

POISON AND MONSTERS

A Thesis

by

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POSITION AND MONSTERS

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ABSTRACT

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Poison and Monsters is a collection of stories that follow the same protagonist, Jiovanna, as she navigates friendships, love, loss, and hallucinations. It is a commentary on mental health and the impact that pain medication, lack of sleep, and loneliness can have on a person. Jiovanna draws on the support and understanding of her best friends, Juan and Danielle, and in one instance a rowdy raccoon to help her find her way through the Darkness that surrounds her. Insomnia, migraines, and heartache tie these four stories together, but they can also be read as standalone pieces that give a small insight into the mind and life of a woman lost to her loneliness, yet hopeful of a life outside of the Darkness which follows.

DEDICATION

The completion of this thesis could not have been achieved without copious amounts of whiskey and the constant support of my closest friends, Juan Flores, Jr. and Danielle Birnell. They saved my life more times than I can possibly count with their constant support and steadfast friendship. A late comer in my life, but someone, who also helped me get through the rough days and nights of writing, is my dog Frank.

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To my family, who even though they may not always understand what it is I'm doing with my life or with my writing, they are still quick to offer their support.

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CHAPTER I

THE DARKNESS THAT FOLLOWS: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I write what has been called, “fantasy memoir”. I take my real life happenings and fictionalize them to a fantastical extent. I utilize my daily hallucinations and interactions with my friends and write about my experience in a way that grounds the reader in my reality as well as the fantastical world I create for myself in an effort to cope with my dark surroundings. Fantasy memoir is a term that Dr. Christopher Carmona, one of my mentors, used to describe my writing. I had never heard of it before as a genre, but I am excited to explore it as one. Recently, I had the good fortune of meeting with three different literary agents who had trouble placing my writing within the market. They each suggested I either dig deeper and find others who write what I write, or decide if I what I’m writing is creative non-fiction or fantasy, but not both. While I understand why they feel that way, I also know that to write something that I don’t connect with is disingenuous to whom I am as a reader and writer. As Cathryn Merla-Watson and B. V. Olguín state in “Altermundos: Reassessing the Past, Present, and Future of the Chican@ and Latin@ Speculative Arts” the realm of Speculative Fiction (SF) is heavily layered, “To be sure, the super-genre of speculative fiction is a notoriously porous and slippery one, encompassing sci-fi and fantasy as well as their subgenres, which continue to proliferate (2017, 4).” So, in grounding my stories in my reality, I am simply adding another breathable layer to a genre that is in constant flux. William A. Calvo-Quirós states in “The Emancipatory Power of the Imaginary: Defining Chican@ Speculative Productions” that Chican@ Speculative Productions (CSP) can

be defined as, “the concept of proposing (and producing) a new world...a world first constructed in the imagination but never completely disassociated from the “real” (2017, 39).” To be told that my work falls into this classification of genre is not surprising. The mythology I have created for my protagonist is largely based on my reality. On my loneliness, and the monsters only I can see.

In my quest to understand my own writing and what exactly it is I am hoping to do with it, I have begun writing about my hallucinations and very vivid dreams. I include my real life friends in my stories in an attempt to ground my reality in the realm of fantasy/horror. My love of the Beats also influences my choice of fantasy memoir as, much like they did, I write as honestly and as authentically as possible. It is my hope that with reading my work that one would understand my ever present enveloping darkness. That is not hyperbole. Everywhere I go, everything I experience is all within a shroud of heavy darkness that has been with me since I was a child. To write only about love is not honest enough, neither is to simply write of loss. I write of both. Often in the same story because that’s how life works. That is my reality. My constant hallucinations are a part of me – so much so that when I am truly alone and my mind is quiet, I miss them. The Smoke and Shadow in my stories serve to remind the reader that my protagonist is never alone. She’s always haunted by the ghosts of her insecurities. As Calvos-Quirós mentions, a writer is not a passive victim but rather an active agent attempting to make sense of their reality (2017, 40). It just so happens that my reality includes Smoke Demons and Shadows and lots of talking to myself and “people” who aren’t there. To actually sit down and write about what I see almost daily is daunting. Even more so when I take into consideration that the reason I’m doing this is to help myself process my fears and loneliness, while also attempting to help others who may be going through the same or similar experiences. Interestingly enough,

the more I talk about this, the more I find that people can be broken down into a few categories. They either understand because they too have seen or do see things no one else does due to medication, ailments, or even traumatic brain injury (TBI), to name a few. There are those that have never seen anything not anchored in the Real World before, but they believe in the flexibility of time and space and so accept the situation as presented to them. Then there are those who don't want to believe you, or simply don't want to hear you talk about it because it scares them. It "freaks them out" so much that you are classified as "crazy" to them and that's all they'll ever think of you. This last category of people was the one I used to worry about. They're the reason I lived a life that was full of people but heavy in isolation. I grew accustomed to keeping things to myself and therefore became somewhat of an expert at hiding part of what makes me the person I am. Calvos-Quirós states:

“For those at the margins, the realm of the imaginary becomes a medium to envision and put into practice an “alternative” world, one that emerges both from lived experiences and from aesthetic stipulations, language provisions, and cultural categories (2017, 41).”

Books/Movies/Television

As a child, I didn't know what was going on with me, but I knew that not everyone had the same “ability” to see that I did. I found myself in a dark corner waiting for someone to tell me why I could see and hear monsters. I lost myself to books and movies and television shows that stared broken people learning they had some sort of power, some sort of special ability that set them apart from everyone else. I began to hope that one day my guide would show and help me get rid of the Wraith that haunts me. I began reading when I was very young, I can't remember my exact age, but I remember watching The Simpsons when I was about five and they aired their first Treehouse of Horror episode in which they write three short ‘scary episodes’. In

one of the episodes, they did “The Raven” by Edgar Allen Poe and I was equal parts intrigued and terrified. I remember begging my sister to get me the book so I could read it. She brought it home from the high school library and I had trouble with the old style, so she read it to me. That was my first introduction to Gothic literature and I was hooked.

As I grew older, I read John Bellairs and R. L. Stein, until one summer day when I was 10 years old. I was at a friend’s house down my street while they had a yard sale, and her father gave me a couple of Stephen King books, “Dolores Claiborne” and “Different Seasons”. Never had I read such rich imagery and poetic justice. At 10 years old, I became a lifelong Stephen King fan. For a time, I wanted to write like him and so I did, but anytime someone would read it, I would get asked if I was “doing okay” or if there was “something I wanted to talk about”. It was difficult to write in an attempt to find my voice, only to be asked if there was something wrong with me. I often wondered if King had been asked the same when he was first beginning to write. Was his sanity and happiness questioned as often as mine was? How did he do it to not feel so overwhelmed by the fear that to talk of that which we feared most would come alive and wreak havoc on our lives if we didn’t at least write about it? How did any of the Gothic writers deal with this stigma? My mind was a cork board peppered with questions of identity, terror, trauma, hallucinations, and evil beings out to get me. Writing was the only way to process the fear and when my sanity was questioned, I stopped talking about the monsters. While I stopped sharing my writing, my love of all things creepy and otherworldly grew along with the intensity of my hallucinations. My mother was at a loss. As I got older, she blamed my insomnia on the books I read or the movies I watched. Little did she know that I was reading and watching to learn how to adapt. I couldn’t tell her that though. I couldn’t tell her I was haunted. I felt that I

had failed as a “normal” person, so I had to pretend to be one and it was exhausting. I felt haunted by my failure.

Toni Morrison wrote in her forward to *Beloved*,

“...I hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by the memory desperate to stay alive (2004, XIX).”

She wrote of a pain that haunts. A history so incredibly awful that to try and hide from it led to a violent haunting. I write of the haunting in my mind, the loss of my soul. Mine and Sethe’s pain is nowhere near the same. It’s not even in the same plane of existence, by this I mean that I see her pain and I acknowledge it, and I grieve with her because of it. That is what I ask of those who read my work. You don’t have to understand it, just acknowledge it as real and imaginary and above all else, honest. With every revision my stories become clearer. I am learning to finesse my experiences in a way that others can understand and engage with. Even now as I sit here and type away, Simone is watching me from just outside my bedroom door. She doesn’t like how I talk about her. Much like *Beloved*, whose sole purpose was to drain Sethe and her family of their sanity and their lives, Simone tries to drain me, and some days she does, but I keep writing. I keep talking about her because she needs to find her end soon.

Wester’s “African American Gothic” explains how people of color, specifically, black writers, utilize the idea of the apocalypse as “an event that satisfies the need for order during chaotic times...(7)” whereas in “The Other Country: Mexico, the United States, and the Gothic History of Conquest” by Jesse Alemán, we are to understand Spanish colonialism as “the ghostly voices of bygone times...(2003, 407).” In both instances, the idea of loss and renewal plays a

very large role in the processing of grief. To write of the apocalypse isn't necessarily to write about death and destruction, and to romanticize colonialism isn't to try to write it out of history, but both serve the purpose of allowing different objectified and vilified communities to grieve. What Wester and Alemán do well is explain the background of their demographic. By giving the audience the ability to look into the various histories of both concepts, the true message of healing rather than suffering can be read. While the gothic can be seen as a means to "safely" comment on the political and social climate, what these two authors do is synthesize the importance of grieving with the equal importance of discussion and dissection of an era and its capable writers. While the African American community (according to Wester, 1-14) utilizes the idea of the apocalypse as a way of renewal and rebirth and starting over, the Mexican community (according to Alemán, 408) utilizes gothic romance to write of a longing for the land they knew and loved and that was taken from them. Through the act of writing they are both fighting against the imposed historical significance of stolen innocence and loss of self and identity that one feels when their culture and their lives are put in danger. Moreover, my apocalyptic work, "Soledad" was inspired by Junot Diaz's "Monstro" and is written in an attempt to understand the implosion of a short, but passionate romance. Much like most apocalyptic texts, warning signs of impending doom were ignored in favor of basking in the warmth of a love so strong that its aftershocks are still felt. Memories of happier times push my story forward and overall it's bound by hope, much like most apocalyptic texts. While the overarching theme of "Soledad" is the feeling of loneliness and compartmentalized depression, I wrote it in an attempt to help myself understand why I felt as isolated as I did. It took more than a few dark thoughts and intense emotional outbursts to realize that a lot of the sorrow I was feeling was due to the Amitriptyline I was on. Once I connected the medication to my dangerously fluctuating moods, I weaned myself

off of it and slowly, came back to myself. My mini-apocalypse: deteriorating mental state, impending death, growth/renewal was complete.

In reading Catherin S. Ramírez's "Cyborg Feminism: The Science Fiction of Octavia E. Butler and Gloria Anzalúa" along with M. Wester's "Introduction: The New Gothic – White and New, Old and Black" I noticed similarities when it came to the discussion of the "other" or "alien" in gothic and science fiction literature. As a long time reader and lover of all things dark and mysterious, gross and uncanny, gothic and horrific, I can identify with the importance of truly understanding what the "other/alien" means. My story, "Poison and Monsters" is one way I try to explain how my sense of "otherness" is anchored in the pain I experience. While I can explain what it feels like to have a migraine, I can never truly show a non-migraine sufferer what it means to be in the throes of one. All I can ask for is that my words paint a clear enough picture of what that experience is like. All I can ask is for my reader to see my "otherness" as a part of what makes me who I am and not what it takes from me. While Ramírez focuses on the identity of brown, female (and female identifying – one would assume) characters, whether straight and cis or queer and gay, Wester speaks of (mostly) black and white (male) bodies and their relation to sex and each other. But this doesn't mean that the similar issues of outsidersness do not plague these characters. While analyzing Butler's *Parable of the Sower*'s protagonist, Laura, a hyperempath, Ramírez is sure to underline the fact that even though this woman has lost everyone in her birth family, she still finds a way to carve a space for herself among a group of diverse, yet equally driven individuals. She creates the family and inclusion that she chooses due to their collective sense of loss which enables them to work together and ultimately have hope for a better future.

Wester writes of *Frankenstein* and how all The Creature wants is to be accepted and loved by his creator, Victor. It becomes an all-consuming rage when he (the Creature) is shunned by his master, which leads him to murder everyone in Victor's family as an act of revenge. The way that Laura, as a hyperempath, is considered "disabled", the Creature is considered a "monster" due to his grotesque image, creation, and behavior. He doesn't find his family at the end because even when he tries to have Victor create him a wife, a partner, he doesn't get one. He is left to wander alone and exist alone. Laura's ability enables her to feel what other's feel, she can't control it, but because she looks outwardly human, she isn't shunned by her new peers and they grow to respect her. In my story "Carry On Wayward Dream," my protagonist looks like me. She is an average looking person who just can't sleep. It is with the help of a friend of hers that she is finally able to get some rest only to find herself trapped in a nightmare loop of a dream reality. Even though my protagonist is different from her friends, they are there to help her through her nightmare and they are by her side when she finally wakes. My protagonist's sense of otherness is ever present, but she knows that the people she surrounds herself with, love and accept her anyway. Yet even in Laura's case of seemingly happy hope, she is still an outsider just like the Creature is, just like I am. Horror and the gothic, even science fiction stories and movies don't resonate with an audience if no one can see themselves as one of the characters. If there is a disconnect between a story and the person experiencing it, there won't be any growth on either part of the creator or the audience. What these two essays did well, was bring the reader down to the base level of understanding and remembering one's personal experiences with feeling "othered" or "alien." "Poison and Monsters" is my attempt at helping others understand what it's like to live through a migraine. I first wrote it while under the influence of medication meant to make me sleep through the pain, and I revised it while I was on the same medication

and while living through the pain of a fresh migraine. There are a lot of thoughts that rush to mind when you're convinced you're about to die. Or sometimes, when you hope you're about to. "Poison and Monsters" is the result of sleepless nights, hallucinations, conversations with friends, and deep, nagging pain. I am my own monster when under the spell of a migraine. I just haven't decided if I'm redeemable or not.

