't a professional of the state, and quite frankly, I'm tired of these games."

"Yes, Judge, back to the point, how long have you served as a witness for the state, Dr. Dietz?"

"I've been practicing since 1995." Dietz replied.

"And when did you first decide that you wanted to be a doctor of psychiatry?"

Miss Marks, "I am sorry judge, but I did not know that my witness was to be questioned on his lack of credibility."

"In truth, Miss Marks, the prosecutor needs to move quickly, or this line of questioning will be struck." Judge Rooney replied.

"May I approach the bench, Your Honor?"

As soon as prosecutor Trinity Anderson reached Judge Rooney, she leaned in, and Judge Rooney lent his ear to her. "My questioning of Dr. Dietz is not intended to be disrespectful, but I do indeed have evidence from 1992. In 1992, Dearil Diamond released his debut album and earned millions of dollars in royalties. Afterwards, Dearil reached out to Mr. Park Elliott Dietz who had just finished his degree at the University of Florida Gainesville. Dearil would pay off Mr. Park Elliott Dietz's entire university loan and any other expenses he would incur over the next two decades. In exchange, for Mr. Park Elliott Dietz's future services. Park Elliott Dietz was unaware of Dearil Diamond's sinister intentions at the time. However, after Dearil had Mr. Park Elliott Dietz followed and photographed with a hooker, Mr. Park Elliott Dietz became Dearil's property. His credibility in recommending insanity is tainted, your honor."

“I see, I see.” Judge Rooney whispered back to the attorney, “You may now leave the bench.”

“Miss Marks...Prosecutor Trinity Anderson...the antics you have both chosen to pull here in my courtroom, without providing crucial evidence to key witnesses in this case have left me utterly bewildered.

“Despite your refusal to follow the rules, this is one of the most prolific cases of cult serial killing that has been watched by the entire world. With you two running a circus of unsubmitted evidence, theatrics, and manipulation, this panel,” Judge Rooney pointed towards the jury,” cannot reach a verdict. Having played this game for too long, I don't want to see a courtroom in my state be viewed by billions of people like this! Both of you are relieved of your duties in trying this case and the jury, you are dismissed!”

As Detective Handorf stood with a feeling that this case was never going to end, Prosecutor Trinity Anderson stood next to her shaking. Then, grabbing Savannah's side Glock 45 MOS, Trinity removed the gun's safety and shot Dearil Diamond three times in the head, also injuring Miss Marks in the arm and Salome in the head in the crossfire. Trinity then turned to the witness stand where Dr. Park Elliot Dietz was sitting in horror and continued to shoot him until the gun was empty. She then dropped the gun to the floor, placed her hands on the back of her head and knelt awaiting arrest.

Two years later: 2001

Detective Svannah Handorf spoke to the media about the tragic shootout at the Vermilion River Killer's hearing by one Prosecutor, Trinity Anderson, in 1999.

“The said fact is that we were in such a rush to bring these killers to justice, we missed vetting the team we had worked with for so long. Trinity Anderson's link to the Herman family was well buried in paperwork, and she had been an upstanding citizen of the community in law enforcement for over 20 years.

“Sadly, the story goes a little something like this; Trinity was one of the Hermans' foster children. Back then, they weren't so hell bent on

status and greed when they raised their first child. As a child, Trinity had been thrown into the foster care system after watching her father kill her mother when she was six years old. Despite their best efforts, the Hermans could not erase Trinity's past, so they sought out a psychiatrist. With hypnosis, the psychiatrist suppressed Trinity's memory, exactly what the Hermans did not want for her. However, once she was cured, they didn't care about what the psychiatrist had done.

“In Trinity's hypnosis, Dr. Josef Mengele implanted a subconscious thought that changed the direction of her life. This thought was to become a lawyer, to prosecute those who hurt others, while suppressing any traumatic memories she had from childhood. This case had struck too close to home, and Trinity's subconscious started to awaken. Trinity's mind filled with all the buried trauma of her real parents' death until she had lost herself. The memories of pain swept her away, and with them she exacted revenge on those who had killed her second mother.

The only positive element we can reflect on now is that the mistrial caused two years ago was rescheduled with a new jury of the Vermilion River Killings that was conducted between the end of 1999 and into the early 2000's, ending with a verdict of guilty for Cadell Aaron Freeman and Salome Jamar Reginald on all counts. Both parties received the death penalty from the state of Florida to be conducted out later next year, on the 19th of December 2002.”

After completing his criminology studies, Brody also took a basic medical course, which included CPR, First Aid, and Phlebotomy. At this point, Brody was still new to the job but familiar with most long-term prisoners at the Florida State Prison in Raiford, where he had relocated in 1999. Prison Officer Brody Langdon quickly rose through the ranks as he had the skills to carry out any task within the facility. Salome and Cadell were sent here to serve their death by lethal injection, sentences which were scheduled to be carried out on the 19th of December 2002.

Brody had a great deal of favour with the warden, the scrupulous H.T. Waterberg. Everyone knew that Buck Langdon, later promoted to FBI head because of his role in the V. R. Killer case, was Brody's father.

H.T Waterberg had handpicked Brody to perform the lethal injection executions at his prison. Waterberg thought it only fitting that the son of Buck Langdon, now the FBI director, would execute the conviction. Despite Buck's knowledge that the executions were still a year away, Brody did not like the idea, so he called his father to calm his nerves.

Brody said, "I understand the general process from my studies, but I need you to walk me through it step by step."

"Well son, In Florida, prisoners are executed by administering a three-drug cocktail which renders them unconscious, paralyzes them, and then stops their hearts. The next drug will be administered after Prison Warden H.T Waterberg checks if the inmate is unconscious. During the execution, four syringes with 500mg each will be prepared. During the execution, you will inject rocuronium bromide one syringe at a time into the inmate. This will be followed by 20ml of saline solution to ensure all of the drug is injected into the inmate's veins. Following this, the third drug is administered. An execution team member will monitor the inmate's heart monitor throughout the procedure. Upon registering a flat-line reading, a physician will examine the inmate and declare them dead."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: The Priors, 2000 TO 2018

Sandra:

As I age, I have gotten rusty with the specifics: the many pains caused by my family, the medications that I abused. It was a cursed and horrific family history that I survived. I remain indebted to this town, for its roots still claw deep into my flesh. I shared a room with my older sister, Dani, when I was growing up. Despite our differences, we got along like family, just like the cult we grew up in.

It wasn't long until Dani became pregnant with Fidel's spawn. I immediately wanted Dani to have an abortion, but Dani refused such

an action. At heart, Dani was pure; even though she had had the worst upbringing of us all, she wasn't willing to kill her unborn baby. The 3-month mark hit, and it was too late. Dani wouldn't be able to hide it from the rest of the family much longer.

Karl:

As I grew older, I became accustomed to hiding the pain that constantly haunted me, caused by my eldest brother, Fidel. When my schooling was completed, I moved out and met my wonderful wife Katarina. Dominance is what I liked, and Katarina liked dominating. I felt the pain of dominance more than anything else. Katarina and I got married not long after we met and had our first child, Hayden. 5 years later came our second child, Jay.

Jay:

Though I was born a boy, I was a girl at heart. I lived in an out-of-body experience for most of my life. From a young age I was called gay because of what I wore. People picked on me for not looking normal, but who likes normal anyway? My dislike for things most boys did made me an outcast. Whenever I knew Mum and Dad weren't going to be home on a Thursday afternoon, I would walk home from school. It was only a short walk from my house, which I always enjoyed, Mum and Dad thought it too dangerous at my age to be walking home alone, but the bus was far worse because of the comments and gawking I received from the other patrons.

During this walk home, I passed by a girl with blonde ashy hair which reflected the sunlight back up towards the heavens. We only crossed paths because I had tripped over on a crack in the pathway as I stared towards the archangel across the road. The mesmerizing girl ran across the street to help me; and as she did so, she also tripped, causing her schoolbooks to fall from her crossed arms, on the books her name clearly said 'Cassie.' Cassie seemed unhappy. In that exact moment I realised that she was not of body. A vortex exploded out of my chest, soon joining with the girl I had just met. It reminded me of a scene from Donnie Darko. The main character, Jake Gyllenhaal

becomes unhinged in his reality and a vortex that looks like a grey Tornado time tube in human size leaves his chest and roams throughout the house.

In this unnatural interstellar connection between me and this newfound human our lives collided; our pain intensified and infested each other's thoughts. Before I had a chance to even recover or look up at this girl, I ran away, taking with me the intense emotions I had just been gifted with. Unnatural or not, there was meaning behind it. I never saw that girl again. I saw and felt her pain: the start, the middle and the end.

It was at this moment that I decided to take my life. I only had half an hour before Hayden would arrive home. It was my time. I placed the noose around my neck, tight enough so I wouldn't fall through. I dragged one of the cane chairs that sat by the balcony table over to the railing and stood up. I looked up at the sky, and with one easy step I fell. The constriction of my airway made me feel at ease. The rope's tightness didn't sting much more than a Chinese arm burn from Hayden when we were both naughty and young. When I fell, there was a thunderous snap, like lightning striking a dried-up tree branch. After moment of quiet, staring into the distance, my eyelids began to flutter, and I felt at peace.

Karl:

We lived in a vast town. Jay commuted to Niceville and Hayden to Needmore, so they didn't see much of each other, but the two of them had always connected in unusual and creative ways. Observing how feminine Jay was, I realised that she was born a girl. I regretted not addressing the pain, or even realising how broken it could have made her feel. I truly believed there was no such thing as a normal person, my wife being a glorified dominatrix. I was the biggest submissive ever. As adults, we didn't need approval or love from just anyone. As parents, we felt as if we had failed; we should have seen!

We had our usual hotel booked for summer Thursday nights of fun. Jay usually got home around 4pm and my eldest son, Hayden, finished school late on Thursdays, arriving home at 4:30pm. A simple half hour can bring about so many dreadful things.

Hayden:

As I was walking through the yard texting friends, I almost walked by Jay's hanging body without a flicker. Innocent and porcelain, Jay's face was purple and her body stiff, like a broken doll.

Any human would easily be broken by the image. I ignored what my eyes were showing me, instead of shock, instinct took over. I ran to the balcony and lifted Jay's stiff body and dragged her slowly back over the railing. Her body fell with a deafening sound onto the wooden deck. I gently picked her up and carried her to our parents' bed, performing CPR, calling an ambulance at the same time from our parents' bedside phone. At 5.19 p.m., Jay was pronounced dead.

