

Vivian's Hyde

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English.

Department of English and Humanities

BRAC University

July, 2024

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Declaration

I hereby declare that,

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing a degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

The thesis (novelette) titled, “Vivian’s Hyde” submitted by Wahida Munshi Bani (19203009) of Summer 2024 has been accepted in satisfaction to the partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English.

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Ethics Statement

I hereby declare that this work of fiction written by me is a genuine work of mine and it has not been published anywhere else. It has been written to fulfill the requirement for completing the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English at BRAC University.

Abstract

The novelette is centered on a female private investigator in a dystopian city, who is deeply haunted by the atrocities of her past. The main lead faces her past through a sequence of nightmares that particularly do not belong to her. Ultimately, these nightmares manifest around her as the antagonist and she has a hard time grasping the psychological manipulation and her actual reality.

Acknowledgement

First, I would like to hereby dedicate this piece of work to Wahida of the past for her perseverance to push through and enjoy herself while writing this and finally, reach today.

Second, no amount of gratitude would be enough for my supervisor and my mentor, Dr Mahruba Mowtushi for guiding me through my creative freedom with her words of encouragement and patience.

Thirdly, I am immensely grateful to my friends for taking the time to read my story and to love and express it as my first readers. I would also like to specially thank my good friend, Nasif, for leading me through all my smiles and struggles with writing this.

Finally, I am overwhelmingly thankful to my friend, Ananya Das, for painting the cover or concept art (next page) for my story, bringing my vision into reality with both mine and her perspective as the reader.



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Chapter- 1

I deserved it. I deserved the blood on my cold hands.

Evadne wakes up with a jolt from her sleep, the pillows soaking wet, from tears or from sweat. She did not know, did not care. To her, it is the same dream all over again. *Yeah, a dream...not a nightmare.* She looks around her ghostly bedroom, outlining the shape of the only two pieces of furniture beside her bed. She, then, notices that it is deep into the night there in the city of KellyJ. The city lights seem more inviting than her bedroom, so she gets down from her bed and grabs her trench coat to head out into the night. The building is...*dead*. The pasty wallpapers are barely sticking, a mouse runs by her feet, and the window down the hallway creaks eerily with the winter breeze, but to her, this was...*home. I deserve it.* She steps on the staircase and singles out any noise around her, but she could not ignore the whimpering coming from behind her neighbor's door. It is just another day for them, the husband will probably come out of the house tomorrow morning with bruises and a limp, just as he has the other day; Evadne does not remember how many days it has been since.

Please, help me, my wife will not let me live any longer. Please. She recalls him pleading, and mirroring the cold stoic face she had back then to now. Could she have helped? Maybe. Will she do it? *No.* She passes by the door, quite easily one could point out. Is she not a detective? Is she not on the side of justice? Why is she not helping? *Because it's not on my desk.*

The ground floor of the building appears to have aged more than the rest. At the far end of the hallway, you could see the half-broken doors, one with a machete pasted on, shattered glasses, torn off sofas, probably aging more than figure gazing at them, all of which are now home to the rodents. Evadne finally tears her gaze from the olden relics, stepping outside to the freezing city.

KellyJ during this time of the year breathes more life than the rest of the days. She recalls when she first appeared in the city and a particular drunkard told her the story of Kelly James, the one who saved the city from flames.

“A penny for a story, please, would you?” a man with a tattered navy suit stepped outside the shadows of the alley. Evadne does not reply, she was never much of a talker, anyways. She just stared straight at the man with dead eyes, hoping he would leave her alone. The only bit of light reflecting on the man’s rugged features was coming from the vending machine she was standing in front of, and it only shone on his face. It didn't take long for her to realize that his features were charred.