Calvo – Quirós's "Sucking Vulnerability: Neoliberalism, the Chupacabras, and the Post – Cold War Years" may not, at first glance, line up with the short story, "The Children in the Trees" in David Bowles book, *Chupacabra Vengeance*. But when one takes into consideration just how similar the concept of the Chupacabras is with the folklore surrounding Cihuacoatl, one might be able to draw a distinct connection. Calvo – Quirós states, "They [monsters] may be fictitious, but they confront our real world anxieties and remind us of our mortality. Monsters represent the cultural soundtrack of the everyday (211)." In Bowles's "The Children in the Trees" we are told the tale of Cihuacoatl and how according to an *Obsidian Codex* there is only one sure fire way to pacify her: spilling the blood of an innocent child. If not, she takes over the world and plunges it into darkness and chaos. Much like the Chupacabras, she is a sign of change that is not welcome. An unwanted guest that needs to be taken care of as soon as physically possible. Like most monsters, Cihuacoatl begins to terrorize the marginalized population of a small village in México (well, her minions/guardians do, the Centlancah, the *fishmen* or *Deep Ones* as Dr. Kerr calls them in the story (137)) before she is fully awakened. Bowles's Dr. Kerr has to make the ultimate sacrifice and kill an innocent child to keep from letting Cihuacoatl rise once again. The Chupacabras, while it generally only attacks goats and livestock in the lore, has been known to turn Mexicans into the monster itself. Not only is it a signal of poverty and being beaten down by a system of oppression, but it is also a way to show the systemic racism that

exists toward the Mexican/Latinx community. Where the Chupacabras transforms the oppressed into the monster, Cihuacoatl needs the oppressed: the poor, the weak, the failing, the innocent to rise again, or so the telling produced by Bowles would have us believe. My story “Soledad” takes on the idea of a fibre beginning in México. It speaks of the Borderlands and what it’s like to live in a world in which simply being brown and within close proximity to México can do to the lives of those on the “American” side when America is run by a xenophobic monster and his cohorts. Oppression, in my story, is characterized by the White Flash Bomb dropped a few miles from the Borderlands in an effort to eradicate the disease and all brown folx, infected or not. What Dr. Kerr in “The Children in the Trees” signifies to me, is that he is the perpetrator of oppression among the community he claims to love. By *choosing* to kill the child Azucena he did not vanquish Cihuacoatl, but simply quelled her desire for an undetermined amount of time. Shortly after the ordeal, Dr. Kerr and his wife leave México and settle in Texas to be near their children and grandchildren, but Kerr is never the same again. He is haunted by his choice to murder the child and therefore becomes the indifferent man that the *Obsidian Codex* claimed needed to be killed in order to silence Cihuacoatl forever. In a way, he becomes the monster because he can no longer feel. He is his own sort of Chupacabra in the sense that he then becomes the oppressed and marginalized within himself. No one in his family or community knows what he did, but he cannot escape the madness that grows within in. He goes on to become another poisoned Mexican.

Christopher Carmona’s “Strange Leaves” is one of those stories that hits every nerve and every sense. You feel it in your teeth like a seed you can’t get lose, it lingers. Cynthia Saldivar states in her article, “Chican@afutruism and Hybridizing Horror in Christopher Carmona’s “Strange Leaves” that “...it [“Strange Leaves”] refuses binaries of the primitive and

technological, unveiling the dynamic, complex, and even contradictory ways in which Latinx immigrants and allies exert agency (185).” By utilizing hashtags as subheads to the different sections of the story that Carmona is telling, he binds an old story to the modern world. In my work, I draw mostly on the “present” but utilize the old world in the way I construct the way I want to tell my story. I focus more on my characters than I do on the world around them because the story is about them not their circumstance. Yet, I try to include language and trinkets of a time passed. A time before computers were commonplace and Wi-Fi was available everywhere versus the way Carmona utilizes technology to tell the story and move it along.

This helps the story he’s telling stay at the forefront of your mind. Writings such as this are most impactful when the audience is left with the understanding that this is real. This is happening. This is something that immigrants suffer through. Carmona does an amazing job of packing so much history into a single short piece. Of hitting the right points that make the reader think long after they finish the short story. And he does all of this without making his story graphically violent. Which, I think is what makes it most impactful. You don’t need to see the violence enacted on Shi because you can feel it all around her. To show it would be gratuitous. In my own writing, I refrain from graphic violence and prefer to take out monsters with magic or metaphor. I do this, again, in an effort to make the story about my characters and their journeys and the fights within themselves. Which means that they don’t need to fight outright in their reality. Their minds are already plagued with a different, silent kind of violence. All this to say that, Carmona isn’t wrong to use the ins and outs of technology in his story because this is something that can *actually* happen and that *would* gain traction online to help a girl like Shi. Simply because people want to feel like they’re a part of something without doing any actual work. Carmona highlights how technology can help bring people together, but at the same time,

he has Haldon be the good guy who is actually going to do something and take her in. Granted, he does say, “I somehow feel like I need this in my life right now.” Ultimately making the decision to help Shi really about helping himself, it keeps in line with the general tone of social media as a tool to “help” others.

“Monstro” by Junot Diaz hits hard. With its use of ironic humor and semi-carefree/accepting way of the world by Diaz’s unnamed narrator, we get the sense that while this epidemic is a big deal, it’s also the norm. While reading it, I didn’t get the sense of urgency that I usually feel when reading or watching something to do with zombies. I actually felt welcomed into the crazy that was the new normal for the people on the Island. I felt sympathy, sure, but I didn’t ever really feel fear or the urge to shout “get out of there!” as I was reading. The way Díaz writes his characters is how I try to write mine. They know the world isn’t nice, they know they have to harden up to survive the daily ins and outs of their reality, so they use humor to cope. You can see this with my protagonist especially. She is modeled after me, so a lot of my coping mechanisms are present within her. I think that has to do with the idea of marginalization and normalization of oppression. As a woman of color that can ‘pass’ as white, I have known many kinds of marginalization and oppression, so reading about the narrator and his friends and how they are dealing (or not dealing with) the outbreak that is happening on the other half of the Island hit close to home. I kept thinking of México and its proximity to us. I kept thinking of how we – in the Valley – would respond to something like this. We are part of America, sure, but it can be argued that the Valley isn’t really America. It’s its own space. Its own type of waste land. It is a land between two borders and only after crossing the second one, are we truly in “America.” My use of the Frontera or the Borderlands in “Soledad” is an homage to not only the area that shaped me, but also to the fear felt on both sides of the First Border.

In “A Planetary Warning?” by Sarah Quedaza she makes brief mention on pages 306 - 307 of the part of “Monstro” that stuck with me the most, “This isolation from the healthy creates within the group of infected a kind of family...the behaviors that isolate the diseased from the general public...unite them within their own sphere” in “Monstro” we learn that the infected are drawn together and early on, we get a glimpse as to how terrible the disease actually is, “I remember the first time I saw it...a shaky glypt of a pair of naked trembling Haitian brothers sharing a single stained cot, knotted together by horrible mold, their heads slurred into one (82).” If this disease is drawn to itself and contact among the infected early on results in fusion, then maybe the 40 ft. cannibal at the end of the story makes more sense? If the Powers at Be dropped a super powered “white” bomb on the Island and caused a dead zone, it is possible that they’re technology caused the fusion to mutate the Possessed further in order to survive and take out the intended target: everyone in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, brown and black bodies. Think of this in proximity to México. If this were going on in Reynosa or Rio Bravo or any other border town and the President decided to drop a bomb to end it all, that bomb would ultimately also end the Valley. Life as we know it would be over. Our brown lives would be diminished in the flash of the whiteness that comes with the end all because of an epidemic that was probably easily avoidable were it not for the corruption that runs the streets of México and the underbelly of America. What I gathered from “Monstro” overall, was that this, much like Diaz’s paper on “Apocalypse” is a major commentary on oppression and exploitation of brown and black bodies and social class. Once those in power get what they need/want from the ones who don’t have it, they become expendable. It is up to us to use our voices and our presence to educate and inform those in power. To make them understand that we are going absolutely nowhere. My work is a reflection of feeling othered and marginalized within a reality of others

who feel the same way but for different reasons. I feel it because only I can see what I see, not necessarily because of the color of my skin. We're in the same fight, just on different parts of the battlefield.

Home

Home is 926 North Heidrick Ave, Mercedes, Texas. Home was 480 square feet making up two bedrooms, one bathroom, one kitchen, and a very tiny living room. Five people shared this space and called it home. When I dream of home, this is where my mind takes me, always. I lived there for the first 15 years of my life. I learned how to ride my bike on my brother's BMX in the front yard. I learned how to rollerblade in the tiny hallway of our house on cinderblocks. If you go back to look at it now, you can still see the faint black lines from my wheels on the linoleum floor. I grew a passion for baseball in the street. I learned how to fight and wrestle in the yards of the boys I grew up with. The walls were thin, not insulated. The heat would beat down onto the house in the summer and conversely, it would hold on to the cold like a lover feared never to return, in the winter. But on some days, when the weather was that strange kind of perfect that the Valley produces, we would have every window open, both doors too, and the perfume from my mother's immaculately kept garden would rush through our tiny home and fill it with promise. It's amazing what feeling loved can do. I never felt threatened by my neighborhood. I never felt that I was in danger. Sure, there were drive – by – shootings on other streets, but our block was safe. It wasn't until I left the barrio that I realized, years later as an adult, that I had grown up in a "ghetto." Somehow, the hook on the screen door and the nail at the top of the wooden door – an added protection at night that served to keep the evil out and the good in – never struck me as insufficient. Our dogs roamed our yard and kept would-be intruders at bay, and the adults in the neighborhood kept a vigilant eye out for everyone else. "Ojo. Mucho

ojo” was a saying constantly repeated by us kids as we ran out to play. Their real meaning never really sinking in. I was protected from the ugliness of the world, but not from the monsters within my mind. So well protected in fact, that when I dream and write of home, the first place my mind goes is to that little house on Heidrick Ave.

When I was about four years old, my brother and I had an argument before bed. I don’t remember what it was about, but I’m sure it was something stupid. As the middle child and the only boy in our family, I think my brother always felt a little left out. I was the youngest and I the latest addition to the family. My siblings, were only four years apart, whereas I am 10 years younger than my sister and six younger than my brother. As has become evident of the life I currently live, my parents were far more liberal and lenient with me as I was growing up. My mother’s expectations of me bearing children are all but lost. She seems to have accepted that I mean it when I say I don’t want any. And my father is proud of the strong-willed daughter he has raised that seems to have no use for a lasting partner or husband of her own. But, when I was four and my brother was ten, we had an argument before bed. He looked right at me and said, “You see those clowns?” as he pointed to the boxed, wind-up, pastel painted satin clowns my sister had on a shelf above her bed. I nodded, wide-eyed. I hated those clowns. I hated all clowns, but those would play music and roll their heads when you wound them up. Sometimes though, when the house would shudder due to a slammed door, or one of my father’s hard sneezes, they would move on their own. My brother knew I hated them and why. In the light of the moon coming through the window beside me, he smirked and said, “Every night they get up and try to chop you into little pieces and every night I stay awake and keep you safe. But not tonight.” And with that, he plopped himself in his cot between my and my sister’s bed, with his back to me he pulled up the Bert and Ernie bedsheet he used as a blanket and went to sleep.

I stayed awake all night praying to the moon to keep me safe, listening hard for the bells that came with the clowns movements. I was sure that if I slept they would cut me up and if my mother found me like that, she would lose her mind. I had to stay awake. The following morning, through red-rimmed eyes of exhaustion, I looked at my brother and smugly said, “Didn’t get me.” And I remember him clearly looking me up and down and as his face dripped with disdain he simply said, “They will tonight.” At four years old, I began my years long relationship with chronic, undiagnosed insomnia. According to the University of Maryland Medical Center’s study on insomnia, there are two distinct kinds: “Short – term (transient) insomnia can be caused by illness, stress, travel, or environmental factors. Long – term (chronic) insomnia may be due to underlying psychological or physical conditions.” With my insomnia came hallucinations, only I didn’t know that that is what they were. When Simone first came through to me, she was a plume of smoke. She looked about my age and size, but she wasn’t fully formed. When I told my mother about her, and the other “people and things” I could see and hear she took it to mean that I could see spirits and ghosts. A “gift” that is believed by some Latinx families to be bestowed on the very “special” in the family. Usually, stories of family elders having the same “gift” are told at family gatherings or after strange dreams and over late night coffee and gossip. Ultimately, my mother didn’t know I wasn’t sleeping.

Now, as an adult, I wonder what that must have been like for my mother to process. She carried – and still does to this day – a lot of guilt about the abuses I suffered at the hands of babysitters and teachers. Women she had placed her trust in to keep her youngest safe while she had to go to work to help support the family. Being told to drink toilet water when I was thirsty, or to eat the cockroaches off the floor when I was hungry, being terrorized with a mannequin head while I was waking up from a nap, being made to eat my pre-school classmate’s leftover

rather than my own food at lunch, being sent to timeout for refusing to actively misspell my name were some of the traumas I experienced both at the hands of babysitters and teachers at my local Headstart. When my siblings had been young, she had been able to be a stay – at – home – mother and raise them herself. She already felt conflicted leaving me behind in the care of someone else; only to later learn that they were harming me. It just compounded her guilt. While my mother’s guilt turned into a combination of being both over protective yet liberal with my upbringing, my father used his guilt to shape me into a strong, independent, capable woman. He taught me how to fight, how to carry and use a knife, and how to shoot a gun. We watched countless action movies together and whenever there was a woman kicking ass in it he’d say to me, “You see that? That can be you. No te dejes nunca mija.” Sarah Connor was one of his favorite heroines for me. Now, as an adult who lives alone, except for the company of my dog Frank, my mother worries, but my father is sure to remind her, “Mija no nesecita ah nadien. Ella puede sola.” And while I am perfectly capable on my own, I still feel a sense of loneliness at times. My protagonist echoes these feelings in my stories. She’s strong, capable, independent, yet feels alone a lot of the time. Isolated by her strength and strong will.

My father did so well in shaping me into the woman I am today, that I intimidate the men around me to the point that they don’t stick around too long once they learn that I don’t “need” them for protection or to take care of me. I just want their company. Apparently, the latter isn’t as sweet or attractive as being needed. My protagonist shares this sentiment. The only people she “needs” are her friends. Men are just extra fun for her. Growing up, I always had more guy friends than girlfriends. I just couldn’t get behind the whole makeup and hair thing. I preferred to be outside playing in the mud or fighting with the boys. This is something my mother knows and while she may not have approved all that much while I was growing up, she never came out and

said it outright. These types of relationships have followed me into adulthood. Knowing men through the friendships I've cultivated since childhood has helped me shape the kind of man I want in my mind. He is the kind of man I write about. The kind of man that, at 32, I have only met once and after months of reflection, I'm pretty sure he wasn't being his genuine self. So much of who I am and why I am stems from 926. The good, the bad, the intimidating.

Simone

Simone came to me at a time when my mind was at its weakest. She still does. Only now, she's much angrier. She grew in the darkness of my periphery for months before she was strong enough to project herself to me. Growing up with her by my side, I was never alone, but I was lonely. Of all the possible side effects that correlate with sleep deprivation; weight gain, depression, poor impulse control, lack of empathy or intolerance toward others, the two that affected me the most were paranoia and a stronger leaning toward the superstitious and magical thinking in general. The longer I went without real sleep, the more "microsleeps" (known as "zoning out" but it is essentially when the brain forces its own mini shutdown – basically sleeping with your eyes open several times a day and not being able to help it) (Medical News Today) I experienced and the more strange, smoke people I saw. While I always had friends, I was also the kid that read a lot and dealt with bullies, yet I still felt lonely. I was constantly followed by someone I couldn't show to anyone else, and she wasn't always alone. As I got older, she grew with me and she became more and more angry at me for not "bringing her into" my reality. To talk about her was to give her more power and that was a terrifying thought. For a time, when I was 15, I considered suicide as my only escape from her constant anger. It is unfortunate, but in my short life, I have lived to bury four friends who died by suicide. I know what that does to a community, but in my desperation to be rid of Simone, I considered it.