Hayden: My upbringing

The constant advances from both men and women gave me a forward-thinking attitude. I grew up quicker than most children. I decided to use such inappropriate advances to my gain; I knew life would be easier with my intellect and looks. At age 9, I started to realise that the unnatural looks from adults would become my daily ritual. In the beginning, when certain adults threw such advances my way, I would always make sure that someone trustworthy was close by in case the advances turned sinister. When I was ten, Mum pushed me towards sports. I enjoyed science and math more, but I think she wanted a trophy son more than anything, especially after my younger brother Jay died. By age twelve, I was well past six feet, and weighed around 95 kilograms. I felt good about my body, and my urge for sexual interaction increased. I placed first in most of my classes, and that year I was named 'next best talent for quarterback.'

I grew up in Niceville, but once I reached Junior High, I had to travel across town to get to Needmore. They had better schooling and the best football team of the surrounding towns. I rode the bus an hour and half every day, but it gave me time to study, so I never complained.

By age thirteen I was a junior, and it was this year that my science teacher, Ms. Fields, made advances towards me: a touch of the inner thigh, a stroke of the arm. Ms. Fields constantly asked me to stay back

after class so she could groom me a little more. I was top of the class, so she knew I was no dummy, yet still she made sexual advances towards me.

My Mom pushed me to win at everything. She wanted me to succeed because she felt my father was a failure. I believed he was a pushover because there was no way they were having regular sex. I thought it may be due to my dad's impotence. When I later discovered his USB files of my mother dominating him, I finally understood their Dom/ Submissive relationship. By fourteen, not only did I have advances from teachers, but I also had them from both my male and female counterparts.

By age fifteen I was the most popular and apparently the most desired guy in school. I only know this because there was a list that was passed around school at the time, and I came first that year. The list was created by an undervalued gay dude at school, so I knew I had the boys on my side, too. I felt privileged. I had had my fair share of one-on-one male encounters. I was never thoroughly invested in women; I was never thoroughly invested in men. I had had vigorous encounters with both: them me, me them, yet nothing felt whole. I explored my sexuality throughout my younger years, more with men, because they seemed to like it more. I enjoyed all the sexual avenues I was entitled to with my gay counterparts. This became the beginning of my sexual identity: to explore, love and learn. Eventually, sexual interaction became too structured. I lost the enjoyment of fucking and exploring; it all became so vain.

At 16, I met Cassie. I had seen her at school before, but not like this day. I could see that Cassie had evolved, with a newfound confidence. As I approached this new mystical being I felt nervous for the first time in a long time. I stuttered as I awkwardly said "Hi."

Cassie looked around the hallway to see if I had indeed approached her. As corny as it sounds, she smelt like a fresh white lotus that had held me captive with euphoria and then finally bloomed, all within that exact moment. The truth within the silence between us made our first meeting even more special. Cassie never looked at me like I was something to be conquered. More a look of despair filled with a heart of pure loneliness. To Cassie I was nothing more than some other jock that had the usual woke trope of schoolhood by flying under the radar. Cassie excited me in a way that I could not describe. Cassie was that

unique. Pure, unattained raw beauty. Her soul reached light years into the future, her truth, the Milky Way.

I was the jock. Society told me to fit the part so they would be comfortable towards my actions, but this wasn't like every other woke story trope. I don't live by certain rules, constructs or stereotypes. You can't change the world until you change the world for yourself.

I became a hard-core activist for the trans community after my sister took her life at the age of eight. Jay had been bullied at school for not fitting into the norm. She had struggled with being overly feminine and was constantly called gay, and the pain became too overwhelming. No matter how hard the rumours hit the hallways if it had happened to myself, I wouldn't have endured what Jay did, because I was popular. Jay was forced to grow up quickly and she made a choice, one she believed made sense to her. Suicide is never to be judged; it's a simple act, one that a person can identify with. The victims will see no reason nor hear no reason, other than the decision that has already been made.

Cassie didn't know my history, nor did my schoolmates. There was a 5-year difference between my sister and me. As small towns go, when I started a new school, the rumours about her had well blown over. My sister slowly faded away within the community; the people couldn't deal with the repercussions they had caused. Death, anger, hate, an unreasonable reaction to a life that should have lived well beyond what had been given, as well as what had been taken.

Jeremy:

I never saw myself going to great heights. Mum had become pregnant with me when she was seventeen years old; she had been with a boyfriend at that time who was from a similar family. Working part time while finishing school, they left their family homes.

As a child, I was skinny, lanky, and had a mop for hair, basically like Shaggy from the cartoon Scooby Doo. Because I did not have the right sized clothing and had outdated sneakers, I was bullied in school. Mum always looked at me in a certain way as if she was waiting for me to do

something, anything bad. My after-school time was usually spent trying to reach the next stage of the game I was currently playing.

When I was eleven, I became friends with a girl named Rachel. Suddenly, I felt like I belonged.

Mum always liked to have me back home at a certain time, so I wasn't allowed over to anyone's house, ever. I guess that's why Rachel and I got along so well; both our parents were high strung and didn't like us doing things without them knowing. When I was twelve, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia and began taking antipsychotics. As I grew, I got tired of taking the medication, and I watched my life slip away into the abyss of the universe. I was lacking energy and started self-medicating by smoking weed. I buried my meds in the dirt of a shack that I found nearby. I would spend hours in that shack during school hours, even if it seemed like minutes; it was my sanctuary.

Rachel and I were not able to speak for more than a year while I was hospitalized in the mental facility. I was transitioning back onto the correct medications and missing a fair amount of school that year, which didn't worry me as I didn't attend that much when I was "free."

Mom and dad were barely able to afford the meds, much less the treatment and accommodation of the newly remodelled hospital. I now stood behind bars and both my mother and father lived in a constant state of tension.

By fifteen I was feeling well enough, I guess. The dosages of medications seemed to level out. I focused on my school studies while also joining the game club to redevelop my social skills with likeminded people of my age. I stayed back to play multiplayer games with the boys having the occasional toke of weed here and there, never stopping my antipsychotics. During our free classes when we were sixteen, Rachel and I spent a lot of time together on the grass talking about stupid things, re-bonding over how weird our families still were.

Heath: Provocation

Every weekday for the last 35 years, Heath had approached the pedestrian crossing cautiously in his car, which at the moment was a silver 1995 Nissan Skyline. Heath grew up in Niceville; he was a simple man. He didn't dream of leaving the township or discovering new things. He just wanted to be a mechanic, someone who cared for his town, family and friends. Heath enjoyed the work, rising early and adapting his opening hours to suit the needs of his customers. He never forced the apprentices to work early or to do what Heath himself had promised to do for certain customers.

Heath loved his job. Every weekday and most Saturdays, he drove down Suspiria Crescent to open the store. He had always wondered why the Lavender Woman coincided with the exact moment the sun rose each day. For the 35 years that Heath drove to work, he saw her smell the roses she loved so much in those sweet sacred moments. In a similar manner to the roller doors that Heath opened every day for work, the two shared an unspoken love for something so simple as a flower or job, and that made a connection between them.

Posey:

Posey had grown up with an abusive, drunken father. Her mother had died of what seemed to have been depression, and once they had lost her, her father threw Posey into the foster care system. Unfortunately for Posey, the lavender roses she had been smelling each day for all those years, were her father's. After decades of no contact from her father the two had moved into their new residence on the same street years later. Posey's father, an empty man, had been a hard drinker for 40 years, barely seeing daylight, if at all. It was only in the last few months that his alcohol psoriasis had gotten so bad he was unable to drink. On one fateful day, the empty man in his constant bitterness came across Posey's daily ritual for the first time. Posey looked knowingly into her father's eyes as 35 years whizzed by in a blink of an eye in the back of her mind, and as she stood there all alone. She had lost all meaning in the lie of her fateful lavender roses.

Jeremy: The Accident

People are prone to snapping at the slightest provocation. I used to see a lady down the street. She was not as friendly as her warm clothing and long hair might suggest. The amount of hair spray she used to hold her hair in place would have set her on fire if you lit a cigarette. Posey was her name, and she usually wore lavender outfits, or variations of them, and she would always walk every morning. It wasn't a busy street, but it still required a crossing. The black and white stripes painted on the street were clearly visible, but she never crossed when she reached them. Instead, she would stop to smell the lavender roses in the neighbour's garden, inhaling the sweet smell. Somehow in those moments her mind calmed, the pacing stopped, and she retreated to her cosy inner happy self.

Posey:

This morning Posey woke up and went through her normal routine, following the path to the start of the crossing. Her usual lavender roses caught her attention and she inhaled. Yet this morning a bitter old man was waiting at the front door of the property to interrupt her. He seemed unwell, barely able to prevent the wooden door from closing on him. He had a square face, a thick head of white, curly hair, a slender body and brown eyes that were nothing spectacular. With his light weight and crouching posture, he not only appeared weak, but also looked as if he had been mummified. The empty man demanded Posey to leave his garden. Then the door slammed shut with a loud crack. Under the door, blood trickled down the three steps.

Posey somehow infused the now meaningless man with the powers of the earth's spirits. And in turn, they requested a sacrifice from her.

Posey looked up, no longer inhabiting her body. Her eyes were crimson as she turned her head away from the flowers. A young boy started to run towards her as she edged onto the road, ready for her sentence.

Heath:

Having driven to the crossing every day, Heath drove on without thinking to stop, his head turned to the usual scene, anticipating seeing Posey sniffing her lavender flowers as usual. The front of his car struck something with a thud unlike any other. Not knowing what he had hit, he screeched the car to a halt and bounded out. One arm protruded from underneath the bonnet, a lavender cardigan covering it. He wept.

Cassie:

My room filled with mystical creatures created by the sweet bubble gum-flavoured smoke I exhaled from my lungs. Lava lamps in purple and red set the mood for my early-00s scene.

As I pondered, I spoke out loud about how I felt. How I wasn't interested in living; more like I didn't care much about living. Stating how careless I am: far too carefree. Growing up mentally at a young age was caused by the fact that I didn't feel right inside myself. I was in the wrong fabric. My reading habits revolved around the same places in the same room, like a vessel doing a round trip, never learning from the dark tides that lapped the non-existent shore. I thought of the good old days when my mother Edith and my father John were happy, before I caused them misery.