“A penny for a story, please...” He repeated, completely ignoring her face screaming at him to leave her alone. “How about you tell me the ‘story’ first and I’ll decide if you are worth this penny.” Evadne showed the coppers in her hand that she had to get a coffee from the vending machine. She felt bad, perhaps just a tiny bit, because the men in this world don’t have anything to offer to it, nor does this world pay two coppers about their mere existence. “Yes, please, however you like it.”. Evadne could not ignore the vigorous nodding coming from the man. He seemed a bit too excited for her liking.

“A young girl adopted into a family of two mothers, wondered everyday where she came from. By the age of ten, she knew she was not theirs. She didn’t remember if it was her friend who told her the secret of the world, or as she called it. It wasn’t much of a secret, more so an open truth or universal secret for the adults. By the age of fifteen, she realized how hidden it was to the world that she had two mothers instead of one, a clandestine tale, and that someone was missing in her story of a perfect family. She read about them in the fairytales that were lying away from

view in dust under her bed. Everyday she went to school with both her mother's goodbyes and kisses, every day she went to bed with her stuffed bunny and her mother's kisses. Then, one day, they were gone, they were no more, they were engulfed in the flames. The flames of their factory spread throughout the city because the men thought it was too haughty to listen to a woman who suggested devising fire preventative methods everywhere in the city. They laughed and asked why there would be any fire in this magnificent city of theirs. As soon as the flames appeared engulfing the whole city in ashes, they disappeared. How? As the city flames disappeared soon, suddenly everyone started muttering the name of Kelly James, they screamed in delight at their savior. Who was Kelly James? When asked, no one answered because they had no recollection of meeting her, but they all knew her name. How? There was no one in the city by the name of Kelly James but then amongst the destruction left by the flames in the factory, a fairy tale appeared, almost charred except for one corner that remained pristine and it felt almost wrong holding something so pure amidst the chaos around. It was a book signed by "Kelly J". Who was Kelly James? Now, it was the name of the city since the forgotten times, a tribute to Kelly who saved their world from the flames. To the people, she was the tranquil water no one knew about."

The old man ended the story and Evadne didn't realize she was holding her breath for the most part. She muttered a small thank you and handed him four coppers instead of the two originally promised. "That was a good story.", she nodded. She noticed the teary-eyed man longingly eyeing the coppers before sharing one last sentiment, "Welcome to Kelly J."

Evadne returned the next week after settling into her new abode but never found the man again. Some say he was executed, while others didn't remember him staying there. "I know he was here.", she spoke out loud, perhaps to the sky.

The sudden jolt breaks her train of thoughts and she soon realizes it was her stop to get down. The route that leads to Lumiere Club is what one would describe as a pitch-black labyrinth. Evadne doesn't find the corners suffocating though, this has been her path for the past couple of weeks, every two days to be precise. This is the case currently on her desk. She treads down the muddy path, *it rained yesterday*, not paying heed to the sinister silence echoing through her brain. While the moonlight shields away from this portion of the urban decay, the club's lights soon appear, piercing through the graffiti-stricken walls around it. Her target for the case appears here exactly around 2:30 am like clockwork, after his wife goes to bed for the night. He stands in front of the line, palms clasped around...*another man*. Evadne quickly takes a photo with the camera, her phone lights up in her pocket indicating that it successfully saved. Now, this is a fairly new finding. The wife had commissioned her about a month back, paying a hefty sum in advance to tail her husband. Now, these are really not the kind of cases that Evadne generally even bat an eye for, however, *beggars can't be choosers*, and with funds running low, she took on whatever she could get. She follows close by the target, and so, she enters the booming noise of remixes and mashups of the trending soundtracks. Spotting them take a seat by the bar, she does the same beside a girl in a neon green leather bodysuit. The girl flutters her thick fake lashes at her, and Evadne inwardly smirks thinking about her perfect plan to chop her hair short to give her almost a boyish look, which is now working. City girls drool over others who embrace the '(wo)men of the new world' vibe after dismantling the existence of the actual gender. She falls into a series of small talks that are becoming bothersome with every passing second and she almost prays for the target to do something, *anything at this point*, and she eyes as he finally gets up and walks towards the restrooms. She gets up too, but then suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she spots the other man slip a lime coloured powder into one of the crimson wine glasses.