Thankfully, I learned of other ways to cope with her/my insanity and I never actually tried to take my life. Simone left me for a while. When I was in my mid-twenties and I had been able to finally regulate my sleep schedule. She was gone and I was rested and I no longer saw Smoke Shapes. I began to convince myself that I had imagined it all, then, one evening while having drinks with a friend, I realized that I never had the ability to see ghosts or spirits, but that I had been hallucinating my entire life due to the changes in my circadian rhythm. When you don't sleep well, or consistently, your brain changes how you experience the world. At 28 that made me feel exponentially better about my mental health, in a very weird way. If I could sleep, she wouldn't come back and I would be rid of her. Easy enough. Flash forward a couple of years and she was back. I was on Gabapentin, a preventative medication to treat my migraines, when she came roaring back into my life. My partner at the time tried to understand, but ultimately, the thought of being followed by shadows and smoke he couldn't see scared him enough to have him ask me to stop talking about it. The only outlet I found was to write about her because my classmates wanted to know more. It was really helpful to let it out and finally talk about the wraith that followed me everywhere. I was able to hide behind the veil of fantasy when I first wrote of her, but slowly, I began getting comfortable with the idea of talking about her. It was cathartic to write about her and field questions about her without feeling as if I was being cross-examined before being committed.

Migraines

I had my first migraine when I was in the fourth grade. Granted, I didn't know what was happening to me. In my mind I was being rebooted. Restarted by some aliens watching me from their mothership far out in the solar system. The pain was so intense that I have no memory of my morning that day, or of anything from the night before. All I remember were bright blue

lights coming in through my bedroom windows and engulfing me in their painful brilliance. Something I still see when I am about to experience an aural migraine. I remember “waking up” in the classroom (probably from a microsleep) when my teacher called on me to read a passage in a TAAS Test prep packet. I had no recollection of who I was, let alone where or what I was supposed to do. Over the years, I’ve come to learn that half of all migraine sufferers have their first attack before the age of 12 but migraines often go undiagnosed in children, so even though I was taken to a doctor – in the early 90s there was no cause to run through a migraine check list – if it even existed at that point (migraineresearchfoundation.org). According to the Mayo Clinic website, most migraines still go undiagnosed to this day because people don’t understand what they’re dealing with. Migraines are unilateral headaches that cause throbbing, stabbing, and sometimes burning pain, and they can be debilitating. They are often accompanied by sensitivity to light, sound, smell, and can cause nausea and vomiting and severe abdominal pain. The symptoms and pain can last for hours or even days. Sometimes, there are warnings such as aura – something akin to the after image of a camera’s flash – that comes into one’s line of sight and alerts the sufferer of an incoming attack. When this happens, the sufferer has anywhere from a couple of hours to a few minutes to take abortive medications and get into a dark, quiet space and wait it out.

It took years of constant pain and exorbitant amounts of aspirin to finally realize that what was happening to me wasn’t just a headache. When I was 30 years old, I had insurance and with it the ability to go to neurologists and specialists to figure out exactly what my triggers are and the best way to prevent my symptoms. It’s interesting that the ability to take control of my health is what ultimately led to Simone’s return. That’s when I was placed on Gabapentin, an anti-seizure medication that is sometimes used to prevent migraines when given in small doses

twice daily. Some side effects include memory loss, confusion, hallucinations, and headache, ironically enough. It was the day following my first two doses that I experienced my memory loss and confusion. I was on campus and I was early for class only that portion of the information was missing from my understanding. I was found near tears by one of my former philosophy professors. He calmly asked me what I was “on” because he recognized the look of utter horror and my constant rocking as not entirely “me”. I explained that I was on medication for my migraines and that I was lost and didn’t know what to do. He stayed with me until a classmate walked toward us. He looked worried and as he took his headphones out he asked, “You okay?” Near tears, I said to my professor, “I know him! He’s in my class!” My professor explained to him what was going on with me and my classmate, very soothingly said, “Yeah, you in the right spot. We’re just early.” He sat across from me and my professor left me to find my bearings with someone I knew. As I sat there speaking to my classmate, I began to find the missing pieces of my afternoon. Putting it all together, slowly, really helped me through that evening class. My protagonist’s journey in “Carry On Wayward Dream” and in “Southern Comfort” deals with moments of memory loss akin to the ones I experienced while on Gabapentin. While I have yet to find the words to truly describe that fear, I know that their confusion helps the reader understand the importance of their journey.

Friends

The classmate that helped me find myself that evening, was Juan. We became closer that semester for various reasons. We had met the semester prior, but this particular semester we were taking two classes together and so we began to talk more and trust each other with our stories. From our similar childhoods, to our similar sense of humor, we became close friends. So much so that I consider him one of my best friends and he – or a version of him – makes it into

every one of my stories in my thesis. Danielle is another friend I made while in the writing program and I don't know how I managed to get through life without her. She is the light in my darkness. I have spent so many years shrouded in darkness, but with her around, it becomes a little less dense. I can see farther and actually allow myself to dream of a future not wrought with the billows of despair that accompany Simone. She makes it into my stories as well. While Juan or other men may be mentioned more by name in my work, Dani is in there, through every sentence of it.

I try to write a flawed, female protagonist who doesn't *need* a man, but rather wants one, mirroring my life at the moment. Dani is a strong woman in ways that I lack, and I am a strong in ways that she lacks and together we complete each other. At least, that's how I try to write us. She and Juan have saved me more times than they could possibly know. Using versions of my friends in my stories has helped me cope with the madness I live in every day. They help me see myself as a person who sees things, not as some sort of freak who needs to be medicated to get through the day. They have helped me develop my craft into what it is today with their honest feedback and tips on character development. Without them, I would be lost to Simone's ether. That much I know. There is no way I can possibly write down every instance in my life that led me to write what I write how I write it, but what I can do is take their lessons, their influence and use it to explain my insanity. I am a product of the barrio and pop culture references; therefore that is how I get my stories across. I write to make sure that I have something that anchors me to the Real World. I write to make sure that the Darkness I live in isn't for nothing. I write to show Simone that she no longer holds any power over me. I am not longer afraid of her. I write to show others that everyone's story is worth telling. I write because it is the only way I know of to keep my monsters from overtaking my mind.

CHAPTER II

SOLEDAD

My apartment used to be my sanctuary. My small space. I could be whoever and whatever I wanted in the comfort of my home. My first apartment on my own, no roommate to seek solace from. No significant other to make me feel suffocated. Just my space, all of it was mine. I lived here for three months before my quiet, calm hole in the ground was overcome by a biological hazard.

I moved into my apartment four or so months after I had broken up with my boyfriend of three years. He had been my first serious relationship in longer than I'd like to admit. Toxicity from a five year bad spell had kept me from committing to anyone other than friends. But we were serious enough to live together for about two years. Serious enough to go house hunting. Serious enough for him to drunkenly slur out that he would “never marry” me because I had “way too much debt” while I was helping him into bed one night after a Guy's Night Out. A subconscious worry he had – that I expected marriage. I won't say that it hadn't blipped on my radar before that moment. But in that instant I knew I wouldn't marry him, even if he did ask me to one day.

When I left him, I told him I didn't appreciate being made to feel ignored. I didn't appreciate being taken for granted. I didn't want to share a life with someone who was constantly making me repeat myself. I was tired of feeling invisible. He countered with his truth, “I have a confession...I was ignoring you for months on purpose because I thought it would help me work

through my shit. Please don't be mad at me! I won't do it again if you stay." Something he kept begging me to do. To stay.

It took me four days to pack up and leave him and in those four days he begged. Over and over.

"You keep claiming that you'll change, that it'll be different if I stay." I said without looking at him.

"Yes, yes, I swear it will be. I just can't lose you. Please." His intensity burned a hole in the side of my face. A creature of habit, his once cool demeanor swam in the stink of panic at the thought of losing that which he was most comfortable with.

"I would believe you, if you had cleaned the god damn bathroom like I asked you to a couple of weeks ago. Like you said you would three nights ago when I first told you I was leaving."

Turning to face him – this man I had loved. This man who had tricked me into believing he was someone other than his casually racist, misogynist self. Toward the end when the "real" him started to emerge – somewhere around the time the Orange Monster called all Mexicans rapists and criminals – I had begun to doubt my sanity. How can someone be so good at hiding their true self from the person they share a life with? I stared stonily into his red-rimmed, faded green eyes and he knew he had lost. He forced a chuckle through his tears, "You're right. I am an asshole. I'm sorry."

I can't say that my relationship ended because he failed to clean a bathroom after he said he would, but I can say that it was most definitely a defining moment. Four months later, I found myself single and happy and comfortably alone in my own space. With the new semester came new and intimidating expectations. I was teaching two classes for the first time while taking a

couple of classes and working on my thesis. The latter part of my 31st year had been challenging, but it wasn't anything I couldn't handle. I had been here before and I would be again. A single 30 something with a laser focus drive to complete her degree. Or so, I thought.

For almost two months, my social life consisted of work, class, grading, reading, writing, revising – with the occasional boring date thrown in – repeat. While wasting time on social media one day, I read about a particularly bad case of an H1-N1-like or “Swine Flu-ish” outbreak in Rio Bravo, a border city in México – my birth city. Juan, one of my best friends, had sent me the link to the CNN article his sister had written about it. He was always on top of stuff like that and his sister had a knack for writing hard hitting, gritty articles that educated while making you feel more than a little guilty about your lack of contribution to the world at large. He knew I was distracted by my own drama, so he did his best to help keep me informed. Now I regret not having paid closer attention.

The thing is, around that time, my migraines were starting to get a little out of whack. I had a serious uptick in attacks due to new stressors. Tension in my neck and shoulders, and insomnia didn't help. Simone – my main and scariest hallucination – began to stop by more and more often and with her presence, she made Damage even louder. It took all my energy to concentrate on my work and keep them both quiet. I didn't have the time to spare on something that was going on across the border. Out of sight out of mind, I guess.

Before all this happened. Before the Blast, before Molotov, before Patrick even, I was alone all the time. The kind of alone that you feel deep in your bones even when you're surrounded by people. I was physically alone, but never really alone, alone. Damage, she lives in my mind. She's the loudest voice in my head. She tells me all about how I'm a screw up. How

no one is ever going to want me for long. She tells me that I'm always going to be alone with her for company. She echoes my insecurities, magnifies them. She plays "what if" scenarios in my mind so often that I begin to believe they're real. For months I couldn't feel. I loved my friends, but I couldn't feel anyone else. Men would hold my hand, or kiss me and I felt nothing. I was simply going through the motions.

Had I been following the development online, I would have seen the staggering numbers of infected. The gravity of this nightmarish reality set in when I came across some newspapers shortly after the world was lit up white. Almost the entire Mexican population 9 miles south of me was infected with The New Scary Flu Strain that seemingly had no cure. It had mutated so much in such a short time, that it was now dubbed, H7-L9 in the States and Fiebre de rabia in México. It was getting pretty serious; my Mother country needed all the help she could get, but would instead receive carnage in abundance.

The Orange Monster Administration would not allow any American doctors or scientists to even attempt to help find a cure because, and I quote, "It's terrible what's happening over there, but it is Mexico's problem. Not ours. My thoughts and prayers are with the Mexican people right now." With that one Tweet, the Orange Monster sealed the fate of not only the people of México, but of those of us that live in the border towns on the American side. I guess he and his administration felt that the newly erected border wall – what with its state of the art, no-grip panels and its infrared cameras that could track all sorts of illegal creatures, the blinding lights sure to sear your retinas if you were foolish enough to look directly at them, and silent alarms that would let the good ol' folks in Green know your exact location before you could say

“auxilio” - could keep out or kill the infection as well as it did both the undocumented and infected alike.

Now, sitting in the darkness in my once comforting home, I drink and long for my friends and family. I drink and feel sorry for myself even though I know full well that I need to suck it up and go find them. Rescue isn't coming for me. There's nothing here except for the Changed and the rotting fixtures of what once was. Memories are being eaten by the oblivion in the air. Soon, all that will remain are the animated shells of the neighbors I used to know. The White Flash Bomb scrambled the circuits of most of the non-infected it was as if all of a sudden the person that once was no longer remembered how to be.

I was coming back from picking up my mail when the bomb was dropped. It lit up the world in a flash of light so bright I fell to my knees and wretched up my lunch. My brain felt super charged. I was tingling; my veins surged with an energy I had never felt. Looking around my apartment complex alive with worry, I saw a few of my neighbors who had been outside. Some tossing their trash, some watering their plants or walking their dogs. Some unloading groceries or laundry – just going about their everyday lives. Most had fainted when the wave of light reached us. It was as if the invisible tethers that held them up were suddenly snapped. Their bodies limp with no strings to hold them up, gravity working against them. I watched them try and fail, over and over, to stand once again. Their voices were replaced with guttural cries of confusion. It was as if the Blast had forced a hard re-boot of their minds, only when they came back online, nothing was connecting.

Grabbing my mail – I don't know why it was so important to carry back the reminder to pick up my class ring, or yet another three credit card offers – I suppose I sensed that the mundane, every day occurrences of my not so exciting life were things of the past. I felt like my

senses were dialed up to eleven while everyone around me seemed to be reverting back to infancy if not worse. I ran to Robert, my 66 year old neighbor who had been outside with his dogs. His head was bleeding from his fall, but he seemed alright otherwise - - compared to the others who were moving around like lobotomized zombies.

“Robert! Are you alright? Let me help you inside.”

“Yeah, I’m alright. Must’ve fallen over when someone took that picture. What the hell was that? You saw that right?” He chuckled nervously, looking at the noon day purple-pink sky as I helped him into his messy apartment. His confused dogs following after us.

“Yeah, I saw it. Not sure what it was, but I’ll look into it. You sit down. Let me get something to stop the bleeding.”

Running around Robert’s apartment, it struck me just how lonely he actually was. I did my best to stop by and visit with him a couple of times a week, but I never came in. We just sat on his patio drinking seltzer and watching his Jack Russell Terrier and his Chihuahua play in the grass. I never stayed longer than an hour. I had deadlines to meet and my own demons to fight. Standing in Robert’s small kitchen, I was overwhelmed with guilt. *How conceited do you have to be to not notice that he actually needs you?*

Dirty dishes piled high in both sinks, his garbage was overflowing, and his pain medications were strewn about in a way that suggested he wasn’t taking them as recommended.

“Excuse the mess. I wasn’t expecting company...” I heard him say from his living room. I grabbed the first two clean looking rags I spotted on the counter and ran back to him.

“What mess?” I winked at him and he gave me a knowing smile.

Depression has many faces. This was Robert’s.

“Here, let’s apply pressure on that cut and also...how many fingers am I holding up?” I asked while I held up three, then five, then two.

When I left his place about half an hour later, he seemed okay. Tired, scared, and confused, but okay. It wasn’t until later that I would regret leaving him alone for so long.

The Changed – as they came to be called – are a sad sight, but otherwise harmless. So long as you don’t get between them and whatever it is they’re doing. The Infected, Los Rabiosos, they’re dangerous. The illness caused them to forget their humanity. They toggle between intense despair and a ravenous hatred that seems to burn at their core. Their sole purpose appears to be to destroy whatever they encounter. They’ve forgotten their families, their passions, perdieron sus almas. One can always hope for a cure, but how do you remind someone of their humanity when they are so far removed from it? There’s nothing for me here but loss and certain death. Crossing the barriers erected by the administration about 60 miles north will be a challenge. That was the government’s way of trying to contain the spread of Rabiosos and Changed to the Borderlands – La Frontera where the war was started.