I used to be at the centre of arguments between Mum and Dad, more so with Mum than Dad. When I was a child, my mother began taking Valium and then Oxycontin. Alcohol became the new mixer, and she fell asleep on the couch by four almost every afternoon. The slack was taken up by my father, who began taking me to my medical appointments. I felt more comfortable with my doctor, a specialist in his field, funding himself to help those who had no other scientific medical treatment, as it was not available.

As a result of her drug addiction, Mum was unable to carry out any daily tasks by the time I was eleven. I didn't like the fact that dad was always away on business, but he needed to support the family somehow. It wasn't hard to see why mum was considered pretty. She was tall, toned, and had cheekbones for days. She had spiky short hair

like Sharon Stone during her prime. Basic Instinct was my tell for the life I dreamed to live.

I started wearing skirts from this age, always getting weird looks, like I was too young for them. When I refused to wear the shorts my mother gave me, she refused to take me anywhere. When I went out with Dad, he held my hand even tighter, as he was happy to take me anywhere no matter what I wore. When I was 12, Mom refused to talk to me anymore, so my father left her, and we moved to the other side of town. Upon arrival, I was surprised to find Needmore to be more welcoming than what I had imagined, but the mind plays with those who listen to the inner dark demons that have constantly surrounded them.

In the spring of my thirteenth year, Dad and I had settled into our new home, and I awoke feeling spiritually more alive than usual. I went to the kitchen to make my usual breakfast smoothie. A lemon, my favourite summer fruit, a hint of apple to sweeten and a few cloves of fresh garlic, mint and jasmine powder for antioxidants.

During my first day at my new school, a strand of my hair fell into the mixture, but there was no time to replace it, so I sealed the lid and headed off to school. My grandmother's old sweater accompanied the smoothie in my backpack. It was one of the few things left over from my mother's side which I took during the divorce. It was an unusual sweater; vintage I guess you would say; bright pink satin covered its underlay. To be honest I had completely forgot it had ever existed. The sweater seemed as if it had never been mine to begin with. It quickly became a heap of unraveled wool, no longer a garment, encircling the jar that contained my smoothie. Combined, it made for a powerful incantation. I did not know it at the time, but it kept me safe throughout those long and painful school days. I believe it also made me stronger in my transition from man to woman.

My medication started to get more extreme at the age of fourteen, affecting my ability to feel what I needed to feel. It was a dark world of misery I wished to never to visit again. It was difficult for me to make friends because I missed so much school. I was assumed to be a drug user or frequent visitor to a mental institution, which was true. There were times when gossip can be just fact, and there are times when gossip is just bullshit, but what's the point of either if you're still going to form the same conclusion.

My summer break was so exciting at fifteen because I was starting a brand-new beginning. My city was finally expanding. My classmates noticed my changes when I returned to school at sixteen, and I think they realised that I wasn't just seeking attention as if I was a lost soul. Hayden and I met that year, and everything became alive. Hayden was on the football team: tall, dark and ominous. He was not your typical jock, nor was he failing Math or Science classes; rather, he was a leader in both classes in addition to leading the football team. As far as jealous cheerleader girlfriends go, Hayden did not fall into that stereotype. He was focused and had a clear drive, but I wasn't sure of what that drive was; that was what drew me to him.

I was enjoying life, thanks to my newfound friendship with Hayden. My life seemed to be heading in the direction it was meant to go, and with my dad's support I was finally able to become whole, as if I had been born into a universe with the right fabric intact. At a young age, I started taking hormones so that my body could grow along with me. My hips widened and my breasts grew. The amounts of estrogen I was taking caused my testes to shrink, and my facial hair stopped growing. I still had my penis and testicles. The process of converting male anatomy to female anatomy entails removing the penis, reshaping genital tissue to appear more feminine, and constructing a vagina. Skin is pulled back from the scrotum after an incision is made. The testes are removed. A shorter urethra is cut. I had no doubt in my mind that I would undergo this costly, lengthy and painful procedure if it was necessary to feel whole.

I assumed Hayden wanted to be friends at first, but we quickly became intimate. Hayden was a friend who made all the changes that were occurring unnoticeable. No one gave me grief over who I was when I became who I was. I was capable of handling myself, but his kindness taught me there is a lot more to this world than people like my mother. As Hayden and I sat on my bed one afternoon after school, he whispered, "You are whole," in my ear. I knew that Hayden truly meant it.

Hayden kissed me on the lips. Despite the wonderful kiss, I felt obliged to tell everything to him. I told him I would have my gender reassignment surgery that year. All he said was, "I think you're beautiful."

He slowly started fondling my new breasts. He undressed me and removed the rest of his clothes. His penis was already hard and pulsing with energy. Then he flipped me over onto my stomach with ease, rubbed the wet spot from his hand onto his dick for lubricant, then he entered me with a gentle push and wrapped his right arm around my breasts and pulled me towards him, my back arching. Then he turned my neck backwards so we could kiss while he thrust me from behind. It was intense, and the force he used to pound me caused the bed to thrust against the wall. Our passionate love making lasted for about twenty minutes, and I enjoyed every moment of it. I could tell that Hayden wasn't faking when he finally pulled out and came all over his chest and abs. The force with which it came out of his penis was amazing. After the release, he moaned with excitement and fell backwards on the bed. He grabbed my waist and pulled my hips into his, and we soon fell asleep naked on my bed, spooning.

Hayden was snoring and seemed exhausted when I woke up in his arms. I made my way to the bathroom to shower off. Halfway through the shower, Hayden joined me, scrubbing me down with the loofa. His large, strong hands on my back and arms were bursting with energy, and I felt alive. My senses were more responsive than ever to his touch upon me. I had entered a new realm of euphoria. As the water dripped on Hayden and myself from the shower head above, he wrapped his arms around me. We dried off, then walked downstairs hand in hand. Dad had already set the morning table for three. I knew he was intuitive, but not that intuitive. We all sat down, and Dad did not make a big deal about it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Rebirth

Ingrid:

Ingrid's parents, Ivor and Magnus, sacrificed their lives to create her.

Ivor was handsome with long white hair, a strong jaw line holding a beard that was seldom trimmed. He had a prominent nose, eyes that

radiated a natural blue, with thick, dark eyebrows. Broad shoulders projected an image of a fellow not to mess with. He was tall, with strong upper arms and lower limbs. He wore notably feminine attire, usually a cape or a see-through kaftan. He was comfy in it and did not care what others thought, nor did they dare to say for fear they might hit the other end of a fist.

Magnus was shorter than Ivor, no less handsome nor hairy. Magnus felt his connection to the land, feeling at ease when he was close to running water. If an argument occurred with Ivor, he would seek comfort by walking to a water source, dwelling on what had just transpired. He would throw a pebble into the stream he sat nearby, watch it slowly float to the bottom, finding its place in its new ecosystem. Not attacked by its new surroundings nor its lack of involvement, it was at ease. As the pebble sank, Magnus thought of the bubbles it left in its wake, reminding him of a good glass of champagne. Like a magnet, drawn towards water, with an interest in science, Magnus became one of the most respected teachers to the youth of The Strain.

There wasn't anything unusual or uncommon about being in a same-sex couple in The Strain. Mother fondly loved Ivor and Magnus during their years together. They had been in love for more than a century, their roots well entwined. Keeping to the tones of nature with a brisk air, The Strain's tradition was strong and sacred.

Magnus and Ivor asked Mother for Ingrid, Priestess of Strength. The magic of her creation came with a limitation on time; she could not exist forever. Contemporary creation seen in surreptitious splendour from fiction to fabric; Ingrid was born.

The spirits of Ivor and Magnus became uneasy as Ingrid lost the battle against Medusa in The Monument. Even though they had felt the loss of her spirit at the Prior's farm, they knew Ingrid still existed within The Monument and the spirit world.

When Medusa won against the fracturing of her realm and reality in the spirit world, Ingrid's soul was destroyed and any dynasty that might have survived was now lost forever. On earth's crust, Magnus and Ivor regenerated with soul, body, and mind as Ingrid dissolved in soul, body, and mind. Loss radiated from every plain, a spiritual abnormality, a pain so apparent, Ivor and Magnus once again became

corporeal. Their arrival would be known to all forces, soon casting barrier spells around themselves, allowing them to walk amongst the dark. An unapparent danger, the Earth spiralled into an iridescent place that no longer kept the balance of all beings.

In the same way as Erica Fisc had struggled on her entrance to earth, Ivor and Magnus also struggled to adjust to their new harsh reality. The sensory overload paled in comparison to the loss they now felt knowing their only legacy was sacrificed to keep the world safe.

Ivor and Magnus now felt the harsh reality of pain, light, and the unwanted weight of a world they had left behind so long ago. Their love for Ingrid held them accountable for the life they had chosen to create.

Cassie: The Road to Recovery

Sometimes a good mystery is better than what is manifested in the ending of a picture. Yet pictures do not lie, nor do genes.

After I lost faith in people, truth made things simpler.

Honesty created the barrier, from the fake to the faker. When you tell the truth, people generally become uncomfortable or slightly impressed that you have made it thus far.

I hear my father's silence, his insecurities never voiced.
I hear my mother's disdain, her anger ever growing.

My constant was institutions, a loving taste of disarray. I felt perpetually in limbo, voluntarily checking myself in. I did a 3-month inside stint this time and met a boy named Jeremy. In fact, we were just two years apart in school. He helped me get through my stay there. He was skinny and tall, and I would have died for his hair back then.

Jeremy was being treated for schizophrenia. When I went to the facility, I was struggling with my transition. As it happened, I was also battling addiction at the time, to all drugs, anything I could get my hands on.

Jeremy hated his medication. When the facility staff watched us take our meds, he mastered the art of pretending to swallow them, and I ate them for him later. Those three months were filled with a wonderful high.

In one of my drug rages, I stabbed another patient with a pencil. I was soon locked in isolation and forced to sober up because I could not get to Jeremy's drugs. Isolation was hard and gave me time to reflect on the first few days that we both had arrived. Jeremy never judged me or looked at me like I was weird. We had earned each other's respect. The boys' bathrooms and showers were forced upon me like some sick joke.