To her dismay, she could not take a snap of it. Should she inform her target? *No, not my problem.*

The man who presumably has drugged the drink soon gets up and makes his way towards the restroom. Evadne follows him but the mob of crowd on the dance floor is not making it any easier for her. There are sweaty hands, legs and bodies touching her everywhere and it takes her a second to regain her composure and push her way towards the restrooms. It is her best bet and she stands correct, just when the two men are at her eyesight, the other man hands him the crimson glass. Then, they walk towards the back of the bar, to the private rooms. She takes a picture of them and finally walks out of this nightmare. Her job is done. Was it too soon? Maybe, *but the wife only asked me to gather proof that her husband was cheating, she probably didn't expect that it would be with another man.* She sends the pictures to the wife and finally makes her way back home. *Too easy.*

Within the next two hours, she gets a frantic call from the wife, screaming at the top of her lungs and Evadne could only catch a few words.

Husband...dead...suspect...dead...you killed him.

Chapter- 2

Tell me, how have I reached this insanity to bring him down...

No, I did not kill the woman's husband or the other man.

The police found absolutely no evidence that Evadne is involved, other than just being hired to follow the husband. She, however, did witness the other man pouring a powder into the drinks but just like her, they are confused as to how he also ended up dead just two hours after the husband's devastating heart attack. They ask for Evadne's help in solving the case but she pointedly declines. *Give it three days, they will forget a case with male victims even existed.* However, Evadne could not but she learnt it the hard way to suppress her emotions where it is needed. She makes her way back to that old building that she has been calling home for some time now. The stairs creaked oh so familiarly, the coolness of her door knob, the rusty piercing noise finally breaking the silence of the room. She is back to her own space. *Wait a second*, her thoughts crumbled. She hasn't reached her comfort space just yet, it was a mere illusion, and the reason is standing in front of her building, holding a duffle bag. Evadne is aware of where this is going.

"No. I am done with your work, it's not on my desk anymore." It is true, she really did remove the papers from her desk, meaning it's not her responsibility anymore. She tries to move to the side to walk past the wife. "Please, you have to find out who killed him. I'll do anything, I am betting all the gold coins in my possession right now. Please...my love..he left me this letter", she falls down to the muddy ground, clutching at her mouth, failing to block any sobs coming out. She unfolds the letter and hands it to Evadne.

Jane, my love, forgive me for we both have sinned. Let us be each other's devils, let the consequences of our actions whisper through the shadows.

- *Clark Nelson.*

Evadne reads the letter at least two more times before looking down at the wife. She needs to figure out if Jane knows what the letter means. “What do you think your husband meant by this letter?”. Jane doesn't take a second to reply, “I don't have any clue. We have never caused any form of trouble for anyone. We always believed to be kinder than the kind that we could be.”. It sounded almost rehearsed to Evadne.

“Listen, it is up to the police now. I have done what I had to do and I spoke to them too.”. She chokes a little before continuing, “It is up to Senior Officer Nora now.”. Evadne knows what's going to happen, that this case is going to be swept under the rug. It would never be their priority, does anybody need to be told why? *Now, this would never be called stereotyping.* It takes some time but Evadne finally succeeds in getting rid of the wife. She leaves with a tear-soaked face, perhaps with more disappointment at this world than she ever had before.

Evadne is finally back to her room, taking off her auburn trench coat and hanging it on the rack beside the small mirror. She turns and looks around her room, trying to relish any leftover peace it could offer. She has a lot on her mind. The coat behind her hung like it always did, with small cuts sewed up and some threads coming off from the collar. It seems old to the point that no amount of ironing could straighten the creases anymore. Is that why she gave up on taking any extra care of it? There are fresher cuts on the arms now, from the building's iron gate in the

corner, leading to the back door. It has some dirt on the belt too, maybe from a rainy day. No amount of wash is stripping the dirt anymore. So, she leaves the coat just like that.