For now, I sip my whiskey and let my mind drift to happier times.

“What are you thinkin’ about?”

“Our first date. Mine and Patrick’s.”

“Yeah? I wasn’t around for that one. ¿Como te fue?”

I smile and lean back into my futon, whiskey in hand, “It was really nice. I was nervous and I think he was too.”

Molotov is watching me, smiling. He likes it when I'm happy. Prefers it to my self-loathing and anxiety that comes along with all the voices in my head. They get too loud sometimes. They're quiet now though, and this is a nice moment.

"I bet he was. A beautiful dame like you? ¡Porfavor!"

I can see Patrick in my mind. His ginger hair combed into a mock faux hawk, his black button up shirt. Just tight enough to show off his biceps and chest when he moved in a certain, subtle way. An adorably self-conscious way, I would learn at dinner. His dark denim jeans hung perfectly at his hips. His wide smile when I opened the door.

"I was so embarrassed that night." I say to Molotov, who's been watching me remember.

El Mapache Molotov made himself visible to me after a few days of hanging out in my periphery and about two weeks before everything went to shit. He's a product of my over stressed mind and affinity for comic book anti-heroes. When I asked him what he was doing here, he smiled his sideways smile and simply said, "I'm here to keep the Big Bad Bitch away. Simone won't get you while I'm here, princessa. I got you." And just like that, he's been following me around ever since. Protecting me from the monsters within my own mind and those which now inhabit the world outside my door.

His words are a culmination of survivalist manifestos I've read, shows I've watched, and fantasies I've concocted for myself. I know all this, but currently, he's my only friend. He's the only reason I'm coping as well as I am. Together, we can get out of here. If we can get across the barricades to go north, we have a chance. His big brown eyes study me with an intensity that is unmatched. He x-rays my mind. Takes stock of my soul and weighs my thoughts with those eyes. His whiskers are perfectly kept; his coarse gray and black fur is as clean as is his orange

and black jumpsuit. His giant gun rests atop my rotting coffee table. A symbolic representation of his care for me. I know full well he can't shoot what needs shooting, but it's a comfort I appreciate.

“Yeah? Why? ¿Qué hiciste?”

“Well, I had just told him about how I don't lie because I hate to do it, so I'm really bad at it. He nodded then asked what my favorite band was...”

“Oh no. You didn't.”

“I did. At first, I tried to play it off and I said, ‘Well, I don't have any one favorite band. I like a lot of different music...’ then I cut myself off and said, ‘I'm sorry, I can't. I can't lie. The Backstreet Boys. I fucken love the Backstreet Boys.’”

Molotov's laughter fills the space in my mind that is filled with the memory of Patrick's laugh that night.

“¡No mames! You didn't!”

“Yup. I was mortified. Luckily, he found it endearing.”

Sitting here smiling, remembering, longing. While Molotov cries tears of laughter. I know he's not really on the couch with me. I know that when I lean up against him and he leans up on me that the warmth and the coarse fur I feel isn't really there. But it's comforting nonetheless.

Loneliness is its own kind of monster.

For a time, loneliness was all I knew. When I lived with my best friend, Danielle, she realized this. She knew by looking at me that I preferred my solitude, I preferred my silent surroundings. I don't think she knew just how loud it got inside my head, but then again, maybe she did. She's very intuitive. I wouldn't put it past her. She hoped to help me see more to life

than constant disappointment I think. Maybe this was why she thought Patrick and I would get along. Upon first getting to know him, I learned we shared the same bleak world view.

Still though, when I met Patrick I was skeptical. Danielle was so sure we'd get along, she'd talked him up all summer, and by the time I actually met him, I found myself slightly annoyed by him. But, he won me over with snarky conversation and not running for the hills at the first mention of my hallucinations – a tactic I've taken to using in order to weed out any would be time wasters.

Our first date was a big deal for me because I actually *felt* him. I felt him the way you do when you wake from your favorite dream. I felt him in the soft, rolling sensation in the middle of my chest. Almost like anxiety, but without the fear of impending death. He felt welcomed to my heart. He felt *returned*, as if he had been lost and he was finally back where he belonged. One night, a few weeks after our first date, he held me close enough to feel his heart beating in tandem with mine, "You feel like my missing piece." He whispered.

We sat on my couch after dinner that first night, flirting and laughing, navigating the invisible boundary of a "respectable" first date. When our arms would touch, or my knee would graze his thigh, as cliché as it sounds, electricity would course its way up my limb. He was intoxicating. Sitting on my couch with him the following night I was laughing at something ridiculous one of us had just said. The way he looked at me, as if he would never see me again. As if that was his worry.

"Would it be alright if I kissed you right now?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'd really like that." I smiled at him as he slowly leaned in. His left hand reaching up to touch my right cheek. Our lips met and I knew I was in trouble. Damage was drowned out by the warning bells going off. "DANGER! DANGER! IT'S A TRAP!!" But it was too late. One

look at him and I knew that the same stars floating in my eyes were floating in his. Three weeks later, he let slip an “I love you.” As I held him to my chest and laughed it off, I felt it too. For the first time in almost 15 years, I didn’t feel lonely anymore. Not because I felt I “complete” but because I felt understood. We have our share of skeletons in our closets, yet rather than continuing to hide them away, we’d brought them out and laid them at each other’s feet. Afraid but willing to trust in one another and find acceptance. Of finding the love and capability of *finally* being our true selves with a potential partner.

It’s been six days since we’ve been thrown into total darkness. Six days since my life turned upside down. Six days since I’ve heard from my friends and family. Six days since I’ve heard from Patrick. I haven’t gone very far from my apartment because I keep hoping that someone I know will come by. Someone who isn’t Changed or Rabioso. At night, I can hear the moans of the people in the apartments next to mine succumbing to the anger in the air. Some who were worn down by the Blast are eventually taken over by the rage. For others, it starts slow. A wearing down of the immune system. The poison floating on the breeze seeps in and begins to tear the body apart, slowly and agonizingly making its way into their already altered brain. I know because I watched Robert go through it. I thought he had been lucky at his age to have survived with only a bump on his head, but slowly. Painfully. He was succumbing and I had no idea how to help him.

I knew I was losing him when he massacred his dogs. They were his family. A healthy Robert would never have done anything to hurt them. The blood splattered walls, bits of brown and white fur, and Robert huddled in the corner gnawing what was left of his senior Chihuahua. All this branded itself into my mind and it was enough to show me just what La fiebre de rabia

could do. After that, Molotov thought it best that I barricade him inside his apartment with all that he might need. You know, just in case a cure was to be miraculously discovered someday soon. At the very least, I was keeping him safe from himself. At least, that's what I tell myself when his agony filled screeching reaches my ears.

The US Government was trying to eradicate an immigration issue. When the healthy Mexicans – followed by some not so healthy Mexicans – decided to immigrate to the US for safety, they were turned away. If they didn't go peacefully, they were shot. According to the *Border Valley News*, La Frontera was placed under quarantine. No one got out and no one got in. Those that were caught were shot on sight and their bodies were then strung up by the Border Patrol and put on display on the México side of the wall. An attempt to ward off any other would be immigrants seeking help from the ravages of a disease that they would never outrun.

Well, some of the mutated Rabiosos got smart and overpowered the borders. Using their bodies as ladders, human chains, they climbed atop each other. A human pyramid of pissed off disease. By using the more advanced cases of Rabiosos as bait – a distraction the Border Patrol could shoot down – the mutated were able to bleed into La Frontera, the wastelands before really getting into America. The powers at be panicked and decided to drop a White Flash Bomb to do away with the infection. And everyone within a 100 mile - radius. Both on the Mexican side and the American side. They did it over Thanksgiving break, so my friends, family, and Patrick were all out of town. I was at home grading and working on my thesis. Lucky me, huh?

The Blast didn't affect me the way it did others. It made me more hyper-aware. I feel, see, smell, and hear everything better than I did before. I wonder if that has anything to do with the fact that I'm wired differently than most. I first noticed it at 21 when I got my first tattoo. No

matter what part of my body is being tattooed, a completely – seemingly unrelated part of my body begins to twitch. Years later, my dentist called me a mutant when the Novocain he had injected directly into my gums wasn't numbing the part of my mouth that needed to be worked on. The day before my 32st birthday, a cerebral angiogram showed my neurologist that every blood vessel, artery, and vein in my body is three times larger than normal. Nothing they can do about it, it's just how I was born. Maybe that's why I'm doing okay? Comparatively anyway.

I lost power the day of the Blast due to some sort of electromagnetic pulse that came with it, and the water began coming out all grimy shortly after. I know I need to move, and I need to do it soon, but I just don't know where to go. I have some supplies. I raided Walmart around the time everyone began to lose their minds. That's when I got my first sight as to how sideways the situation really was. Walmart – on a good day – is a mad house of unattended children, underage teenagers with nowhere else to go for fun, men and women taking up whole aisles as they slowly push their overflowing carts. Frozen food left abandoned in the electronics section, pasta sauce tossed into the throw pillow bin. It's chaos incarnate.

Walking in after the Blast wasn't any better. There was blood and screaming everywhere. Los Rabiosos were raging. They moved like locusts swarming the panicked and unsuspecting. The smell of blood, bladder, and bile came together with the stench of fear and left me rooted to the spot. Forcing me to take in the bloodshed. Los Rabiosos tore through the crowds of lost and scared looters just trying to get what they needed to survive this evil they could not define.

Los Rabiosos' newfound strength and agility made them not unlike velociraptors – ravenous, precise, and insatiable. They ripped arms out of sockets the way petals are ripped from flowers, blood and shock surging through their prey, their survival instincts on overdrive, most

keeled over and were eaten alive. Some of the Changed tried to fight off Los Rabiosos, but they're so slow moving it was like watching the Fellowship trudge through deep snow while Legolas all but floated on it.

There were some like me, who hadn't been affected by either the Blast or La fibre de rabia, but seemed to not know what was going on or were suffering from delusions of heroism. As I stood obstructed from view by a display of dulce de leche, I watched as a Changed woman attacked her would-be-rescuer. A young guy, about 22 or so, had seen her being attacked by a Rabioso and had run toward them, baseball bat swinging. He socked the Rabioso right in the head with a hard, wet THWACK and he went down. When the 22 year old reached out his hand to help the Changed woman up, she pulled him down toward her and used his bat against him. Mouth agape, I watched as the Rabioso he had knocked out got up and rushed both he and the Changed woman. I can still smell his blood on the air and hear his screams in my head.

I'm not proud to say that I kept hidden until it died down. Or that I made my way to the sporting goods section and loaded up on knives and guns and ammo. Or that when I went to grab food and other supplies I ignored the cries for help from some of the injured survivors. I wanted to help, I really did. But Molotov kept directing me to get what I needed to survive and get gone. I would gain nothing from trying to help those who were dying. I knew he was right. So I packed a few bags with food, water, weapons, and survival kits. Using my new abilities to read the terrain before me, I fled back the two blocks to my apartment. After securing all my doors and windows, I rolled myself up in my San Marcos blanket, held my teddy bear to my chest, and sobbed until I was sure dehydration would claim me.

“Molotov, you really think we can make it?”

He sighs and cracks his knuckles, “Does it matter? The truth is we gotta try it, or we’re gonna die here.”

He’s right of course. I sip my whiskey and think of how excited Danielle was to be leaving town for a while to see her boyfriend. I’m so glad she wasn’t here for this. Juan was, but he’s a Marine, and had been way more informed than I was. I’m sure he got his family to safety. Although, he was pretty close to the border. Closer than me anyway, “Shit, I live close enough to smell Mexico, and on a clear night, I can hear gun shots!” he’s always saying. Patrick was visiting family in Tyler. He must be worried sick about his cats. My family is in Corpus Christi, they’re far enough from the blast point to not be affected. I suppose I can head there and try to reach out to the others. Part of me hopes that the pulse created by the Blast has been contained to La Frontera.

“Yeah, you’re right. We’ll head out once the sun breaks; it seems to slow them down.”

“You got it, princessa.”

I’ve been packed to go for a couple of days now. But I’ve also been trapped by my insecurities. I’ve always wondered if I could survive an apocalypse and now that one has made itself at home in my neighborhood, I question my resolve. The voice of Damage in my head is deafening. Molotov can sense when she gets too loud. That’s usually when he asks me questions about my friends, about Patrick. To distract me.

“What do you like most about him?” Molotov asks.

I smile, “The way he holds me when we slow dance awkwardly.” We stood in my bedroom as he softly sang to me, “I think that possibly, maybe I’m falling for you/No one understands me quite like you do/Through all of the shadowy corners of me...” Landon Pigg’s words never sounded sweeter than when they were accompanied by Patrick’s breath. Shuffling from foot to foot. His

forehead pressed against mine, his crooked smile creeping across the right side of his face. His warm hands on my hips, squeezing gently. His voice, low and soft, yet still deep and gruff as he sang to me.

“I know I care about you, but all emotion is gone right now.” He said without looking at me.

“Okay...well, I still feel you. How lame is that?” I forced a laugh.

“Hey, it’s not lame. I know I care about you. This really has nothing to do with you. It really is that lame cliché. I’m just in a funk. I’ll get out of it eventually.” He looked at me but he didn’t see me. He was a thousand miles away.

“To paraphrase Samwise the Brave, ‘I may not be able to carry your burden, but I can carry you.’ Figuratively of course.” I said to his profile. I could see every freckle. I wanted to hold him and kiss every single one. All the hundreds he has on his face alone, to see if that would help him feel. Instead, I sat quietly at his side. Letting the loneliness come back in. Letting Damage get louder and louder again. Until she was all I could hear and all I would believe.

“Please don’t try to actually carry me. You’re tiny. I don’t want you to hurt yourself. You call someone, okay?” He was laughing, but I was already doubting his sincerity.

I don’t blame him for what happened to us. There is no one to blame, that would make my grieving all too easy. My heart aches when I think of how cold and distant he became. No longer the sweet, warm, cheeseball I fell for. I knew he wasn’t the same, but I still missed him. I still loved him.

“Pues, if you want to dance with the guy again, we gotta get outta here.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The tears that fall from my face splash into my whiskey adding a little salt to the smoke in the glass. Outside I can hear the moans of The Changed and the squelching attacks of Los Rabiosos. Corpus is about 150 miles north of where I am. Once we get out of the city, I'll find a vehicle to take me up most of the way. Molotov is right, I can't just stay here and hope help makes it past the barricades. If I want to live, I have to keep moving. I will see my friends and family again. Maybe I'll even see Patrick and we'll get to have one last slow dance. A goodbye dance. One filled with the honest love we shared for a time. Before our worlds changed so much. Nothing will be as it was before, even if Molotov and I make it out of here alive. But even though I'm right back in the arms of loneliness, I know I won't be for long. My friends are my anchors. They are what's real and they are all I need. Their memory pushes me on.