There was no physical connection between us. He could clearly see I had a penis, but he knew I was a girl. Chatting in the shower was an enjoyable way to bond with him. Jeremy and I became friends because we talked about our lives and the messes we had made. We soon discovered that we attended the same school in Needmore.

Jeremy did have one recurring nightmare, about a little wooden shack somewhere not far from town, surrounded by dense, overgrown trees. The shack was used to disfigure and mutilate small animals in his dreams. Storage racks of tools surrounded the interior. Animal body parts hung from various hooks inside. Having no window or air flow, the stench from his dream followed him around every morning, preventing him from eating breakfast. The staff had to sedate Jeremy most nights.

Edith: A short, unhappy life.

Edith's mother had been cruel, and so were her sisters. At the age of thirteen, Edith had prayed for her mother and sisters' tragic deaths, and her wish was granted. They were killed in a horrific car accident on Route 66. Their deaths did not make Edith sad; rather, they made her feel relieved. In her past, Edith had always had an aversion to women, because they had treated her so cruelly. Her belief was that it was because she was prettier than the rest, as though she was not a devoted member of the family. She was overjoyed when she finally had a son of her own. It was an odd fate that Edith was given the life of a

child only for that child to betray her and turn into something she wanted to forget.

Edith's house was small, dank and unclean. She became more hateful in her ways as her sleep was often interrupted. She awoke in an uncontrollable trance one fateful night just after 1am. Without questioning her actions, she simply followed her instincts. In her dressing gown, she grabbed her car keys from the bench. She drove a small manual Hyundai Excel, which always rattled while she was driving, yet she never bothered to fix it. Having chosen her destination — the opposite side of town — she started the car in the garage.

At 2:30, Edith arrived in Needmore. She parked the car on the suburban street and walked towards the forest behind the last row of houses on the block. She didn't have to go far before she found herself beside an ungodly shack. She entered and lit the candle on the blood-stained bench in the corner. Although the stench was unbearable, she was unable to leave. There was a small black book in the middle of the bench, engraved with "the sensibly sized book" on the leather cover. Edith flicked through the pages and felt the power that lay within the poems that had been written all over the pages. Edith closed the book and slid it inside her large furry pink dressing gown.

It was just after 3 a.m. when Edith glanced at her watch. Instantaneously, the face of the watch cracked on the witching hour, freezing it in time. She felt a sharp pain around the front of her neck. Slowly looking down at her pink dressing gown, soaked in a red liquid, she looked her exterminator in the eye and gasped for air as she slowly drowned in her own warm blood. The murderer, whoever they were, had a discerning smile on their face as they killed her.

The police found Edith's body, a knife in her hand, and it was soon determined that the cause of death was suicide. Edith was known to be a stubborn, hateful woman, and her history of drug abuse and isolation added fuel to the fire of the suicide determination of death. One thing the police could not figure out was why Edith drove an hour and a half to commit suicide in an abandoned old shack.

John:

The idea of telling Cassie of Edith's suicide was beyond John's comprehension as he thought back to Cassie's younger years when Edith and himself were happy. When Edith discovered Cassie's true gender identity, he knew she had changed inside. Additionally, John knew she was a hard and strong woman; suicide just didn't feel right to him, especially with the mitigating factors. To avoid stirring up unwanted and unforgiving memories from the past, he decided to leave it to the police's discretion. As John reflected upon the hatred Edith had caused him and Cassie, he realized that they could finally put that behind them forevermore.

Cassie now had Hayden in her life, and John didn't want to ruin her high from last night's sleep over. This news could unravel everything they had been working towards in these last few years: Cassie's good mental health. John was thrilled that Hayden had also found love with Cassie. If she hadn't, it could have been an entirely different ending. John set the table for breakfast.

Cassie had an uneasy feeling when she arrived home after school that day. John was a pianist, and when his tune didn't match Cassie's intuition, she knew something was wrong. Cassie entered the white-painted, French-style house where John sat playing "Saturn" by Sleeping at Last on his piano. The key was severely off, so Cassie sat next to him. Because John had given Cassie so much support during her upbringing, she wanted to repay his kindness. John was unable to speak, so Cassie re-enacted what John used to do with her when she was a child.

With no judgement attached, John would ask Cassie a question and she would answer with either a yes or a no. It was their odd little way of communicating that they had developed over the years to take away the old tears. It was an escape to be able to tell the truth in happy silence. Edith had been the main cause of chaos; emotions always had run high back then. Cassie's early years of upbringing were marked by this sort of communication. Her father's love for her made Cassie feel so rich. Cassie did not have to dress up in a huge gown and go to some Hollywood-type gathering, she was already wealthy. She didn't have to impress him with good grades or impressive dance lessons - all she had to do was be herself.

Cassie spoke softly. "Are you upset?"

John cleared his throat. "Yes, your mother, sorry, I mean Edith, she has been found dead, Sweetie. The evidence the police provided to me this morning indicates that she committed suicide."

Cassie sought comfort in Edith's inescapable death. She called Hayden to comfort her and asked him to come over. Gazing straight into Cassie's beautiful blue eyes, he spoke. "I've seen your face a thousand times, and I've memorized it. I'm going to kiss your lips, and I'm going to believe every kiss will be different, but still the love I long for. All I can say is, don't run away from this. I can understand how hard this is for you. I've discovered your ghosts, they're now mine. I think it's time I told you mine."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Repeat 2008

Rachel:

I am outgoing and talkative, unlike my mother, who is shy and has not recovered from childhood traumas. This broken part of my mother, the idea of "knowing" what truly unsettles her each day rests within my own assumptions. It was always a conscious effort on my part to prevent myself from ending up depressed and alone like Sandra. I always learned from others and was never afraid of anyone.

In my ninth year, I began to plan my own future, becoming more independent from my mother, enrolling in activities that were more interesting than those she suggested. I took every additional extension class until the dean told me that I couldn't take any more due to my overwhelming workload. I participated in ballet, baseball, and cheer as well: all my new favourite hobbies.

As a ten-year-old, all my dreams came true when I made it to Nationals with my cheerleading team. With the raw talent of Sylvie

Guillem, or so my teacher said. I eventually left it all behind because it was destroying my feet. For the season, I was the highest batter in baseball with the most home runs, and I received praise. It felt a pleasure to be recognised and celebrated for my diligent work. I was finally receiving the praise that I had always wished my mother had given me. It was only sad that the praise was coming from strangers. My whole life I had felt undervalued and ignored. Bored in a world I was forced to be brought up in, never knowing or learning anything true of heart to my history or culture, I created a sense of being in my own made-up realm where I had been forced to co-exist.

After I started Junior High, I met Jeremy, and we became friends. At age eleven I got my first period, and my mother was utterly unprepared. I was quite independent and street smart by this stage in my life, so I understood what was going on with my body. Mom breezed over the conversation and gave me a pad. Soon I discovered tampons and got in touch with my own vagina through the internet; my mother was not going to teach me, so I had to teach myself.

By the age of twelve, I had developed my own style and was running an online channel about cheering techniques and choreography, which earned me some cash. Mom received benefits from Dad and was on mental disability support, but by this point, I was making more money than her and keeping things going while she was unable to. The power and water had been shut off so often before, and I had to make sure I stayed on top of it. She had fallen pregnant with me by accident, and she had never explicitly said she didn't want any kids, but I could feel her shame. After my early creation, she should have had an abortion because of her mental state. She certainly wasn't pro-life; I chalk my existence up to the fact that she probably just changed her mind at the last minute.

When I was thirteen, mum went down a severe rabbit hole of depression. Sometimes I wouldn't see her for weeks rather than days. She stayed in her room with the curtains shut and slept most of her days in darkness. When I left her meals, she barely touched them. She seemed more lucid after I started telling her about Jeremy, at first, but only gradually. I told her what I knew about him, and she thought we were an unusual group of friends. I got along with Jeremy so why did it matter? At first, Mum seemed happy for me, but then things started to become weird.

As a teen, Jeremy swapped his medication for weed and was admitted to a mental institution. Then he had a fit, and as a last resort, his parents confined him. I told my mother everything about his problems and how I wanted to go visit him. She forbade me from going, because she feared his violent tendencies and did not want me near him alone. As usual, she overreacted to what had already happened; I respected her wishes to keep from causing her any more grief. I felt bad for not sneaking out at least once to see him, but Jeremy seemed understanding.

Jeremy returned to school at age fifteen and we did not spend much time together. While he found his place in the world with his gaming friends, I continued to run my online store, do all my activities and take care of my mother. As a result, I hardly had time to spend with my friends, and most of whom were only acquaintances. It was odd to me that Mum was happy I wasn't friends with Jeremy anymore. I assumed that she would have wanted me to be happy no matter who I was friends with. During this year, knowing how busy I was with all my extracurricular activities, she was mostly at peace. By the time I was sixteen, Jeremy and I had reconnected, and our friendship began where it had left off. Mother's condition also started to improve during this time, and I even saw her leave the house once. She was more lucid and had an inquisitive eye about her. Was she finally ready to leave her past behind and return to the real world?

Now was the time to start digging, and digging was something I was good at. Having known what school Mom had attended and what year, I was only left with finding the right yearbook to trace back her history and find the people she grew up with around Niceville. The school that Mum attended had been dismantled. It was now a burned-out shell of concrete. The town had been industrializing outwards while the school was slowly rotting away. It was only when I learned of its history that I understood why. The former Niceville high school was just over the road from the State library. As a result, I would be able to find the information I needed to question Mum during one of her lucid states, or maybe even piece the past together on my own, with the help of any willing locals.

Mom graduated in 1991, so I searched the book for her picture. I couldn't find her name in the book. A blank profile stood out, a generic outline of a female with just a name, Sandra. To find out whether all

the graduates from Niceville high school in 1991 were included in the 1991 book, I asked the librarian.

In her mid 70s, the library clerk wore Dame Edna glasses with a shiny gold strap. In addition to being the Librarian, she gave me the impression that she was a quirky bitch, with her red lipstick and silver, permed hair.

As I slapped the 1991-yearbook on her desk, I knew she was up for some questions. The Librarian introduced herself as Darlene. "Child, come sit down with me."