The bed feels cold to the touch, maybe that's how she likes it. She lays on the bed, thinking back to the events earlier. She couldn't help but have this nagging thought that there is something to this case that everyone is missing. *What...just what...* Evadne knows it but she can't pinpoint it just yet. She drifts off from the world for the night with her head feeling heavy.

“Mother, look what I drew!”, a little boy held up a piece of paper, standing on his little toes to reach his mother's face as much as he could. The mother only kept gazing towards the room next door, as if the little boy didn't exist.

“MOTHER, LOOK!” he screamed with a sternness that didn't quite match his age. His mother ignored him. He touched his mother's arm to get her attention but it was of no use. Her hands were cold, just like her gaze.

He deflated and walked out of the room with a little pout, only to jolt up with a slap to his face.

“You are forbidden to enter the room, how dare you disobey me!”. The man walked fast past him to close the door behind the little boy. The little boy palmed his cheek, trying to hold in the stream of tears threatening to overflow. He looked towards the distance at his mother's eyes, one last time before the door broke his heart yet again. He knew what was coming next. The old scars on his back ached, as if they knew what was coming. Then, it did, inside the room where the mother kept on gazing.

The little boy stepped outside the room, now a little older, his babyish features gone. The man behind him watched the boy limp away outside the room almost forgetting the ritual.

A chill ran down his spine. He almost forgot his practice. "Thank you, Father.", and he closed the door behind him. He walked past the other closed door. He learnt by now not to even look that way, as if that room didn't exist. He stepped down the stairs to his underground abode, and lit up the place, revealing countless sketches of humans...and animals...with the most intricate details in a disarray.

Evadne wakes up with the worst headache she's had in ages. She tries in vain to piece together what she has seen in her dream. Everything seems foggy. She decides not to waste time thinking much of it because she has a case to solve on her desk. It finally occurs to her the detail she had been missing last night. She rushes out of the bed and gets ready for the day, planning her course of action while she wears the same coat from last night.

The wife is hiding something...but what? The letter-

The letter the wife showed her last night felt odd. From her previous investigation, the husband was anything but religious. She recalls a phone conversation she overheard while following him.

"Yeah...I get it. I love her and if she wants to follow the path of God, she's free too. I love her regardless. Her views may not match with mine but that's alright. All's good because it's her."

The husband was not religious, in any way. He couldn't have written the letter. She decides to follow the wife today, staking out near her home. The wife comes out an hour later and strides towards the opposite direction. Evadne follows her close by and spots her entering the local town hall. She enters the premises after a minute, under the pretense of waiting for someone. Evadne sits at the far corner and tries to spot Jane. She is nowhere to be seen. She gets up to look around and pretends to marvel at the details of the walls. When she nears the corridor, Jane comes

outside of a room and Evadne swiftly moves behind the wall to hide. She notices Jane glancing around, *is she suspicious?* She decides to be extra careful from here on. Jane walks further away and just when Evadne is about to follow her, a woman comes out from the same room with something in her hands. She ushers a maid on the other end of the hallway and hands her what seems like a circle shaped object. The maid's hands visibly shake as she holds it.

To Evadne's utter surprise, the object falls on the floor with a loud *CLAM* echoing on the walls of the corridor and breaks into little pieces, revealing a powdery substance inside. That substance looked oddly familiar. *That lime color...* The sound alerts the maids nearby and they all swiftly make their way towards the broken pieces with a broom, trying to clean every bit of it.