CHAPTER III

CARRY ON WAYWARD DREAM

“Look, if you’re dreams are really that bad, try that anti-nightmare spell that’s in that book I lent you. If you do everything that it says in there, it’ll work. Trust me. It really helped me when I got back.” The sincerity in Juan’s eyes and the warmth in his voice sold me. Well, that and my desperation to just get a full night of restful, fearless sleep. The book he meant was *Grimoire for the Apprentice Wizard* by Oberon Zell-Ravenheart and the Grey Council, whoever they were. As a Harry Potter fan, I thought, “Well that’s rad. What’s the worst that could happen?” Let this be a lesson, kids; don’t practice magic if you aren’t fully committed to it, or at the very least harbor some sort of respect for it.

Had I not been so desperate for a peaceful night’s sleep, I would have heeded my own advice, but alas. I tried the spell and unknowingly re-signed myself to the endless dreamscape I am now marooned in. Before you ask, no, I don’t think Juan set me up. My insomnia had gotten really bad. Almost 73 hours of no sleep whatsoever. In the past, I would at least get a 15-45 minute cat-nap a day. But every time I closed my eyes I was accosted by the signs I missed. The little things my “best friend” Manny used to do. The red flags that served to outline a pattern of escalating predatory behavior. His constant unwanted petting, his “accidental” grabs at my body, his “charming”, yet chauvinist jokes, and always the smoky body of my personified nightmares.

I just wanted sleep and Juan just wanted to help me. When he ‘got back’ meant when he came back from deployment. Transitioning back to civilian life must be difficult. I figured, *if it*

worked for him, it'll work for me. Yeah, only he's a Marine. Not some nutcase with a sleeping disorder and waking hallucinations he sometimes interacts with. Nevertheless, I had followed the instructions to the tee and for three nights I had slept the most glorious sleep ever imagined. Dreamless, fearless, deep sleep. Like falling into the crystal blue waters of safety, of home. It left me rested and ready to take on anything that came my way. I felt born anew. Long gone was the woman who cursed the sunrise. Long gone was the woman who begged her mind to just "SHUT UP" so that she could get some rest from its endless chattering. Long gone was the woman whose face served as a silent warning of – "Don't fuck with me until I've at least had my third cup of coffee." I was unstoppable.

Something happened on the fourth night though. I'm not sure where I went wrong. I missed a step somewhere between the crystal pyramid under my bed and the Mugwort under my pillow. Maybe I was supposed to change out the red onion hanging in my room? I don't know. The spell's instructions didn't come with a "use by" section.

It's hard to tell how long I've been stuck in this loop. A realization I made when I noticed the slight variations in the dreams I'd been having. The glitches in my Matrix signaled that something had seriously gone awry when I became conscience of my dreaming. For a time I was convinced I was dead. Stuck in Hell or Purgatory, just floating around. Serving my penance for the wrongs I've committed by constantly running from all which I fear most. I move on when She's near. I sense her like a tuning fork in my teeth. It's a slow hum that builds and if I stick around, the pain sets in my brain. I've been jumping dreams. Jumping memories for what feels like eons now. Just trying to stay a few steps ahead of her.

I'm at 926 right now. Heidrick is where I grew up. Mercedes, Texas. A 'Barrio Princess' among the boys I rode and bled with. My childhood home has been all but demolished by time

and hooligan asshats. It's tricky coming here. This is where I met Her after all. The first place she materialized. I was four and the night was a blanket of heat that only Deep South Texas could produce. The hot, sticky, sweltering, humidity of it all. Like molasses in the lungs and polyester on the skin making it impossible to sleep. I looked over to my right and there she was. Looking back at me. Smiling. She was so nice in the beginning, but then...fury is a curious thing.

The paint is peeling off the walls of the 480sqft home I used to share with my parents and two siblings. The floor is sunken in places, giving entrance to the tlacuaches that always loved our little house as much as I did. Using the exposed cinderblocks the house rests on, I hopscotch my way through my past and into the emptiness of my future. *I need to get back to them. I need to see them again.* My friends, I miss them dearly.

The air-raid sirens from the Hurricane Shelter three blocks over are deafening. *Wait a minute! I know this dream!* Gingerly making my way out of the Hobbit hole I've made for myself in the closet that used to be in my bedroom, I grab my pack and strap it tight. Navigating my route down the hall and past the lone bathroom with the forever leaking showerhead, I birth myself through the hole in the back door. The backyard is a jungle of neglected memories and jumbled foliage. Putting on my gasmask, I look around as the purple mist begins to make its way toward me. If I leave now, I can avoid the larger pack of zombie-like creatures I call "Gotchas" that are coming in from the east of the neighborhood. Maybe I can get back to the Safe Zone and find Danielle and Juan. Maybe the dream versions of them can figure out a way to wake me up, get me back home.

I take a few steps north toward the sound of the air raid siren when I see the infected, bloated, pus leaking body of my former best friend. My ride or die. 'Jio and I are the same

person,' he would boast to anyone who'd listened. That all came to a bubbling, angry, loathsome stop the night he groped me for the third time.

“Manny? What the hell happened to you?”

He doesn't speak. He just starts running toward me, mouth foaming, hands once again attempting to grab what isn't theirs. Without flinching I lift my sawed off shotgun, and blow his head off. Grey matter splatters backwards as his once perfectly manicured beard is awash in the pus and purplish ooze that seeps from what used to be the center of his face. “You were always kind of a dick.” Stepping over the still twitching body of a person I used to trust is just proof of the hold She has on my mind. She's making me do this on purpose. Making me re-live the trauma. Making me see how naïve I was. How, blinded by his grooming, I let him into my life. Into the most secret parts of my mind only to have him use my vulnerability against me. Only to become a victim, yet again.

Shaking away the disgust. Reminding myself of the task at hand. I make my way into the alley and go south across a couple of over grown lawns. That's when I see Danielle taking down horde of Gotchas with a machete that Juan and I taught her how to use. A quick study, the machete quickly became her weapon of choice. She sliced and diced Gotchas left and right never failing to miss her mark. In my excitement to reunite with my friends, I don't see the trap set up before me and I fall like Will Byers into the Upside Down of darkness, decay, and death. Before I meet what will surely be my squelchy end, the smell of coffee invades my nostrils and brings me back to a happier time and suddenly I'm...

Standing in front of the coffee maker? “So, this is gonna sound really weird, but I can't find any of my hats.” Looking up from the orange container of chicory coffee I see Danielle standing by the breakfast nook. The mid-morning sunlight shining through the open shutters.

She's radiant in a royal blue wrap dress. Her honey colored locks pulled into a loose bun at the base of her head. It's all I can do to keep from sobbing. Taking a steadying breath, measuring out coffee like so many measured out emotions, I ask, "Your hats?" as evenly and as feigned confused as I can.

"Yeah! I can't find any of them anywhere! I've looked in my room, in the kid's rooms, in the living room, even the office and nothing. The really freaky thing is that I had already put one on today and that's gone too!" Her green eyes are saucers. Her pale and freckled face is flushed with confused excitement. I miss the real Danielle so much. "Just poof! Right off my head! Isn't that freaky?"

"Yeah, that is really weird." My brain feels like cotton candy. I need caffeine. But I want to try and help her find her hats because in this dream we never find them. I bring the mug of hot coffee to my lips, *Wait, I've never actually had any coffee in this one before because...* When the doorbell rings I know I'll never see her again. The classic 'ding-dong' of her doorbell is accompanied by the cacophonous, protective barking of her fierce family protector, Grim.

"Oh, I'll go get the door." Danielle walks off laughing as Grim, leads the way, barking at the would-be intruder. But I know that when the bell rings, no one will be at the door. No one will be there because She rang the bell to get Danielle out of the room. She rang the bell to get me alone. By the time Danielle comes back into the kitchen, I'll be gone. Out the back door and over the shrubbery and the fence. I'll be away to get Her away from the people I love. I run through the neighborhood and into the adjacent street dodging cars and buses with an agility I only have in dreams like a real live version of Frogger until...

I find myself standing in a forest. I know the forest is in Red River, New Mexico, because that's the only forest I've ever seen up close. But as I hike the trail to Middlefork Lake, I come to

what looks like Lake Tahoe. It's so blue, it's almost blinding. Juan has told me all about it, shown me pictures. He loves it here and it's not hard to see why. It always takes Her longer to find me here. I think it's because we've never been.

There's a campsite by the lake's edge, the one that Juan and I always sit at when I have this dream. Two weather worn logs have been placed on either side of the welcoming fire that Juan set before I got there. He materializes out of the woods to my right just as I sit down on one of the logs to warm up.

"Hey, you hungry? We having fish tonight!" he says, proudly holding up two freshly cleaned and prepared fish. He smiles broadly as he walks over to the fire and goes about cooking his catch. In the twilight, his 6ft 4in frame makes giants out of shadows against the trees, and yet I feel safe. I feel home. In the original dream, we sit across from each other enjoying his bounty in silence. It's when, as the sun begins to settle over the lake, that he tells me his ancestral story. He tells me about how he's actually a "Lake Man". That he's tied to the still waters to my left. That to love a Lake Man is to prove it by diving in and gathering sand from the bottom of the lake and bringing it back to him. To love a Lake Man one has to be pure of heart and mind. He's told me all this before, resulting in my unabashed laughter at his seriousness. Once my fit of giggles subsides and breath returns to my lungs, he explains the different kinds of worthy love. Such as the one of friendship that we share, and how in some ways, that's the strongest bond of love two people can have. But not tonight.

"You need to wake up, Jiovanna." Juan's dark eyes dance with fire as he watches me over the flames.

"What?" My half eaten fish forgotten. He knows I'm dreaming.

"You're wasting away. We've tried everything. You're in the hospital right now."

The moment Juan says that I hear the faint beeps of machines keeping me alive. The breeze coming off the lake no longer smelled of adventure and longing, but was instead that sterile smell that only hospitals can produce.

“There’s a woman with me, a curandera that one of my sister’s knows. She’s going to try to bring you back to us. She says there’s something you’re running from that you need to face.” I watch as he looks up at the trees and the sky, and off to his left into the woods, almost as if he’s listening for something. Forcing my attention, I can hear the soft mummer of a woman’s voice, like prayer.

“How are you talking to me? Why isn’t this on replay like everything else?” Juan’s smooth, bronze face looks me over and the softest smile touches his lips.

“Because I told you of the spell. She says I’m responsible for you. I have to guide you back.”

Guide me back? I’m stuck in this hell hole because I was trying to avoid my nightmares, because I wanted to rest, and all I’ve wanted since I’ve been aware of my plight is to be back with my friends. I look from Juan’s face to the tranquility of the lake. In all the instances that I’ve been here, I’ve never gone in. I’ve never so much as gotten near the edge. I don’t swim, so why would I? When I look back at him, he’s watching me, studying me as I piece the puzzle together. The whispering is heard on the wind again, making its way through the trees and to my ears. He moves his head slightly to the left the way he does when he’s distracted in conversation.

“I have to go into the lake don’t I? I have you bring you the sand.” It’s a question I don’t need answering. I feel it in my gut.

“You got this.” His eyes say he believes it. *At least one of us does.*

“And if I don’t? What then?” Tears welling, fear bubbling. The once peaceful dream I found solace in turning into a nightmare all its own. He sets his fish aside and takes my plate from me, laying it down softly next to his. All I hear is the wind in the trees and the lapping of the waves on shore. Looking into his dark eyes, I zero in on his voice before fear can shut me down.

“You thinkin’ ‘bout it too much,” he laughs, “and that’s why you Sam Winchester.” He reaches for my hand and I feel him place something in it. Looking down I see the necklace I gave him for his 32nd birthday. An ode to *Supernatural*, one of our favorite TV shows, the “Samulet”.

“It’ll keep you safe.”

“You try so hard to be Dean, but you full of ‘chick flick moments’ ya know.” I tease. He’s anchoring me in my reality, he’s saving me. I take the necklace, lacing it multiple times around my wrist. Together, we walk to the edge of the lake. What was once tranquility incarnate is now a slow, rolling boil of anxiety that mirrors that which I feel building within.

“Breathe and you’ll be okay...well, don’t breathe underwater cause you’ll probably die, but, you know what I mean.” He pulls me into a full body hug.

“You should really go into motivational speaking after this.”

“I know right?” His laugh sounds forced. “Go in there and bring me back some sand. That’s the key.” His smile is sincere but it doesn’t touch his eyes. Worry rules them.

Standing on the shore my mind races with all that can be, “What if I fail though?” Looking back at him, wanting him to say that he’d come with me.

“Don’t think like that. You got this and I’ll be here. Waiting for my sand.” His smile, damn that chipper smile.

The water is ice cold at first but quickly warms up as three steps takes me to a steep drop off. I have a moment to gather the deepest breath I can muster. I look back at the shore and see

Juan standing there watching me. Arm raised in farewell. Then I see Her walking out of the woods. She's fury incarnate. She's malice personified. She's writhing with lividity. And she's making her way straight for me. I don't worry about Juan because it's me she's after. It's always me she's after. Losing myself to my task and once again running, I allow the dark water to wash over me. I'm lost in the timeless abyss of the lake.

The water parts like a curtain and I fall like Alice down the rabbit hole. My lungs feel set to burst so I venture a breath and find it easy. *What the hell is going on?* Reaching the bottom, I land softly cocooned within the tunnel of water around me. The sand is creamy white with gilded mason jars at my feet. I reach for a dark blue one. Juan's favorite color, and the only one among many at the bottom, and fill it to the brim with the silky sand. Instantly, the water begins to pour in around my feet as I clutch the mason jar filled with promise to my chest. Taking a breath I'm pushed to the top by the churning waves. At the surface I pull myself in a pathetic doggie paddle toward shore. All thoughts of Her forgotten in my moment of triumph. All I see is Juan glowing with pride at the shore where I left him.

"I did it! I don't know how or what happened or why, but I did it!" I say holding up the jar of sand. Gasping through my excitement and uncertain of what to do next, "So what now? I don't have to kneel do I?"

Laughing his high-pitched, deep-bellied laugh, he picks me up and hugs me to him tight. Tighter than usual. He smells different. He feels different. He won't stop spinning me.

"Juan, what the fuc--"

That's when I see him. The real Juan. He's slumped over by the fire up against the log. His chin rests on his chest and his hands are bound behind him. Blood trickles down his forehead.

Looking down at the monster holding me, I see the smoke shape. I see the blood-red eyes of the nightmare that's been hunting me, Simone.

“Oh, you got the sand! You got the sand! You've proven your love for a Lake Man! How pathetic!” She spins me faster, harder until finally letting go. Sending me flying out of her arms and into one of the trees that lines the clearing. My head makes contact first, the rest of my body follows. Still clutching the jar of sand to my chest I absorb the pain and push it away. I need to make sure Juan's okay. Crawling toward my bound friend, I hear his voice accompanied by prayer on the wind.

“Use the sand to take the bitch out, Jio.”