Darlene told me about the mass shooting that had taken place at Niceville High in the year 1988. It was organised and carried out by a boy named Fidel Prior. Using the photocopier, I copied Sandra's page from the yearbook. This was the only clue I had about why my mother wasn't in any of these yearbooks. I arrived home to find Mom sitting at the kitchen table, hardly dazed from the medications she usually took to self-medicate. In front of her, I placed the photocopy of Sandra.

Mom said, "I knew this day would come; it was a miserable fate for a family that had always felt fractured. I have been following Jeremy. I noticed he was burying his medication in the forest behind his house in a small shack where he would sometimes spend hours. Upon going in one afternoon after he had left, I found all sorts of small dead animals, including the neighbour's dog that had gone missing just a few weeks before. The dirt floor beneath was stained with dried blood; the woodwork bench smelt of dead animal corpses.

Sandra had lied to me for years and kept herself drugged to distract me from her truth. She had spent her time following my cousin around rather than providing me with a true upbringing. I knew that Jeremy had schizophrenia, but he had never shown any signs of violence towards me. I had to investigate for myself.

I went in search of The Shack that my mother described. I would certainly find evidence of dead animals, or at least bones, if the accusations were true.

When I finally found it, I wondered if it had always been so hidden. There was no support structure to keep the shack upright, so I entered cautiously. There was no evidence of mutilated animals inside, nor did I find any tools that could be used to do such things.

The time had come to confront Jeremy. He had the right to know who his father really was. I told him that we were family and my mother's intentions.

Jeremy:

Jeremy's broken state of mind had swayed him to The Shack from an early age. A certain genetic blood line that exudes mayhem and death might give rise to Wiccademous, formerly known as Medusa, incarcerated again by no other than the girl that she had freed. The last heirs of The Strain Witches needed to be eliminated if Wicca had any chance of survival and freedom. After she betrayed her blood line, Edith no longer posed a threat, but she was still a loose end that needed to be dealt with.

When Jeremy was a young man, Wicca instilled hatred into his subconscious which he could not control. The violent dreams Jeremy had weren't just dreams; they were the results of what he had been doing under the command of Wicca, who had slowly enslaved him. His schizophrenia was only one piece of the puzzle with a wave of disorder swept through the realms of all things wonderful and wicked. The victim of his own lineage, Jeremy had become a target for those who had the power to use him to their advantage.

Lunch time had come and brought with it distasteful and distant gun shots.

Cassie:

Ms. Fields had been following Hayden and his new relationship with Cassie, which made her angry, but not angry enough to take out a firearm and mow down people in a school yard. Hayden sat in the library corner with Cassie, catching up on a group assignment they had left to the last minute. Ms. Fields despised Cassie's taste in clothes, which today was considerably worse than others. Cassie wore a tight-fitting yellow Pascal singlet dress, which almost matched her skin colour. Then to hide her figure, as if it weren't perfect enough, Cassie wore a fluffy pink coat that looked like she had plucked a flamingo to

make it. She had picked it up a few years prior in a thrift shop in New Orleans when John took her on a spontaneous trip to get her mind off the divorce proceedings.

While they sat there, Hayden and Cassie's dreams became infectious. They thought about their future life and the pain they had seen, and they pledged to each other that they would always be honest. It would be by boat, not air, that they travelled across the seas, and they knew that their loved ones would miss them, but they knew they would always return to them. Trusting the past, moving on from it, and starting anew.

On the other side of the room from Hayden and Cassie sat Rachel and her mother. The silence at home was unbearable, so the library created a public place where they could talk. Several rows behind the tables in the library, Sally was stalking in the stacks unnoticed.

The clock struck 1:23 pm. Cassie's bright white hair reflected off the windows that led out to the courtyard. Cassie and Hayden seemed at ease with one another, realizing how lucky they had been to find soul mates.

Shots rang in the distance, radiating throughout the courtyard behind. As the shots grew near, Cassie, Hayden, Sally, Rachel and her mother all became aware of each other's presence. The library entrance had two double doors, with no handles or anything to barricade them. Rachel's mother told Rachel to stand behind her, Cassie did the same with Hayden.

Cassie was the last true heir of a dying clan that had gone astray. Instead of letting the natural order play its part, dignity and revenge had slowly taken over The Strain. Their key to success was balance, and with blurred lines now present, there would be no further illumination. In Cassie, Mother saw a new natural order, a young individual that sought true being and happiness. Because of the destruction of Cassius, men could never again rule The Strain. Nature would not let them do so. The Strain would have ended with no peace to guide them into the next realm if Cassie had never sought her truth. It wasn't about winning or losing for Cassie, it was about feeling what was right and acting on it.

All along, Rachel's mother's worst fears had been realized. The debris from Jeremy's bullets re-cohered in all directions, covering the

students in a dust pool of blood and particles. Sally went into a state of disarray, unsure if she had undiagnosed PTSD. She wondered if death was finally seeking its last victim. Sally could not believe what she was hearing, and all her fears hit her in that one moment.

Enrage Probabilistic Nest En: The Library Oak

The tree in the library courtyard was no ordinary oak tree; it had sat in this very spot since anyone could remember. It remained safe, as it was protected by the Earth. It had correspondence to its land, to its people and to its history. Its fate was unwritten, watching and seeing those who entered its space. Learning to love, enduring the hate, connecting to the books that were born from its roots. Embodying fiction, reflecting on the truth of what was seen by the oak tree firsthand.

The students who selected certain books and the pages they chose to read within those books told more about the character of a person than how they acted with others directly. The school had been there for a short amount of time compared to what the oak had endured, yet the oak did not mind its circumstance. Patience was gratifying; a great new beginning did not mean that the end would not be mayhem. Everyone assumed that the oak tree was in fact, an oak tree. Its resemblance due to age seemed to have unquestioned authority over that fact. Yet it was a Great Basin Bristlecone Pine. An anomaly in a state like Florida, yet it existed. Strong, nonthreatening and completely deafening in thought and imagination. Those who saw the tree for what it was, knew that it was called, “Enrage Probabilistic Nest En.”

The library was quaint, built in the mid 70s. It was a circular room leading into a small upper level, only three steps tall, with a few additional stacks to hold books. The majestic tree stood in the centre of the courtyard behind these stacks, as if the courtyard had become a sanctuary. The trees' branches reached well beyond the roofline and engulfed the area beneath. The courtyard cried out to the neatly stacked books that lined the library, which were made of the same paper the tree had supplied many years before. The library was floored with unused tiles donated by the City Council. New, old, and modern elements were patched together. They all held histories, whether they had already happened or not. A mosaic pattern of brown,

orange, and black accented the individual shapes in the tiled pattern. In contrast to the heavy shapes of the tiles, the bright green needles of the Great Basin Bristlecone Pine calmed the surroundings.

Stacks of dark wooden bookshelves had stood there since the opening, and they were arranged in no specific order. Bethany, the librarian, also worked at the local morgue. She seldom bothered with the organisation of the library since she was usually exhausted from her work of the night before. Now, she was working on a suicide case that just didn't feel right, even though the police had ruled it as such. The length of the slit in the victim's neck seemed too high compared to the height of the victim; it was almost as if she would have had to break her own arm to get the right angle. As if surprised by her own actions, the victim also clutched her neck. And the blood on the light pink dressing gown was thick and unusually coloured. In one of the dressing gown's pockets Bethany had found a sensibly sized book. The dressing gown had soaked up most of the blood from the victim which had saved the pages from being stained and unreadable. As the case had been closed there was no reason to cause more havoc within the community with rumours of a brutal killer on the loose.

In her old age, Bethany had seen a lot of death that came to the morgue through her doors. She was getting tired of working long and gruelling hours; she just needed to earn extra money after her wife had died 5 years earlier of cancer. As the book was of no use to the victim now, with no relatives to claim her possessions, Bethany decided to keep it for herself. To Bethany, the book made no sense. It wasn't a novel, nor did it seem to belong to the victim. There was no inscription indicating whether it had been a gift or just a lost piece of history belonging to someone else. Bethany chose to file the book in the history section, which consisted of more than just history books. Despite being smaller than the other books on the shelf, the book's new location caused a gap in the row. Standing at the gap, you could see a direct path to the library's flapping doorway entrance.

Cassie: Path Dependence Theory

Having seen every aspect of the world and the problems it faced, Enrage Probabilistic Nest En was still surprised by certain despicable acts that occurred in the simplest and most complex of societies. State

forests were only cleared through payoffs to certain governments for the animals that nestled there. It was this realism that preserved her darkest secrets, with a faith in certain broken individuals who continued to surprise her with results that she had never imagined.

As the bullets once again filled the hallways of another school, Enrage Probabilistic Nest En had faith in the people who stood in this library. Using its connection to the Earth and the sensible sized book, the Enrage Probabilistic Nest En slid the book from its place and threw it down in front of Cassie with one swift breeze of hope. Despite the horror that slowly approached them, Cassie picked up the small black book, soft to the touch as if it had never seen a hard day's work in its life. Not one bit of the leather casing had deteriorated. Still crisp and clean as from the day it had been made, the pages spoke to Cassie spiritually. There were no page numbers or index to help decipher what had been a guided to her. As a breeze swept through the courtyard and into the lower level of the library, Cassie felt a wave of identity sweep through her as she connected her fingertips with the pages. With the integration of each other's trust, their histories merged as well as their faith for the good and righteous. The sensibly sized book had finally found its true soul mate. In Cassie's mind, she was overwhelmed by memories of other people's pasts and futures, thoughts of hate, loss, endurance, determination, fight, joy, peace, strength and wisdom.

Cassie witnessed Ales and Darja's communist rise, their move to the United States, the birth of Fidel and his siblings, as well as Sally Field's nightmare encounters with the clergy. Hayden, Rachel, and Jeremy Prior, and the paths they had taken. Cassie's encounter with Hayden's sister, Jay, discovering she was the cause that led to her suicide. Posey and her father's drunken rages. Posey's voice of helplessness as she faced the spirits that brought wrath. Cassius's birth from Mother, his love for Aby, and Aby's destruction of the clan and her dark offspring. A mother is lost to the Prior family, a hospital burns, Gwen cries for help and Cassandra is born. Cadum is slaughtered and the farm and earth are destroyed. Its link to Medusa and the town of Arcadia, the three high priestesses and their battle for peace. The Monument and the tests placed within each layer, as well as the shack that Jack built that caused so much grief. Rita and the connection between earth, air, water, and fire through her trials. The struggle of Jeremy and the manipulation by evil, as well as Edith's death. First there was the shooting of 1988, then there was Erica Fisc and Prime Ono Scrims, and

finally there was Enrage Probabilistic Nest En who threw the book towards her for ultimate peace.