Meanwhile, the first maid stands there frozen with a visible shake in front of the older one. She says something which Evadne could not figure out so she keeps her eye on the powder instead and watches it being swept away. *I need to know what that was. Why are they being so uptight about it?*

The maids pass by Evadne hiding in the shadows, and she makes a point of following the one who was left to throw the dirt away. So, when she moves, Evadne follows closely to find her pacing past the hallways and exiting through the back. The maid drops everything she has on her hands, including the broom and dust pan and even her hand gloves in the trash. *Who throws away their cleaning supplies after such minimum use? They seemed relatively new...* She also notices the woman pull her sleeves down as much as possible to hide her now bare palms and walk back inside the church. Evadne waits for a few minutes and she comes out when she feels that the coast is clear. She wears gloves of her own and goes through the trash, moving away any garbage bag blocking her view. Unfortunately, she does not find anything and it is as if the lime powder vanished into thin air. *I am sure I saw the maid dropping the contents inside this bin. How did it*

disappear in just a few minutes? Even if it did vanish, this is an important clue. It's a powder-like substance that probably reacts to air and so, *it needs an airtight container, which could be a circle shaped compact container too.* The container from the church looked oddly familiar but Evadne couldn't figure out where she saw it.

She starts walking towards the street trying to think without realizing where she is heading. *Just think, where did I see it?* Suddenly, she bumps into a structure with her knee and she looks up to find a scene that reflects nothing but a page out of the serenest fairytale, that is the first thing that comes to her mind. Evadne looks around and notices how there is no sign of life and her eyes go back towards the most captivating water fountain she has seen in a while. She does not recall ever stepping into this area before. The gray structure stands taller than her with gushing waters from all sides and the calmness of the water falling from one layer to another, the little droplets landing on her face, soothing her tense features, it was the comfort Evadne needed. Behind the fountain, the sun is finally setting for some rest, casting that ethereal golden glow on the crystal-clear water.

Evadne's mind clears just like that. She makes her way towards one of the benches, as if she is in a trance, as if the rust, moss and vines are all calling for her, almost like a mother's warmth. It was something she forgot or perhaps she never had, she can't remember. She takes a seat there gazing at this mesmerizing view as the water sparkles like a million diamonds. *So precious...* It is tranquility amidst the chaos inside Evadne's consciousness. Her mind becomes a clean slate and she lets go of the breath she has been holding on for so long and just on cue, a new wave of soothing symphonies surrounds her. The soft chirping of birds, the running water, the rustling of trees, they feel close to home, as if they were there just for...*me. Is this truly real?*

She is grateful but who should she thank for this beautiful scene? *Myself for finding this or...* she quickly shakes her head to focus back on the matter at hand. She has seen that powder box somewhere but where, that lime powder also seemed strangely familiar. Her mind goes back to a few days, months and even years and then something clicks.

“Welcome, please come in.” Jane ushered as she stood by the entrance.

It was the day I first went to her house. The home was as homely as anyone could imagine but it felt revolting. It had these expensive portraits of their gods as you walked in and Evadne ever so softly just shook her head and stepped past them. Jane led her to the living room on the right of the portraits and the place smelled like those cozy afternoons with coffee, it didn't take long for me to notice the candle lit on the side.

I sat on the couch opposite to her and figured that I should at least compliment her home, right?

“You have a beautiful home.” Yeah, I think this much will do? Do I really need to go for more?

Jane instantly lit up and gave a big smile. “Oh, thank you so much!!”. What I didn't expect was her to start going into the whole history about how she decorated the place, where she brought everything from, even the portraits in the hallway, how everything cost so much and this went on for way too long. Fortunately, she drifted to the story of her husband and she started discussing the plan more so like she kept telling me about what she needed me to do. It was a simple case, she needed me to investigate her husband who she suspected to be cheating. I took note of some of his most visited locations to look for clues. Then, it hit me that I didn't know what the husband looked like. So, I asked for a picture.

“Uh...right.”, that seemed odd. How did she forget that? “You know what since you loved the house so much!” I didn’t, “how about I show you around? We can grab a picture of my husband from the bedroom.” Oh no...