I can see her dancing in my peripherals. That's where she started all those years ago. In my tiny room on Heidrick Avenue. She would hide in the dark, in the shadows that she's made of. And wait until I was alone before she would talk to me. She was always so nice. So comforting when my siblings were jerks, when my parents were fighting, when my books were read, and the television wasn't working. Sitting up, I look down at the jar of sand in my hands. Only now it holds a gadget similar to the *deluminator* that Professor Dumbledore uses in the Harry Potter novels.

“What the hell?” With confusion clouding my already exhausted mind, she strikes sending me flying across the campfire and into the surrounding stray logs.

“Focus!” Juan's slumped figure slurs out. “She ain't got nothing on you!”

“Oh, she 'ain't got nothing' on me? Really? Says the sack of useless Marine lying at my feet? Right! Face it Princess, you haven't got the chops to take me down. You're all mine.”

Simone chides in her faux honey voice.

Watching her stand over one of my best friends as if he were a prized stag on a hunting trip snaps something deep inside me. My friends are the reason I am who I am. They're the reason I thrive, and the reason I'm still standing. This bitch thinks she can take them from me? She's got another thing coming.

"Hey Simone, tell me somethin'," slowly reaching toward the midnight jar that once held sand and now holds my weapon, "when you were growing in the ether of my nightmares all those years ago, did you ever really think that we would be friends? That I could actually love you like I love them?"

Simone's face rippled, her smoke body shifting, clawed hands shrinking.

"I thought only of driving you to madness."

Slowly unscrewing the lid, never breaking eye contact. The beeping of the machines getting louder, the whispered prayers on the air hastening their pace.

"Honey, you live in my mind, you know we suck at lying." She lunged at me, and channeling Harry taking out the Baslik in the Chamber of Secrets, I pulled the *deluminator* out of the magic jar. Flicking the button on the side I pulled her into the instrument in my hand, snuffing her out like many a useless light.

Instantly, my body was free of the pain she had inflicted on me. Looking at the *deluminator* in my hand, I realized that after all the years we spent together, all she wanted was attention. All she wanted was to come through and be seen. I smiled at the fact that even in death – perhaps most importantly– she got nothing. She was taken out with ease. I walked to edge of the lake, and without a second thought, tossed it as far out as I could. I watched the lake open up and drown the thing that carried the wraith of my nightmares to its deepest depths. Just like that, she was gone. No fireworks. No flashy show. Just, POOF, right out of the thin air she'd come

from. The wind started up again, the breeze coming off the water was cold and sterile smelling. The leaves were rustling hard when Juan joined me at the edge of the lake. I was happy to see he was free of his injuries. In the silence I could hear the beeping getting louder. The prayer speak more clearly. The time to go was getting near.

“So umm, is this the part where you kiss me or what?” I joked, trying to break the tension.

“Chingao. You can never just have a quiet moment can you?” he smiled at me. We lean into each other one last time and as his arms wrapped around me, I felt safe. I felt... The softness of a bed beneath me and the weight of blankets on me.

“Oh thank goodness, she’s waking up!”

“About damn time!”

I recognize their worried voices before opening my eyes I smile; Juan and Danielle, they’re here. I can feel something wet wrapped around my right wrist and without having to look, I know it’s the “Samulet” from the dream.

CHAPTER IV

SOUTHERN COMFORT

Every morning is the same thing. The sound of a gunshot. Smell of gunpowder. There's a body lying before me. It's slumped over and part of me knows it's not breathing. The other part of me starts screaming, "Juan?...Juan!...JUAN!" As the darkness begins to turn a murky blue, the buzzing starts and I feel it rip its way into my brain. A scream catches in my throat and all I can do is claw at my head as my knees meet the bubbling hot asphalt. She's coming. Slick with terrified sweat. Fear metallic on my tongue. I hear his voice on the wind, "She's coming..." Flailing arms break through first and fumble for the bottle of Southern Comfort on my nightstand. The only thing that calms me now. Gulp after gulp, breath and heart slowing, in the dark all I can see is the red numbers on my alarm clock, mocking me. 3:00 am.

I wasn't always like this you know. I wasn't always a cheap drunk guzzling down whiskey flavored liqueur as if it were water at three in the morning. But lately, everything around me has gotten...darker. My daily interactions are ink stained at the edges of my periphery. I'm not really sure how else to explain it. I feel like I'm caught in a nightmare loop of a moment I've never experienced. I'm stuck having the same dream over and over and no matter what I do I can't change the outcome. Try as I might, I can't make it light again. Taking a pull from the bottle, sweat and frustrated tears mingling on my face, "I'm losing my mind." I say to the darkness.

Juan is one of my best friends. He knows I've been having a rough time lately. I hadn't been able to sleep almost at all for a few weeks – this was before the recurring nightmare. Juan was also the only one that knew about my hallucinations this time. Sometimes my family and other friends didn't take too well to my accounts of the Smoke Demons and Shadows that followed me. My hallucinations can, at times, become all consuming. They usually start out as auditory. Static on some music, far-off voices that *could be* my neighbors fighting, phones ringing while out in public spaces. It's usually nothing I can't handle. Even when the visual hallucinations begin, I can tell them apart from my reality and my interaction with them is kept at a minimum. Juan was with me when I went to my neurologist for help.

“Well, your MRA, MRI, and cerebral angiogram all look normal, Jiovanna. But you do have a lot of tension in your neck and shoulders, which is probably what's keeping you up. I'm going to give you Amitriptyline. It'll help you sleep.” Dr. Arman smiled at me before losing himself to my chart.

“Are there any weird side effects?” I asked to the top of his head as he scribbled away orders.

“Some, but I'm sure it's nothing you can't handle.” Dr. Arman looked at me and winked his blue eye while his brown eye stared through me. He was one of the youngest and most accomplished neurologists in the Valley. Surely, he knew what would help me. Surely, this man I had met all of two times would know what I could and could not handle. Surely, I would be okay. I glanced over at Juan as he flashed me a toothy smile and two thumbs up.

I slowly weaned myself on to the medication by taking half tabs for four days. On the fifth, I took a whole tab and while the half tabs had helped me sleep almost immediately, the whole tab was something else altogether. It caused my first out of body experience since I was

15. As I was waking up I found myself in my upstairs neighbor's apartment. While we were cordial enough to stop and chat when we saw each other outside on the patio, or at the on-site laundromat, I had never been inside her home. All the single bedroom apartments shared the same floor plan, so I knew my way around hers pretty well, considering. Walking around her living room checking out her books, and judging her unicorn decorations, I realized where I was and what was going on. *Nope. Not happening. It's too damn early for this.* I thought as I called myself back to my body, turned over on to my left side, and covered my head. Little did I know that out of body experiences would be the least of my worries.

Later, while I recounted my morning adventure over coffee with Juan, he laughed and asked, "Chingao, why does this stuff always happen to you?"

"I dunno. Maybe I'm just hella special?" I shrugged as I stuffed a vanilla bean mini scone into my mouth.

"More like a weirdo." He laughed.

Juan was always calling us weirdos. Our unconventional personalities were one of the many reasons we bonded so well as friends. While we met in graduate school, we were the same age and had grown up a few towns away from each other and had very similar childhoods. Both of us were the youngest in our families, and while we grew up with meager means, we still had a Goth streak that even now at 32 was hard to shake. After all, once a Goth kid, always a Goth kid.

"I may be a weirdo, but you the one who chooses to be my friend. I'd say you the strangest of us both, Mr. Vampires – Are – Cool – Would – Be – A – Velvet – Goth – If – It – Weren't – So – Damn – Hot - Here!" I teased back.

This was par for the course of our friendship. He'd say a thing and I'd say a thing and we'd squint at each other in an "intimidating" way until we couldn't see one another and then

we'd burst out laughing. Often leaving others watching us incredibly confused. That morning, sitting at the coffee shop with one of my best friends, I felt the underlying fear that I'd had earlier begin to dissipate. It was just a one-time thing. I'm sure it was all just a very lucid dream. I bet I hadn't even actually left my body.

I let myself forget about it as we decided to hit up Alamo's Mercadodome, or more commonly called "La Pulga de Alamo" first. It had been years since either of us had gone to a flea market, and having graduated with our MFA's recently were weeks away from starting our Big Girl and Big Boy jobs. We wanted to take a nostalgia trip. Back to the days before student loan debt, rent, grading, and administration duties ruled our lives.

As we pursued the aisles of used valuables, pop music bleeding into the soul of the Tejano music dancing with traditional corridos of the open air shops, the smell of roasting meat romancing grilled onions and fresh cilantro, fat sizzling in discos as tripas swam in gallons of oil, I missed Danielle. She was the missing link in our trio. After graduation, she and her kiddos had moved out of the Valley to Austin in an effort to make her new family work. We still spoke to her daily via our group text and weekly call ins. Things were going really well for all of them, but I selfishly wanted her here.

"Didn't this place get raided by the FBI last week?" Juan asked as he looked at some bootleg movies.

"Yeah, but I think my dad said it was a stand on the other side of the lot." I replied, distracted.

"Hey check it out! You want some pirata versions of *Supernatural*? This guy has all 13 seasons for \$5! Which isn't bad, but he definitely slacking. When I was in Afghanistan, there were guys selling Blu-ray's with 50-60 movies on one disc..." Juan exclaimed, holding up a box

with a poorly photo shopped Destiel and Sambriel on the cover. “I mean, if you can get over the fact that this graphic designer obviously thinks Dean and Castiel and Sam and Gabriel should be a ‘thing’...” He looked quizzically at the Blu-ray cover.

“To be fair, this is probably the product of a person who has never watched the show, or is catering to a *very* specific audience. With our luck though, we’d end up with highly eroticized fan-fiction rather than the actual show.” I said laughing as he very carefully set it down and backed away.

“Yeah, never mind.” He smiled at me and then quietly, “What’s up with you? You don’t seem as excited about being out here as you were when we planned this last week.”

“I miss Danielle” I half sighed, half wined. Juan looked down at me – something he couldn’t avoid, what with being well over 6 ft tall.

“I know. I miss her too. But she’s still around” he said as he snapped a cell phone photo of my pale, pouting face and sent it to her in the group text, “and now she’ll get to see you all pouty!” He laughed, putting his arm around me and leading me to a stand selling aguas frescas y fruit cups overflowing with mango, melon, watermelon, and jicama. It was then, right before I could respond to his playful jab, that I first noticed the guy in black. He had a buzz cut, not unlike some of the veterans I worked with at the university, but judging by the way he carried himself, he wasn’t military. He pulled himself back into the shadow of the shop when I made eye contact. His deep brown eyes squinting at me as he smiled at me with his finger over his mouth as if to quell a scream I didn’t feel building.

I stopped abruptly and watched his eyes gleam in the gloom he dissolved into. Instantly, the Smoke Demons and Shadows took the guy in black’s place within the darkness. Almost as if they had feared his presence. With him gone, they continued to watch me.

Immediately, Juan knew something was wrong. He dropped his arms to his sides and made fists of his hands, ready for a fight, “What is it? Where?” He looked around the shops with a Marine’s attention to detail.

“I...it’s nothing. Sorry, I thought I saw something...I’m alright.” I don’t know why I lied.

“You sure? Cause you don’t look alright...” still scanning the area. Still hoping to see what I see so he can help me fight them. That’s one of the amazing things about my best friends, both Danielle and Juan. They can’t ever see my monsters, the Smoke Demons or the Shadows, but they’re always ready to help combat them. They don’t question my mental stability, they don’t claim that I’m making it up, or ask not to know. If they could, they would kill the Wraith responsible for all this if it meant that I could be happily rid of all it.

“Yeah, I’m alright. Just a weird shift in the light. There’s nothing there. Let’s get something to drink.” I said to Juan. He didn’t look all that convinced, but he dropped it and walked along with me. The rest of the afternoon I kept ignoring the feeling of being watched. It came from both sides of the aisles at any given moment. In my mind, Smoke Demons and Shadows were watching us walk by. Their red and gold eyes bore holes into my skin as I lingered in the light where they couldn’t touch me. There were more than usual, but I tried not to let the reality of it cloud my mind. They were just products of my overstressed, overworked, mind. My meds should help them go away.

The last stop of the day was The Bookworm, our favorite bookstore. While browsing the New Age section for information on out of body experiences, I again felt someone watching me. It was different than the hanging cloud of darkness I felt when the Shadows watched me. It was laser focused, concentrated on my every move. I wasn’t so much scared as I was curious. Why would anyone want to watch me so intently? I reached for a purple book, “So You Left Your

Body Again, Huh?” the cover asked. Smiling a half smile I couldn’t help but chuckle to myself, *First you floating around your neighbor’s place, then the Smoke Demons and Shadows have you tripping so hard you see a ‘guy in black’, and now someone is ‘watching’ you? Girl, get your shit together.* I thought as I placed the book back on the shelf.

“If you think the books on out of body stuff are funny, you should check out the ones on astral projection,” said a deep voice from behind me. He radiated an intensity synced with my heartbeat. I knew it was the voice of the person who had been watching me, the guy I thought I’d hallucinated at the pulga earlier. In that moment, I felt connected to him, as if I had known him for a lifetime. It’s hard to explain, but I felt safe.

“Hey, if I could learn how to astral project myself; I’d get a helluva lot more work done.” I said with a nervous laugh as I turned to face him.

He looked about my age, 5 ft. 9in, buzzed hair, brown skin tattooed, broad shoulders that showed he was fit. Dressed in a black, lightweight hoodie with the sleeves rolled up, dark jeans, and biker boots, he was smiling at me. As his dark brown eyes studied my pale face, I felt exposed, but not in danger. I willed myself to not look away. Instead, I took in his features; strong jaw line, two cross tattoos on his face. A small one under his left eye and one on the right side of his neck and up on to his face by his ear. I met his eyes. He squinted his at me understanding that I had met his challenge. Licking his lips he smiled and dropped his eyes first.

“I bet you could. A motivated woman can change the world.” He rocked back and forth on his feet as if he were nervous.

“Well, this woman needs sleep and lots of coffee before even attempting such an endeavor.” Face-palming internally, I laughed nervously at my attempt at a joke. *Smooth Jio, smooth.*

He smiled at me and was about to say something else, when Juan came up from one of the adjacent aisles, “Hey! They just got in a new shipment of journals! You should come check ‘em out since your Dream Journal is almost full...” he looked over to where the man was standing and raised a questioning eyebrow at me. Wondering just exactly what kind of moment he had walked in on. Knowing that Juan could see him was a load off my mind.

“You’re busy. Maybe I’ll see you again sometime and buy you that coffee that’ll help you change the world.” He winked at me, nodded at Juan in that way men do when they want to convey respect to someone they don’t yet know, and walked away from us.

“Who the hell was that guy?” Juan asked as he came closer to me and handed me a journal to look at.

“No clue...but he was nice.” I said as I watched him walk away.

“Uh-huh. ‘Nice.’ I’m literally watching you objectify him mentally as he’s walking away,” he teased.

“I am not! I am simply appreciating his form and posture! I don’t even know the guy’s name.” I could feel myself getting red as Juan stared at me with raised eyebrows and a smirk spread across his face.