During the overflow of information, Cassie felt the waves of her legacy overtake her; the knowledge was too much for her to handle on her own. The contents of the sensible-sized book entered Hayden and Rachel as Cassie grabbed their hands. Cassie could then focus on the harsh reality of who she was and what she had to do. What appeared on the outside revealed itself on the inside. Throughout Cassie, the wisdom and power of the sensibly sized book grew. Its magic rhymes penetrated her inner being.

Cassie's charged body now surged with potential, as she telepathically linked with the Enrage Probabilistic Nest En tree. Rather than being selected or inherited from a lineage, this new clan leader was born. Cassie took her hands from her backup team, and as she raised her arms, the wooden stacks rose, and the books shuffled and fell to the floor. The stacks shot across the room, covering the double door entrance to the library. The stack was so large that it covered the wall around the doorway. Cassie raised her arms again, and as the tables collapsed, the screws from them came undone. They flew like the bullets that could still be heard echoing through the hallways and drilled into the stack to provide extra support. Cassie manipulated Jeremy to focus on the blocked door, creating a situation that would enrage Medusa, hoping to distract him from killing more students. She directed Hayden, Rachel, Sandra and Ms. Fields to the courtyard. "Climb the limbs of the tree quickly. This tree is a friend; it has stood here for five thousand years."

All of them climbed the long limbs of the Enrage Probabilistic Nest En with Cassie, who led them to the safety of the roof above.

Manipulating Jeremy's body that was slaughtering students below, Medusa gained enough death to use that power to free herself from The Shack. Now released from the prison where she had spent most of her life, she headed towards the mayhem that she had summoned to the school.

Erica felt the chaos in the air with Medusa's newfound freedom. Ivor and Magnus sensed the pandemonium at the school that now housed Cassie's newfound power while Jadis perished back into the Earth as it reclaimed her body because of her failure to protect the

world from Wicca, yet again. It was the end of times and with it came untold repercussions to a world that was now engulfed with chaos.

A.M.W: The Showdown

The bright tin roof covered the entire school, reflecting off everything. The patter of rain on the tin could be heard throughout the school on rainy days. When the storm was too loud, the teachers had to pause the lesson until it passed. However, it was nothing compared to the bullets that pelted the brick walls and the bones of the students running in the corridors.

Cassie led Ms. Fields, Rachel, Sandra, and Hayden to safety over the roof. When they reached the other side, they slowly climbed down the gutter drainpipe. Keeping out of sight, they hurried into the bush and called for help from the police department.

On the hot tin roof, Medusa landed as the police sirens blared in the distance. She breathed in the death in all its glory as she reflected on her mayhem that had engulfed everyone. She was a tall, dark figure in a navy-blue cape that rippled through the air, reflecting off every tin roof that surrounded the school, giving the impression that many members of the same group were circling in the air around the school grounds.

Magnus and Ivor joined her on the roof shortly after Erica's arrival. The two of them knelt together as they landed; it had been some time since they had apparated in gravity. From afar it looked as if Gandalf the White and Dumbledore had landed on a hot tin roof, collapsing on arrival. Wicca saw their reflection underneath her as she hovered above the roof, and she turned to the insolent men attempting to stop her, laughing at them for thinking they could even try.

Wicca ripped the tin roof sheets free of their groundings in a wave of hatred. The rough, uneven, edges hurtled towards Magnus and Ivor.

Using the roof pipes that had now been exposed, Ivor unleashed a torrent of water that conjured into a large funnel. Ivor directed this wave of water towards Magnus' bright blue eyes. As the water passed Magnus, he used his connection to the land's water to stop the flying

shields in their tracks. The rectangular tin weapons that were launched toward them were now captured as large ice sheets. Standing directly in the middle of the two opposing groups, Erica rose from within as the ice and tin melted together in a pool of murky water.

Medusa regretted ever freeing Erica, and in that moment, her crimson eyes shone right through the murky water. Erica was created in Ingrid's image, except for the crimson-coloured eyes. Magnus and Ivor were stunned at Erica's resemblance to their late daughter. She removed her hood, and Ivor and Magnus stared in awe. As she smiled back at Ivor and Magnus, hope once again entered their lives.

One wave of her hand and she apparated Ivor and Magnus into the dense bushes where Cassie and the group were hiding. As true gentlemen, Ivor and Magnus introduced themselves to Hayden, Cassie, Ms. Fields, Rachel, and Sandra. In no time at all, they explained that Erica had taken over the fight against Wicca and had sent them here to protect Cassie. There was no other option than to venture further into the Forever Forest. "The spirit of magic should conceal Cassie's power from Wicca, should she run after it," Magnus told the group.

Magnus and Ivor led them deep into the Forever Forest until they reached a swamp-like area. Magnus and Ivor were no fools, as they knew that Wicca would seek Cassie regardless of how masked her powers were. The most effective way to avoid evil is to hide in plain sight, as Magnus and Ivor explained to Cassie.

Cassie pulled the sensible-sized book from her pink feathered jacket pocket and handed it over to Ivor and Magnus, who quickly flicked through it. They found a rhyme to render the human into an animal, concealing the fact that the animal was indeed a reflection of a powerful being. Cassie kissed Hayden goodbye for now, and Magnus and Ivor recited the chant together from the book. "Absconde id quod in manifesto visu potentem est, eius potentia ad pacem servandi precipua est, sincera, sincera, pura in veritate, ad mundi purificationem."

Cassie began to transform into a magnificent pink flamingo and within seconds, she was now the tall mystical bird standing before them. In preparation for danger to approach, Ivor and Magnus hid the rest of the group nearby as the bird gracefully entered the swamp.

When the police arrived on the scene, blood streaked the windows of the classrooms. A dead student lay at the very entrance, blood trickling down the concrete steps. The roof of one of the buildings was occupied by two distant figures. In contrast, the roof of the other building seemed to have exploded, sending water out in all directions. The school building still had students screaming, and Jeremy was too far lost to be saved. Efforts by Erica to save his soul were now beyond her. When the SWAT team arrived shortly after the police, they took vantage points on the buildings across from the school. In addition to being concerned about the gun-waving student inside, they were also shocked by the two women fighting on the roof.

Shots rang out, and in one swoop Jeremy was down, his skull cracking when his lifeless body struck the ground. As the police looked around at the wreckage caused by one hateful individual, the students screamed for help in relief. The SWAT team kept an eye on the two women on the roof as police and ambulance services rushed in to help the surviving students. Their eyes were filled with pure disbelief at what they were seeing.

A helicopter with D.O.W.A. written on the side landed in the street below and another SWAT team emerged. With Franz's authority, the SWAT team staged what looked like an old-fashioned cannon. It was 1.5 metres in length and stood at eye level with the team members. A blue charging light circled the centre of the gun and an electrical current passed through it. This piece of heavy machinery was supported by six legs. Following the installation of the weapon, the team drilled the legs into the concrete roof. From the cars, jerry cans were brought up and a funnel was used to pour a disturbing-coloured liquid into the electrical cartridge of the gun.

The telescopic sight of the gun showed Medusa and Erica still fighting on the rooftops of Niceville High. Franz placed an empty capsule inside the electrical cannon filled with the disturbing-coloured liquid, and with the press of the yellow button the capsule became filled with blue electricity plus liquid. Under Franz's orders, the unit opened fire on the two women.

The capsule exploded with such force that S.W.A.T. and Franz Jr. took refuge behind a see-through blast barrier. The capsule left ringlets behind it from the force; ripples of sound and sheer force radiated out in circles. Erica and Medusa, so distracted by each other's

spells, did not even flinch when the capsule exploded, assuming it had been part of the chaos below. As the capsule approached Medusa and Erica, its main body separated from its shell like a spaceship entering the atmosphere. In a flash, as the capsule spun, the outer walls dissolved, and the liquid was released, spraying droplets all over Medusa and Erica. Both fell from the air, their limbs going numb as they hit the roof and slid down in horrific violence, plummeting to the ground below, unconscious.

The SWAT team, armed with rifle-sized versions of the battle gun, ran towards the school where the two bodies lay. This first unit stunned both Medusa and Erica with their guns to ensure they were knocked out. A second unit arrived shortly after, and they retrieved two pods containing the fluid they had fired at Medusa and Erica. The second unit wheeled the pods towards the first team. Together, the teams placed Medusa and Erica in their respective pods, sealed their lids and loaded the pods onto the sides of the helicopter.

Franz accompanied them back to headquarters. Here, they would be connected to a constant supply of electricity and amniotic fluid. The fluid had to stay fresh to be effective, especially against two of the strongest witches the earth had ever seen. SWAT teams were posted 24/7, making sure that everything was current and up to date. Niceville, its residents, and students were no longer vulnerable to the threat. For the first time in such a long time, Ivor and Magnus felt at ease among the people of the Earth.

When Ms. Fields, Rachel, Sandra, and Hayden emerged from hiding to join Ivor and Magnus, they brought Cassie's reflection back with just as much ease as they had erased it. The group embraced each other in the Forever Forest, sighed in relief, and all began to laugh awkwardly. Now everything seemed so simple compared to what had happened previously. It was a matter of perspective, and now everyone was free of the grief that had lingered for too long.

Medusa and Erica were kept in a building in New Orleans that was built in a Brutalist style, which emerged in the 1950s and developed out of the early-20th century modernist movement. It was a massive, monolithic building with a rigid geometric style that overused poured concrete to make it look indestructible. The interior design of the D.O.W.A. included raw materials, textured surfaces, simple silhouettes, and geometric shapes. The pods that held Medusa and Erica were in

the basement, surrounded by thick walls of concrete. Only one person at a time could enter the room through a trap door, climbing up or down 3 metres on a spring ladder. It was a failsafe; if for some reason Medusa and Erica ever escaped, the D.O.W.A team would trigger the bombs, causing the underside of the facility to collapse. At the very least, it would alert other departments across the globe while buying some time while the two prisoners were buried under massive amounts of weight until their power permitted an escape.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Reverence 2009

My soul listens to the wind.

Hayden and Cassie decided it was time to make a change after the chaos that had struck so close to home. Life was fleeting, and they both had witnessed it many times before. Instead of diving six feet under, they opted to explore the six seas.

John, Karl, and Katrianna saw new life in their children: the love they had known once. As Hayden and Cassie were both Scorpios and had both turned 18 on the same day, a double gift seemed appropriate. In her will, Edith had left John her entire estate, which was over 130 thousand dollars. Old, bitter and alone, she had no one to leave it to besides her ex-husband. Katrina and Karl had been saving a university deposit for Hayden and Jay since birth, Hayden was now 18 and the fund amounted to 60 thousand dollars. Jay was 11 when she committed suicide, so her amount was 40 thousand. Combined, the two lovers had everything they needed to travel for a long time. There was no better opportunity to highlight the true love of two people to the world. Together, Hayden and Cassie bought a 1990's Lotus Carlton boat named 'Pink Champagne.' After graduating from high school in Florida, they sailed away.

The plan was to sail through Panama and up to Seattle, then proceed to Vancouver, Alaska, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Brisbane, and finally New Zealand.

Cassie chose Seattle as her first stop, because of its abundance of water, mountains, and evergreen forests, as well as its thousands of

acres of parkland. She knew she would feel at home there, or at least peaceful for a moment in time.

Hayden and Cassie confirmed this theory with loving looks and warm welcomes wherever they turned while sightseeing around the city. Steel was used to construct the Needle, allowing it to withstand an earthquake up to a level of 9.0. Cassie saw it as a symbol of indestructibility, a quality she had to develop because she had to fight every day from the past demons inside her head.

The next stop was Vancouver, a bustling seaport and one of Canada's densest and most ethnically diverse cities, on the west coast of British Columbia. This could have been the perfect world for Jay to live in, to thrive in, to just exist. Hayden could only imagine what it could have been like, but he laid his thoughts to rest here. He could not hold onto his regret forever if he wanted to move forward, so when he left Vancouver, he left Jay there also. He knew he could go back anytime to visit her if need be.

Alaska is known for glaciers, national parks, wilderness, the Northern lights, the midnight sun, and cruises. Unlike anywhere else she had been, Cassie felt most at home here.

With each place Cassie and Hayden stopped they felt stronger and more complete than they had the last. Heading towards their destination to recover from their pain, to be free of hatred and loss, to learn that all they needed was each other's love, today and tonight.

If you are hoping to sail from North America to Japan, you need to wait until late enough in the season so that the Pacific High, normally centred somewhere north of Hawaii, has strengthened enough for you to ride down toward the Aleutians, then steer northwest towards Russia, all the while (supposedly) enjoying favourable winds.

Seeing Japan's advanced technology gave Cassie more hope for a normal life, and the two of them discussed future medical advancements. Japanese people call Japan the "Land of the Rising Sun" because the sun rises first in Japan before it rises anywhere else on earth. Talking about Japan is like talking about a country that is flawless. Japanese technology is among the most advanced in the world. Cassie, who was an atheist, enjoyed Japan's indigenous spirituality, Shintoism. Every living thing in nature (e.g., a tree, rock, flower, animal, even a sound) contains a kami, or god. Buddhism deals

with the soul and the afterlife, whereas Shintoism is concerned with this world and this life.

The couple chose to island hop from Japan to Taiwan, following the National Geographic Orion, taking in natural wonders, historical sites, and cultural treasures along the way. They decided to sleep the night off the coast before sailing to the Philippines.

The Philippines was an essential stop as the country was so unique. There are at least 7,500 islands, only 2,000 of which are inhabited and about 5,000 are unnamed, making it the world's second-largest archipelago. Discover, name, and call your new island home. It showed how simple life can be while still being so invigorating that they two could still discover something new.

Cassie and Hayden reached Ubud's coast and witnessed the panoply of black and white magic in back streets and streams east of Jembawen Road. Grimacing gargoyles stared out from houses, incense marking every temple and shop. Both saw the black magic and white magic that every Balinese possessed, that of sakti, a magical energy that made it possible to resist evil that negatively affects the fortune of a family.

Cassie and Hayden indulged in this enlightenment, spirituality and culture, soon learning that everything that had happened was never to do with the culture they had grown up to believe was reality. The truth was about learning everything and anything about every other culture.

To see the simple connections the earth chose to show to each person. To not accept so quickly and naively, to try and understand what had been seen, and what did not make sense was born from somewhere else

Papua New Guinea was next, followed by, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne all on the East coast of Australia. The passage from Australia to New Zealand is surrounded by a lot of myths. Most of them are the result of ignorance and inexperience. The only complaint is that there is not enough wind. They listened to the experiences of many others, both good and bad, before taking the passage.

The main reasoning behind this stop was to visit the incredible and powerful Whakaari/White Island, an active andesite stratovolcano situated 48 km from the east coast of the North Island of New Zealand,

in the Bay of Plenty. The island covers an area of approximately 325 hectares, which is just the peak of a much larger submarine volcano.

Cassie and Hayden had reached their destination and it was time to let go of all the disruptions that had occurred throughout their noticeably short yet colourful lives.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Roots 2010 to 2019

Time passed and crops grew. The journey that Cassie and Hayden had taken opened so many new insights that they never believed possible. Excited from the love, passion, technology and spirituality they had witnessed over their two-year yachting trip, when they arrived home, they were more than welcomed by both parties. Selling their beloved yacht that had given them so much for a sweet price to another young couple living in the moment, they used the money for a small house deposit in New Orleans. John had ended up moving there a year into Cassie and Hayden's yacht trip around the world. Once the two were settled with John it wasn't long before Katrianna and Karl moved also. Niceville had never been nice to any of them, so it was time to move on. They had always all felt a deep connection with New Orleans, mostly due to its history, magic and its unique identity that had held so many nationalities, willing hostages the locals did say.

Astonishing affairs summoned those to its shores; their colours were washed in by the tides of nature. Enlightened worlds sank into the water, ease and splendour grew and new humble beginnings thrived. Love entered the quarters of New Orleans; so they did naturally bind strength of proper glory. Growth carried forward; fantasy grew with freedom. On the outskirts of the city, the muse eke did ring, fainter than the bosom, drawing in pure souls. As the city expanded with ease, so did the spirits of the souls beyond it. French, Spanish, Congolese, Haitian, Native American, Creole, Latino, Sicilian, Anglo-Americans. Half a dozen more nations gathered, to form a new world identity that stood alone from the rest.

This was its charm.

In the face of extinction, the Cajun Flamingo continued to roar. Outlandish, feathered hats during the Victorian Era of the late 1800s

dissolved into animal sanctions and endangered species that ruled them all. Hunters dwindled and died, drawing themselves to extinction. Compared to gold, life was worth more.

The Kermes Vermilio had now left and ventured elsewhere.

New Orleans brought some remarkable gifts to the two families. Ten years had passed since Hayden proposed to Cassie on the Volcano peak in New Zealand. Cassie, wanting a grand gesture for their 10th wedding anniversary, rented a yacht for them to sail around New Zealand. The couple had done their fair share of yachting and didn't want to leave their two adorable children, Pascal and Hernandez Prior, with the grandparents for too long. Cassie chose the two-week holiday with flights that came with a yacht helmed by captain. This time, they would reach the peak on December 9th, 2019, and Cassie would recite the vows Hayden had made to her ten years ago.

After sailing all around the north and south islands of New Zealand, Cassie and Hayden landed at their destination on the 13th day of their two-week trip. On the same spot where they had stood ten years earlier, Cassie recited the proposal speech.

*“The face I cannot forget, I’m free falling
No trace of regret, only pleasure
A true fucking treasure
You are my song that summer sings
The chill that autumn brings
You are my smile reflected in a stream
Whose eyes can be so private and so proud
The reason I survive
The why and wherefore I am alive
Impossible you and me.”*

Cassie and Hayden were sharing stories about ten years ago with 47 other people on the island when an explosion occurred. The ground below them cracked violently. Tourists fell into the lava below and screamed as their flesh and bodies melted. Fire and molten ash rained down upon the tourist group. Elderly people with respiratory problems were unable to breathe due to the ash, which was gritty and abrasive; other small particles scratched the tourists' eyes, making seeing impossible. Cassie and Hayden were downwind, and their breathing became rapid because of the gases, causing dizziness and

confusion. Their throats began to swell as a result. As the two held hands in fear, a large dark smoke barrel with wings engulfed them.

Twenty-two people died that day, as a result of either the explosion or injuries, including two whose bodies were never found and were pronounced dead after they had possibly disintegrated or drifted into the ocean. The remaining 25 people suffered burn injuries, many requiring intensive care. Seismic and volcanic activity as well as heavy rain, low visibility and toxic gases hindered recovery efforts in the week after the incident. Scientists identified the event as a phreatic eruption: volcanic gases and steam were released in an explosion that sent rocks and ash into the air.

Investigations into exactly what the remaining 25 saw in those moments was investigated weeks after the violent eruption had taken place. Several of the witnesses reported seeing what looked like a dragon composed of dark smoke that rose from the cracks in the earth below. "The toxins in the air might have caused hallucinations," one investigator told the other.

Investigator Two added, "the shock of it all was likely to have caused hallucinations as well." A final report was being prepared on what happened during the climb and whether anyone had seen what happened to the couple who were reciting their ten-year anniversary vows at the time of the explosion. According to the official report, it was likely after the couple had been swooped up in smoke that they had indeed fallen to the lava below and sadly perished.

A year after the accident, Jason Moore, 18 years old, was able to retrieve the data from his phone recording. Once the broken footage was back together, the video confirmed what survivors had indeed witnessed. Within an hour of posting, Jason's video had received over 8 million views, and within 24 hours, it had received worldwide attention and was featured in over 145 countries. In the stills of the images that focused on Cassie and Hayden Prior a year before, a dragon-like figure was seen engulfing the couple. Just before the recording cuts, you could see the couple being lifted upwards by the smoky demon.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: Re-echo 2019

It was now 2019. Erica and Medusa were safely in the D.O.W.A New Orleans facility, far more than 6 feet under. But the world seemed unwilling to return the favour of safety; with global warming well above 1.5 degrees Celsius, the rise in temperatures impacted livestock through changes in feed quality, disease and water availability. The world began to plunge into chaos and the risk of vector-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue fever, increased.