“Uh-huh. C’mon perv, let’s go check out the journals before they close up for the night.” As he turned to lead the way to the front of the store, the sensation of being watched came over me again. I scanned the shelves behind me, but didn’t see anyone. Still, that laser focus attention was on me the rest of the evening. So much so that I grew accustomed to it. If it was the guy in black I had been talking to, maybe that meant I would see him again. I realized on the car ride home, while singing “Don’t Stop Believing” at the top of our lungs, that I was more comforted

by the fact that I had a possible flesh and bone stalker than one made of smoke and shadow. Talk about complicated relationships.

Sleep came a lot quicker than I had anticipated that evening. I thought for sure I would lay awake thinking about the guy in black as the drug dissolved in my stomach and made its way to my brain. Instead, I turned over on my left side, cuddled my teddy bear close, and was out almost immediately. That was the night I had my first death dream.

It always starts the same; Juan, Danielle, and I are out grabbing a bite to eat. It's a sunny day, but not heavy with humidity like most days. It's beautiful, warm, comforting. The sky is clear of clouds and is a brilliant shade of blue and Danielle is telling us about the plans for her upcoming wedding. Laughing, the day is perfect. Birds are chirping, the breeze is cool, the grass and flowers are brilliant shades of greens, pinks, purples, reds.

As we're leaving the restaurant, the sky begins to darken. Birds fly off into the horizon as the world grows colder. A chill is felt in my bones, then overwhelming sadness in my heart. I turn to look for Danielle but she's fading. Fear and worry streak her face as glass tears cascade from her eyes and shatter at her feet. "Dani!" I yell, reaching for her ghost. She holds her hands out to me, but I only catch air. She's gone in midnight colored mist.

"Juan, what the hell is going on?" I turn to him, wanting to re-group. Needing to know that he just saw what I saw, but he's on the far end of the lot now. Walking as if in daze. The sky is almost obsidian in color and devoid of stars. The silence is deafening and the ground is pulsing. Cracks begin to form in the asphalt, sapphire light pours through like lava rushing toward Juan.

"Juan!" I yell as I run toward him, jumping the chasms of blue light. I need to reach him first. I can't lose him too. As I get closer to him, I hear Her laughter. Simone – the Queen Mother

of the Smoke Demons and Shadows, deep in my head and out of the blue light. She's coming. "JUAN!" I shriek just as he turns to look at me. His eyes are miles away, "There will be two of them." He mutters.

"What? What are you talking about? We have to find Dani!" I reach for him but he's stone cold. Juan is a walking space heater; it's not like him to be this cold.

"There will be two of them. They can help you fight..." and then the gunshot. The smell of gunpowder. When the darkness fades away, I hear her laughter over my screams as I look down at the gun in my hand and the shape of my friend at my feet.

That first morning, I called Juan in tears. I needed to see him. I needed to hold him and smell him and ensure that he was alive. Nearly tackling him when he let himself into my apartment, "It felt so real."

"But it wasn't. I'm still here. This is real." He soothed. Cradling me to his chest so I could hear his calm heart beating beneath his warm flesh. His strong arms trying to shield me from the madness attempting to rule my mind as he carried me to the couch. Desperately holding on to him, I breathed in his Polo Sport cologne as my choked sobs died down to silent tears. He helped center me in my reality like he did by the lake in Tahoe...*what the hell are you talking about? You all have never been to Tahoe...*

"What's happening to me?" I asked quietly. My voice thick with sorrow and shame.

"Well, the doc did say that there would be some side effects. Maybe that's all it is. Just your meds acting up." He handed me a box of tissues and watched me carefully as I cleaned my face. "Other than the nightmare, how have you been sleeping?"

"Like the dead." I replied and blew my nose, hard.

I stopped taking the medication after two weeks of the same nightmare. Every night it was the same thing and no matter what I did within the dream, I couldn't stop it all from happening. Again and again. Whiskey was the only thing that could quell the growing madness, but drinking a liter of Jameson every two days or so was expensive. Southern Comfort offered the same effect for a substantial discount.

Now, sitting in the bed, in the dark, the bottle of SoCo resting between my thighs, my mind drifts back to the guy in black. I haven't seen him since that night almost three weeks ago, but I think about him often. I don't know why. Something about him felt...different. It wasn't just a physical attraction. It was deeper than that. In the brief moment we'd had together in the book store, I had felt connected to him in a way that made no sense. The last time I felt anything remotely like this ended en pura soledad. Taking a pull from the bottle, making the Smoke Demons swim in the darkness around my bed, I pictured his face. His dark eyes looked excited, yet he had remained collected. *What if he's some hero out to save me from my demons?* I thought to myself. SoCo spilled from my mouth in a spray and burned my nose as I laughed at the notion. "I don't need 'saving', I need a fucken lobotomy." I said out loud to the shapes watching me from the darkness. Their sadness heavy in the silence.

The only person to help me get through my brand of crazy was me. Everyone else was either just along for the ride, or oblivious to my mental battle. Still though, I wanted to see him again. But I had nothing to go on as far as finding him. And for all I knew, he was seeing someone. "That would be my luck. Y'all creeps are the closest thing I've had to a 'serious' relationship in years." I said to the Shadows and Smoke dancing in the dark corners of my room. Drinking deeply as the realization set in, I'm so lonely. For a brief moment, two of the Smoke Demons came closer to me. I could have sworn they reached out to comfort me. Must have been

a trick of the light. Shaking my head to clear the image I took a longer pull from the bottle and they swam back into their corners where they spent their time.

So much had changed so quickly in the last few months. Graduation, job hunting/securing, debt, one of my best friends moving away. I hadn't been as prepared for all the "grown-up" changes that came with my new title. I wasn't handling the transition from 'graduate student' to 'professional' well at all. I was up at 3 A. M. with a bottle of less than stellar whiskey flavored liqueur warming between my legs talking to the monsters hanging out in the dark. I was a mess. No wonder Simone was making the rounds with me. I had successfully kept her at bay for years with medication, a rock solid support system, and just plain determination. Now, my foundation was cracked and blue light was spilling through. I took another pull. I need to find that guy again. If anything, maybe he'd be good for a one-night stand. Something to help me get my mind off of the insanity and maybe help me sleep. Deciding to go back to the Bookworm in the morning and channel my inner Jessica Jones to ask about him, I took another swig and laid in the dark until the early dawn light crept in around my black out curtains.

Walking back from the bookstore later that day, my questioning having yielded nothing but even more frustration, I wanted to hit something. No one knew who I was talking about when I asked about the guy in black. It's a fairly small bookstore with mostly repeat customers since most people prefer to shop at the Barnes & Nobel down by the expressway. I figured that someone would have remembered him. Standing on the corner of 107 and Sugar, trying to decide if I would take out a Craigslist add to try and find him, I saw Simone. She came without warning. One minute I was standing there, waiting for the tiny white man to appear on the streetlight across the street from me, signaling it was my turn to pass, when I saw her flicker into my reality.

She was standing amongst a crowd of college students heading toward campus. Toward where I was standing and waiting. Her coal red eyes glowing, her shark-tooth filled mouth smiling, tar dripping like saliva from the corners. She waved at me and began to cackle. Cold sweat sheened my body, heart racing, dizziness threatening to topple me, I blinked hard and she was gone.

Looking around, everyone was going about their lives like normal. When the little white man clicked on, offering his privilege to get me across the road safely, I made an about face and walked up the grassy ditch separating the gas station strip mall from the road and headed to the liquor store beside it. Forget hitting something. Forget getting laid. I needed a drink.

I didn't even register the 'ding-dong' of the door as I walked in, or the hello spoken to me by the new guy behind the register. I simply bee-lined it to the amber liquor aisle and bent down looking for the largest bottle of SoCo they offered.

"Guess he was right to be worried about you. I just thought he was crushing on you." I heard a woman's voice say from behind me. I reached for the plastic bottle on the bottom shelf and held it from the neck like a weapon. Slowly turning around, I don't know what I expected. My knees buckled, my lungs felt sucked dry. She was the splitting image of Danielle. Pale skinned, freckled, huge smile, only she had long dark hair down to her waist. Very different from Dani's shoulder length, honey kissed tresses. Her eyes were as big as Dani's, but the brightest violet instead of green. She winked at me, "Not planning on hurting me with that are ya?" she asked, eyeing the bottle in my hand.

I stood there, slack-jawed, the forgotten bottle of SoCo loosely held in my hand. Slowly, I shook my head side to side.

"Good. That would be a really weird way to say hello." She smiled.

“Who?...” I managed to squeak out.

“Oh! That’s right! You don’t know me! You only met Daniel that night at the bookstore!” She laughed, taking the bottle from my hand and walking to the counter. I followed, dazed. She was even Dani’s height. What the hell was going on here? When she handed the cashier a \$20 she smiled Danielle’s smile and said, “Keep the change, love.”

The kid behind the register, must have been in his early 20s, blushed hard and said his thanks. Only what she had actually given him was a neatly cut banana leaf, not a \$20 bill. Confused, but before I could say anything to the love-struck clerk, she took my arm and gently led me out of the store.

“We don’t want to be around when the glamour wears off, trust me.” She laughed as she handed me the bottle.

“Glamour?” I asked, as I followed her down the sidewalk and back to the intersection where the little white man across the street told us it was time to walk.

“Yep! You can see through it because you’re not like the rest of them, but he has about thirty minutes or so before he realizes there’s a banana leaf in his register.” She said laughing as she led the way.

“What the hell are you talking about? And where are we going?” I asked beginning to get annoyed. As much as she was acting like and sounding like Danielle, I knew she wasn’t her. “And why are you wearing the face of my best friend?”

She stopped and turned to look at me, her violet eyes flashing the way Dani’s do when she’s being cheeky, “You can call me Ava, and we’re going to your place. Daniel is waiting for us there.” Before I could ask who ‘Daniel’ was, she turned to me again, “He’s the guy in black you’ve been looking for. He would have come around again, but I needed him to go somewhere

else and well, it's a whole thing. I'll explain it all once we're safely at your place." She took my hand and laced her arm into mine and we walked that way the last three minutes it took to get home.

"Fairies use glamour and they can take the shape of anyone they think their target will be more likely to help." I said to her as we walked past the townhouses in my neighborhood.

"You are correct!" she smiled happily. "I chose to look like Danielle because I know how much you miss her. The sadness is coming off of you in waves. You Scorpios, you sure do wear your heart on your sleeve sometimes!"

I was slightly annoyed but not angry. She wasn't wrong, I did miss Dani terribly, and I know it was obvious, but she didn't have to call me out like that. I didn't even know her.

"How do you know so much about me?" I asked as my apartment came into view.

"Well, you were on our radar for a while – a few years actually, but we didn't start following you until recently. Before you went to that doctor that thought anti-depressants would help the monsters go away." She looked a little sad. "I'm sorry we took so long to come forward and help you. It's just that we were under strict orders to watch you until told otherwise."

Knowing that the last thing on my mind should have been the following after all that she had just said, I still blurted it out, "So, you and Daniel are a couple?" *God, you are an idiot.* I screamed at myself.

She laughed, "Gosh no! Dan and I work together. We're partners, have been for years. He's like a brother to me." She stopped and turned to face me, "He's a great guy, but he's also somewhat of a Drama King. He usually takes things out of context and misconstrues jokes. He's insecure about his lineage and how he'll be perceived because of it, so he tries to make up for it with this 'bad boy' exterior, but trust me, he's super emotional."

“Oh. Ew...wait, lineage?” I asked still semi-interested in a possible fling. It had been a while since I’d had anyone to roll around with.

“Yep! He’s a Lycan.” Ava smiled Dani’s smile at me. She had been following me a while. She knew I liked Lycans.

Nearing home, I opened my SoCo and took a swig. The reality of my situation was beginning to dawn on me. This was real. I wasn’t dreaming, and it wasn’t a hallucination. Holy shit.

My apartment door opened before I could put my key in the lock. The guy in black – Dan, was standing in the doorway. Worry fading from his face the moment he laid eyes on us.

“Finally. You’re back.” He smiled, “I hope you don’t mind the intrusion too much, but I needed to make sure that this was a safe place.” He took my purse and my bottle from hands and placed them on my coffee table. Looking around my place I realized he had cleaned up a bit.

“You cleaned my apartment?” I asked, not without some humor in my voice. Here is a man sent out to help me and after breaking into my apartment, he decided to clean it. Who does that?

“Yes well, it was a bit of a mess...” he blushed averting his eyes from me and turning to Ava. “I brought the weapons you requested.”

I cut them off before they could continue, “Okay, enough. Can one of you take the time to let me in on whatever the hell it is that’s going on here? You’re in my apartment without me, you’re following me. You’re paying for my booze with leaves. You claim to be a fairy and that he’s a Lycan, right! I have enough crazy in my life right now I don’t need a couple of crackpots coming in and making things worse!”

They stood staring at me, eyes wide and focused on my right hand. I hadn't realized how worked up I'd become. Looking down to my right hand, I noticed I'd pulled my knife. Dan smiled and came closer, hands up to show he wasn't a threat.

"I'm Daniel, you can call me Dan. I am the only son of two of the oldest Lycan families in the world. She is Ava. She's a fairy with ties all the way back to the Angel Revolt. We are part of an elite squad of magical creatures that hunts down Big Bads." He reached out and gently took the knife out of my hand.

"Lycan? As in...werewolf? Really?" I heard myself asking. I wasn't anywhere near my body. I felt detached as if all this was happening *at me* rather than *to me*.

"Yes, exactly." He smiled to show me his fangs, "Only because I'm the product of one of the oldest lines in Transylvania, and one in Mexico, and with lots of training and practice, I've learned to control my power. I can turn at will and I don't lose my mind to blood." He spoke softly, placing his large, warm hands on my shoulders and sliding them down my arms and up my back, finally resting them on my hips. Our eyes met and I felt calm. "Ava has been on Earth since the closing of the Gates. She has more knowledge than either of us combined, and is a very experienced warrior. We are not here to hurt you."

Ava spoke from behind him, "You're the strongest "mortal" we've ever encountered. By all rights, you should be dead by now. That's her end game. Simone's."

"Dead? Why?" I asked, the effects of the SoCo and Dan's touch lulling me into an almost unnatural calm.

"She exists in a world next door to this one. Something that Stephen King refers to as "Todash Space" but we call the Ether." Ava said, almost apologetically. "Every generation, she marks certain children whom she believes will help her come across into our reality."

“And every generation, she drives the poor chosen children to madness and ultimately, their deaths.” Finished Dan. He looked away from me then, as if remembering the lives lost over his time trying to stop her.

“You’re the only one who has survived this long. We weren’t sure as to why until recently...” Ava began to walk toward me and the Smoke Demons and Shadow walked with her, “These ‘monsters’ that you flee from aren’t here to hurt you.” She said to me as they got closer.

“They are your warning sign, you’re protection against Simone.” Dan said as he led me to the couch to sit down. I grabbed the bottle on the way and took a hard swig. This was a lot to process.

“Who are they?” I asked though the sting of tears in my eyes.

“They are your fear, your pain, your nightmares, your terror, your anger, your self-loathing. Every horrible emotion that Simone has made you feel. They exist to help you fight her. To show you that you are not ruled by your Darkness, but rather supported by it.” Ava came closer and so did the Smoke and Shadows.