On Labor Day, the 2nd of September, it was a bright morning in New Orleans. The water was warm, the air was moist, and there was an unusually light upper-level wind.

Then Tornado Othmer crashed through with fierce winds, storm surges of flooding and heavy nonstop rainfall that led inland. The Backup generators switched over automatically in the D.O.W.A New Orleans facility as the city plunged into darkness. The last time the generators had been checked for maintenance was 2012. The loose, dirty connections had a buildup of lead sulphates. As the building had grown older over the years, cracks had slowly appeared. Because of the heavy rainfall and excess water, the soil around the bunker became saturated. Floor cracks started to penetrate the building's foundation, and water began to seep through the walls. It was no longer possible to use the generators on the main floor that were connected to the bunker by cables. In conjunction with the water seeping in and the electrical grid of the area shutting down, the recycling of the pods ceased their ability to provide adequate electrical current.

The bunker flooded too quick for the special D.O.W.A unit to escape and they drowned in silence, while Erica and Medusa awoke in terror. As the pods shut down, an automatic release of the lids took place, and the amniotic fluid mixed with the flood water. Due to the lack of recycling, the fluid was rendered useless.

Erica awoke, unfamiliar with her surroundings, wondering if she had been thrown back into the dark lake, just as she had done to Medusa and her shack. She was astonished by the comfort she found now, as if nostalgia had set in rather than the angst and hate she had experienced in those trying times.

Erica, knowing that Medusa would reawaken soon, tried to destroy the facility that held them. Once Medusa woke up, the new undersea sanctum was even more infernal than the dark lake which Erica had endured alone for decades.

The world watched the destruction of New Orleans, and alerts were sent to every major department of the D.O.W.A. about the New Orleans facility's inactivity. Ultimately, the D.O.W.A had to agree unanimously to destroy the facility. Within 7.5 minutes of the facility shutting down, 195 countries agreed to blow up the New Orleans branch. The recycling system at this point would no longer be effective against Erica and Medusa, and any remaining staff would not have been able to escape.

The crimson eyes of Erica did not waver, looking directly at Medusa as she floated upward from her pod like it had occurred in slow motion. Erica looked at Medusa, knowing that one last distraction might allow her to allow her final ending. Erica shared a moment of her time with Medusa as their imminent deaths were certain.

*There were bells on a hill
But I never heard them ringing
No, I never heard them at all
No more birds in the sky
Always saw them winging
Then there was music and there were wonderful explosions*

*If only we met in a sweet fragrant meadow to assume that
there was love all around.*

*But I never heard it singing
No, I never heard it at all*

Every wire in every piece of concrete inside the bunker had been laid by Franz Jr. and his D.O.W.A Unit. They had asked Ivor and Magnus for help, protecting the wires with an old but simple boundary spell. Wires and metal parts of explosives were protected from both magical and non-magical elements. This time there was no trick or learning curve; it was as simple as it was, unbreakable by spirit, destruction, or nature. If Mother wished for it, it served only one purpose: to ensure the end. Even if lost souls can be resurrected later, there comes a time when faith becomes useless. When the time comes, they must be cut off and learn what they have done so that the end is the only way to

redemption. The walls erupted in pockets of explosions ignited all around Erica and Medusa.

The undex explosion reverberated like Tornado Othmer on the bayside houses. In an explosion surrounded by air, the atmosphere compresses and absorbs some of the explosive energy. A submarine explosion transmits pressure with greater intensity over a longer distance. Every piece of concrete within the bunker cracked under the pressure.

The best part of the explosion was the mystery the humans had planted inside the two pods that held Erica and Medusa. Once they two had gained their freedom, the hub tombs released the amniotic fluid that had been keeping them captive. Into the storm's flooding water it mixed, creating a trail of tiny droplets that led back up into the pod and eventually to the recycling pipe. It was Franz's idea that the explosion would be fuelled by the amniotic fluid if everything played out according to plan. A combination of natural elements and a whole lot of force would trigger an explosion so big that nothing of the ascending floor above nor the building would remain.

Bone was ripped from flesh, and the flesh disintegrated as if doused in acid. Eyes grew and exploded like jelly fallen from a tub. Blood filled every pore of the murky water as hair fizzled and danced. Brain matter spilled from cracked skulls as the brain expanded. Limbs were amputated from bodies as intestines split like pig sausages in a muddy water that tasted like chunky flesh decomposing in the sun for days. The remaining intact bones were crunched like sawdust from a woodchopper.

BELT THREE: BYGONE

CHAPTER TWENTY: Prime Ono Sicrrms, Time and Place Unknown

Your brain must sort through a flood of sensory information when you are awake. A spotlight of attention illuminates important sensory information to the brain, entering a conscious awareness. The mind's spotlight is the world around it, with awareness as its focus and the degree of wakefulness as its intensity. In all cases, the impact of sensory stimuli on dreams suggests that the creation of dreams occurs as much in the body as it does in the mind and underlines the role of the body in conscious experience. This was no dream.

Erica Fisk: "My land was raw and unfinished when I was born. I was ready to erupt into the world above, restless and impatient. At my core, I was pure darkness, an unstoppable, uncontrollable force. A house for the forgotten and hidden, in the realm of spirit beings. This vault I lived in was toxic, and most things could not survive. Creation is not without its share of misery, but rain always brings some degree of certainty. Fungus grew, bringing algae with it. As a result, I consumed dead organic matter as my only food source, making my eyes crimson in colour."

Cassie: "In a long-running war that had raged for centuries, I was seen as something to be procured like an object. I was a sacred feather, one used to decorate the vanity of others."

Erica: "The shadow of the distance shimmered from a shallow, damp surface. As I lay face down in the pool of water that reflected the glittering edge of the life to which I had just awoken, I could not breathe. I lifted my weary head, seeing the vast expanse of water, a new unwelcome plane."

Cassie: "In unison, we stepped forward, hearing barking in the distance, not just one tone of barking; it seemed as if there were two animals. As we turned to our right simultaneously, we were echoed in loneliness and distance. Our bodies now synchronized, generating a mirror image of all three of us. In that moment, when we all looked towards one direction; we were able to see each other for the first time."

Hayden: "We walked for miles, the water never reaching our ankles. The sun persistently set in line with our eyes. Above us hung a sky with brilliant colours. When we looked up, we got lost in all the colours, becoming disoriented as we accepted the trance. Intoxicating to us."

Every waking surface was flooded with fragments from the past and present, reflecting off the shallow puddle of water that seemed to extend forever. There was nothing horrific about it; in fact it was utterly beautiful. Clips playing on "Repeat" echoed with pastel pink and blue shadows. The extracts played simultaneously in this universe via multiple projectors from outer space. There were many moons orbiting this new belt, and the shallow water was telling a story with the sections being shown. Regressions of past belts that had imploded from both non-human and human perspectives. As a result of the rapture and rape of each belt that was rich in resources, many were reduced to oblivion by unforgiving and careless races.

Upon the failure of one belt, a limbo planetary structure known as Kermes Vermilio would begin. Mother would send representatives who deserved another chance at revitalizing their image. The Belt would be created by Mother if no one was worthy. Like that of Byzantium with the creation of Cassius and her seven days of creation.

Water trembled from our footsteps as we walked further into the void as images from Belt One: Byzantium appeared on the inner rims of the water. The seven days of creation, Cassius' rule for over a century, his weakness in duty, his betrayal by Aby, Aida's birth, and the filthy blood that wiped out more than half The Strain clan while Cassius fled with his child, buried in the forest for eternity. This book's sensibly sized size, Cassius' downfall, and Rita's rise to give birth to Jadis in the 16th century to counteract Aida's rebirth as Medusa make it unique. The death of Rita and the clan leadership lineage of the three

high priestesses. In addition to the shack, life on earth, and the introduction of the Witch Affairs Department, all of these were gone.

After we passed the inner rim, we reached the middle rim, which displayed moving images of Belt Two: Billennium. The tragic tales of Karl, Francis, and Dearil Diamond show us the birth of Pink Champagne and the beginning of the Vermilion River killings. An ever-increasing environmental emergency, the heightened hallucinogenic properties of Cadell and Salome, and the corporate and individual impacts on it. Gunfights, massacres, and murders all ended in a huge display of destruction.

In Belt One: Byzantium, Cassius was the first to cause this unnatural shift through time and place. Through his infidelity to Aby and the creation of Aida, who symbolizes chaos, Cassius sealed his fate. The split reality of Belt Two: Billennium was created as a result of Belt One: Byzantium drifting from its natural path.

Within the rift, certain characteristics and characters remained unchanged, making it a basic mirror image of the previous belt, only with a lot more chaos. The Forever Forest, the sensibly sized book, and the true characters of the story would remain the same with each new belt.

The two belts now coexisted in the same universe. Until now, there had never been a rift in the Multiverse. In most cases, belts died naturally as the created race gave way to nature, allowing it to replenish while they sadly died of natural causes.

A world within a world was created by the rift, as Byzantium began to seep into Belt Two, Billennium, gradually merging with the planet. They were not meant to coexist, and chaos reigned as a result. Lost souls whose paths were not followed became a distant memory. With Belt One's stain drifting onto Belt Two, the only true path forward was for Mother to erase it. Taking only a few worthy instruments from Belt One and Belt Two, Belt Three: Bygone, will be born to start the new beginning.

“Our Crimson Void shook with a distant and continuous roar as we walked every inch. We invented a new time to make sense of the never-ending sunset on the first day of the first passing. Eventually, the source of the distant sounds we had heard continuously throughout our tumbled forever voyage came into view. As if voicing a

new perspective on what should have been. Mother, You have all paid Your weight in feathers. I have not been the best at times, I have been told. The dog inside me obsesses with tailgating the fabric of everything. However, it is now up to the three of you. Erica, Cassie and Hayden; this is your time, your Kermes Vermilio

“Life and intelligence must evolve.

“Our broken and now unmagical spirits were outstripped by a Cajun Flamingo, a pink demon on the road that roared a call above all, a giant in the distance with wings stretching to great lengths, standing tall. We realised that we had been granted by Mother to create a new sanctuary out of new and old endings as we looked into the beast's eyes, the eyes of KERMES VERMILIO.”

The End

BYZANTIUM





BILLENNIUM

BYGONE



CASSIE