“Jiova, there is something you need to know about yourself,” Dan held both my hands in his and focused my attention to his eyes.

“Am I still dreaming? Like that time I was at Lake Tahoe?” I asked, hopeful that I was just stuck in a new nightmare loop.

“No, my beautiful Jiova, this is very real.” He looked away from me, as if it hurt him to look at me for too long.

“What is it? Is it my friends? Are Danielle and Juan okay?” I asked beginning to panic. I hadn’t heard from them very much today. I wasn’t even sure what time it was. I needed to make

sure they were okay. I tried to stand up but Dan firmly held me down, “They are safe. You need to hear this.”

“There’s no easy way to say this...during our research, we learned something rather unexpected. Jiovanna, you’re different because you don’t have a soul.” Ava said from behind Dan’s bowed head.

“I don’t have a...what?” I felt cold, the isolation I always felt was magnified and was I smothered by its weight.

“As far as we can tell, you were born without one, but you’re still a good person. That’s why she hasn’t been able to kill you or hurt you. You’re a lot stronger than her.” Dan looked at me again and smiled.

“I’m a Monster?” All the years of Darkness played over in my mind. All the years of loneliness and isolation even when surrounded by people who cared about me. All the years of *knowing* I was different, yet not understanding how. All those years of feeling lost to my madness. I felt the SoCo trying to come back up, I forced it down with another long pull from my bottle.

“You are only a Monster if you think of yourself as one, Jiova.” Dan said as he gently but firmly took the bottle from my mouth and set it on the coffee table before me.

“You have always had a choice and you have always chosen to do good. You genuinely care for people. You aren’t evil. You are a different entity all together. There has never been one like you.” Ava smiled at me through the tears in her eyes...or maybe it was just my tears making my world swim before me.

The room was too small. It was too dark. It was too full of monsters. “I need air.” I whispered as I pushed past Dan with a strength I didn’t know I had and made my way out of my

apartment. I could feel the tears streaming down my face, the overcast sky a reflection of my mind. Standing at the fence that enclosed the overflow pond across my apartment I realized how quiet it was. No birds could be heard, even though I could see them clearly. No chicarras, no crickets or ducks quaking.

“It’s the glamour. You know how Hermione casts protective charms while she, Harry, and Ron are on the run in book six?” Ava asked from behind me. “Same concept. We’re in sort of a ‘Muggle Proof Bubble’.”

“No one can see us or hear us. At least, not if they’re human, anyway.” I turned to face her, looking over her shoulder at the Army of Trauma that was standing back a few feet outside my patio door, watching us. Watching me.

“I know this is a lot to process. Even though it was decades ago, I still remember the pain of being Cast Out, but we pull ourselves together. We make a decision and we move on.” Ava watched me watching my Army of Loneliness, my Army of Distrust, of Nightmare, of Sorrow. “They serve to help you, not hold you back. As do Dan and I.”

I turned back to the chain link fence and watched the silent ducks and the garzas that now accompanied them in the murky water. My whole life I spent wondering ‘why me?’ and now that I had an answer I didn’t like I wanted to retract the whine? That’s laughable. My father didn’t raise me to be a crybaby. He made it a point to raise a chingona and I always carried that title with pride. Now, all of a sudden, I was too scared to take the next step and accept who I truly am? What I truly am? I closed my eyes and relished the memory of my ‘normal’ life. Something told me that soon, that’s all I would have left.

I turned and looked Ava in her violet eyes, “What do I have to do?”

She smiled at me and placed her pale hand on my forehead, “Close your eyes and think of those you love most.” She spoke softly, there was warmth coming from her. Having lived in the Dark for so long, I had expected cold. I closed my eyes and thought of Danielle. I thought of the late nights spent in her kitchen. Drinking whiskey and dishing out our guy troubles. I thought of Juan and our countless conversations about ‘Ancient Aliens’. I thought of Patrick and the days filled with cuddles and tentative plans for a future that included our ginger haired twins. I thought of my family, off doing their own thing, off excelling at their own happiness. I thought of the love I have for them all. The different kinds of it. The different levels. Every one of them taught me something about who I am. Every one of them shaped me in a vital way.

The warmth from Ava’s outstretched hand flowed from the top of my head down my limbs to my toes. Every inch of me tingled with a new sense, a new power I had never felt. Opening my eyes, the world looked different. It was as if someone has turned up the saturation on reality. It was so bright; it hurt to look at anything directly.

“What the hell...”

“It’s alright, your eyes will adjust. This is what the world looks like to everyone else.” Ava said with Dani’s borrowed smile. “You accepted your true form; therefore you can now see the beauty in the world you reside in.”

“Well, that’s fucken cheesy.” I said, as slowly the colors that had been attacking my senses lulled themselves into resistance. My eyes adjusted to the new brilliance, the lethargy I had felt almost my entire life was lifted. Limbs tingling with a strength I never thought I’d have, I looked for my Army of Trauma and saw them in their true form. No longer were they Smoke and Shadow, but fully formed versions of myself. Every one of them had a weapon of their

choosing. Every one of them had their own armor. They both looked like me and not at the same time. But they were smiling. All of them were.

“Cheesy maybe, but at least you’re whole now.” It was Dan. He had joined Ava and me by the fence.

“How can I be if I have no soul?” I asked, wondering if Ava had *given* me one when she’s placed her hand on me.

“Most mortals need a soul to survive, but you’re not a mortal.” Said Dan with a smile that explained his interest in me.

“As an Immortal, and the only one of your kind – so far – you got to choose your own path. You chose to have love and compassion for those around you. You learned it from your mortal family.” Ava smiled wide, her own smile this time.

“And while you will outlive them, you will always love them and have the capacity to love others.” Dan looked down when I met his eyes. Shy all of a sudden, he *was* emotional.

I started laughing then. A huge laugh that started in my belly and bubbled its way out my mouth in a cacophonous “Revenge of the Nerds” type of laughter that could be heard for miles, were it not for Ava’s protective charms, I’m sure. Here is a Lycan and a Fairy – a Fallen Angel – telling me that because I know love I can never be evil. Because I know love I can defeat my Wraith. Because I know love I have an Army of Trauma at my disposal. Because I know love, I’m basically Harry Potter. I’m Rey of Jakku. I’m Luke Skywalker. I’m Roland Deschain. I’m Jessica Jones. I’m Diana Prince. I’m Rogue. I’m Sam and Dean Winchester. I’m every weirdo I have every read about and looked up to. I am the Grey Jedi. I am the Boy Who Lived. I am the Force. I am Bilbo Baggins. I am every down – on – their – luck – anti-hero – protagonist I have grown up admiring.

I double over to catch my breath as tears stream from my face and onto the dirt at my feet. Ava and Dan stand back and watch me, smiling. My Army begins to chuckle along with me and I know. I *know* I am now ready to take down Simone. Queen Mother of Darkness and Decay. I *know* I can take her down because just like her, I was born of the Dark. But unlike her, I didn't adopt or adapt to it. I embraced it.

Pulling myself together, I stand and regain my composure. I have a lot of work to do before I'm ready to face her, but with Ava and Dan by my side, I know I can take her. My friends and family will move on and live their lives happy and healthy and free of Darkness. I know this because I will protect them. I will make sure of it. They are my charges as I prepare to take down the Wraith.

"Okay. Let's do this." I say with a smile that I actually feel in my heart. "I'm ready." I look at my Army and they raise their weapons in salute, "We're ready." Taking Ava's outstretched hand, I feel whole.

CHAPTER V

POISON AND MONSTERS

As I write this, I can feel my brain pounding. It swells and peaks. It threatens rupture. My stiff neck unyielding steel rods hold the unbending hurt in my head and upper body. Through clenched jaws I do my best to smile. To ignore the torment. The pressure builds up behind my right eye. The voice of Damage in my head screams my unworthiness – it's coming now. My end will be here shortly.

All I can do is barricade myself in my cave and swallow the chemicals my doctors gave me, “Well Jiovanna, sometimes a little poison a day can help keep the monsters away.” Yeah, thanks doc. But no amount of drug can keep my monster at bay. Sometimes, the drugs coax her out. Sometimes my stress calls her. She's here again. She has been. I've been trying to ignore her for weeks to no avail.

She's sitting with me in the soft gloom. Caressing me with her smoke talons that feel like hot iron, Simone. I hadn't been sleeping. I'd heard her talking. I'd told myself I'd dreamt it. Hell, Juan and Danielle told me the same thing. I wanted to believe them. But deep down, I knew. She made herself known to me like the ghosts of Poe's unnamed tormented. Her tell-tell signs like the beating of the heart they kept repeating. Her shadow in my peripherals in the South Texas sun. Her suffocating cloud of self-doubt shrouding me in velvet darkness. Her near constant cackle. They didn't know I wasn't sleeping.

When I open my eyes, the pain washes over me and the walls drip like melted wax. Reality is quicksilver, slick in the distance of my understanding. *I'm alone in this* I think, but then I see her. I can always see her. Even in darkness, she makes damn sure of that. Her coal red eyes burn with a deep fury I've never understood. She smiles at me with a mouth too full of razors. Tonguing the pointed tips. Tar-like saliva oozing from her gaping mouth. Simone. She won't let me die alone. She's been with me since I was 4. My oldest friend. My first enemy. Her kindness soured over time, or maybe she just got tired of pretending. This bitch will follow me into oblivion.

I dreamt I died and finally found peace, finally found rest. An existence without Smoke Demons and Damage ravaging my mind. Then I woke up in my bed. In my room. Covered in sweat, and still in pain. Her gaze still following me. Her laughter still rolling like deep thunder in the distance. Stumbling around, tears streaming, heart pounding, sightless in a world too full of light. My hands shaking with desperate effort, I ripped the caps off and upend my pill bottles. Fioricet 50-325-40 MG (55 pills), Naproxen 500MG (24 pills). A careful combination of barbiturates and anti-inflammatories all in one go. The aim? Not death necessarily, but simple, quiet, lasting relief.

I wanted to end the blinding ache. The silver taste of madness on my tongue. The realization that you'll have happiness and I'll only have Simone. I had her darkness. I had the riot in my skull that nothing could stop. How do you cure something when you have no idea what causes it? Migraines come in spells, in periods of affliction. Almost anything can be a trigger. Sleep deprivation is one of mine. I've been pining lately. Pining over someone who doesn't even realize I'm pining over him. Pathetic, I know. But Simone, she knows how I feel and came to keep me company. To make sure she made me understand that true loneliness

doesn't end with a warm body by your side. This poison, all it does is help me sleep through the pain, but to sleep is to dream of him and to dream of him is to feel pain.

Poetic. I know.

I dream of his smile, his gentle air, the way he talks to my protagonists...I dream of the culmination of the man I want. He's the man I write. The man I envision as the "The One". He's the perfect blend of clichés and stereotypes, intelligence, wit, sarcasm, strength, care, sensitivity. The strong, silent type, who doesn't shy away from an outspoken woman. One who doesn't sink into himself when she's speaks her mind. A man who will stand aside and let her fight her own battles, but will be there to hold her when it's over. Win or lose. I write of the man I dream because I'm starting to think that he doesn't exist for me. I spend so much time in my own head worrying about perceptions. Listening to all the negative honesty that Damage shrieks at me. My standards are too high for someone with so many issues, she's says. Damage is ruled by Simone. Simone tries to rule my behavior. She acts out when she doesn't get her way. To meet someone who understands this, who won't run from it, is a feat all its own. Simone knows this, so she has Damage remind me. Constantly.

The bottles lay empty on my white futon. A symbol of purity I could never live up to. Crawling back to my bed, my stomach churning. Visualizing the acid in my gut attempting to digest the pills, my brain on the cusp of detonation. I laugh. I almost began to pray. I can't remember the last time I prayed to an Idea I know doesn't exist. Pulling myself up on to my bed, I try to recall the *Lord's Prayer*, but my mind spins the English and Spanish versions together like swirled ice cream. It's too much to climb and think. I begin to sing instead, "*Ohh, you're half way there, ooh oh! Livinin' on a Prayer...*" I dare a cautious smile. Lying on my side, my knees to my chest, sweat drenching my pillow. I'm lost in the tangled darkness that is a mixture

of heartache, mental pain, cowardice, desperation, and laughter. Her laughter. Always her laughter like gravel on aluminum. I hear the bells I feared as a child. They keep getting louder. I run toward them rather than shy away and...

My alarm is loud. *Good God in fucking Heaven why is it so god damn loud? Ugh, my head is killing me. What the hell is up with the trippy ass dreams lately?* I stumble over to my purse on my futon and take my fioricet and my naproxen along with my zonisamide, birth control, and folic acid (all recommended doses). The last three are daily – to assuage the pain monster in my brain. The first two are abortive meds – for nasty migraines that blindsides. I shut the shutters and send Danielle a text, “Morning. Head kills. Taking meds then back to sleep. Feel awful. Have a good class” I don’t wait for a response. The focus it took to compose a coherent text message was enough to have me seeing a kaleidoscope of unexplored galaxies dancing behind my half-shut eyes.

My body is tense, my neck stiff. Later, when I wake from the mini-coma I’m about to induce, my kidneys will scream for hydration. My joints will beg for movement. My brain will feel swollen – far too large for my skull. I feel so much pain daily. *At least I’m alive.* I see her, Simone. She’s on my futon soiling it with her black tar, laughing. *Fuck you, you gah damn sow.* I cover my eyes with a t-shirt I half hope will suffocate me as I sleep and roll over. Away from her. Away from the light seeping through the shutters. This blows, but at least I’ll be able to sleep now. The meds’ll knock me out long enough to make up for some of what I’ve been lacking lately. Before drifting off I picture Juan’s smile, I remember him saying, “Simone ain’t nothing but a pansy bitch parasite that only exists because of you. She’s got no power, so don’t give her any.” *I won’t. I won’t.* I remember Danielle saying, “Is she there now? I’ve got sage; I will go into your room and fuck a bitch up!” Smiling, my dreams are of them and of our friends.

Of jumping realities. Looking for hats, evading zombies, diving into the crystalline waters of Lake Tahoe. Of Mapaches and Infected. Of Fairies and Lycans. And always of taking down Simone. I spent so many years trying to take her down alone; it's only now that I know I can't. Without my friends I'm lost to her ether. I'm right back where I was as a child. Before drifting off, I wonder what life would be like without her. Before I can begin to picture that bliss she's back and singing to me, forcing me to remember her. I resign myself to her horror and fall into the abyss of my nightmares.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jiovanna L. Pérez is a 2018 graduate of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Creative Writing Masters of Fine Arts program. She also holds a certificate in Mexican – American Studies from UTRGV, and in 2014 she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy with a double minor in English and History from the University of Texas Pan – American. Jiovanna writes about popular culture and it's relation to oppression and marginalization within minority groups as well as focuses her creative writing in the realm of fantasy. She has taught ENGL 1301 and 1302 at the college level, and has led writing workshops for the Veterans at the university through the university veteran writing program: A Walk In Our Boots. She hopes to continue inspiring a love of writing in all students.