The agonizing conversation and tour continued, I zoned out from the conversation and focused on how odd it was that there were no pictures of the husband anywhere, only occasional pictures of her and lots of ceramic decorative pieces of their god wherever I lay my eyes.

“You both seem very religious,” I commented. It took her a minute to reply that it was just her. Again, odd. The husband must be very understanding of her choices then because the whole house is screaming at you to repent or be damned.

We finally reached the bedroom upstairs and again, I was greeted with a huge portrait of similar kinds hung on the wall on top of their bed frame. Jane asked me to take a seat at the corner as she looked through her closet for one picture. Interesting... Meanwhile, I took the time to look around the bedroom from my place. It was just as homely too. It wasn’t too big but it had an old vintage bed, one closet that didn't appear big enough to hold clothes for two people, a nightstand, and a huge cream rug under the bed but not a single picture of the husband or the couple.

Then, as if everything paused around me, I finally noticed that painstakingly similar circle-shaped object on the nightstand just beside a foundation and lipstick. It was a compact face powder. That’s it. There it is.

Chapter- 3

Evadne is sitting on her bed with her legs crossed, fumbling with her phone in hand and contemplating who to call. Right now, she can take two routes. She can either call Jane or call *her*. She knows who has murdered Clark Nelson, she has solved the mystery. Now, she can inform the wife, the one who has commissioned her, or she can call *her* and help the police solve the case. Neither option is sitting right with her and she taps the phone on her forehead out of frustration. Calling Jane would probably throw the whole investigation off for the police and the real culprit would probably never be found because she herself is the murderer. However, calling *her* could also imply that she is willing to help them for future cases when she strictly specified that she wouldn't. *What if Nora also thinks I am willing to give our relationship another chance. I would rather die than let her or them think that.*

She decides to think this through tomorrow after some sleep. *Yes, sleep helps, I will have a clearer mind tomorrow.* She finally lets her body get the good rest it needs after the whole day and her mind drifts off from thinking about getting a new pillow to...

SMASH!

“My apologies, father! Please allow me to clean this.”, the boy scurried right away to clean the plate that his father possibly purposefully dropped from his side. He quickly piled up the broken pieces. A piece produced a fresh cut on his thumb but he had mastered hiding any wince or pain on his face by then. He got up and asked for permission to leave the room, hiding the thumb behind him, all the while cutting new ones on his other palm from the tight grip of the broken plate. He didn't care.

The father started to hum to the song playing in the room. The son stood there praying for his father to show any form of yes so he could escape from there. The father looks up as if he just realized the boy was standing there and ushered him to leave. He bolted.

He returned later to clean the dining room and it was the final task of the day. He smiled excitedly, counting the minutes on the grandfather clock beside him for his father to retire to bed for the day. He was going to hear it; he had been hearing it for the past ten years. It was that satisfying creak of his father's door followed by a muffled click of the lock.

He was free. It was his time to shine.

He needed to let go of the stress today. He needed to paint. He needed to paint red.

He went down the familiar steps, getting even more excited by every second. He had an inspiration. He stripped out all his clothing, and stood in front of his canvas with a paintbrush on his palm. He looked down towards the fresh tub of red paint that smelled like comfortable death and dipped his brush there. The boy didn't remember what happened afterwards, but he was welcomed by the face of his innermost demon in red on his canvas. His newest masterpiece.

"Oh, no, I am almost out of paint...", he looks up the corner of his room filled with cages of...rats.

Oh, no...Evadne hates waking up with these headaches. Just great. She needs to decide her next action today and now she has this massive headache. To be honest, Evadne knows what she has to do, she has from last night. I know...I'm just dreading it. She gets up from the bed, her feet leading her to the bathroom with eyes barely open. A weary reflection greets her and she stands there with a million thoughts pouring through her head. She shakes her head in an attempt to

block them from continuing more because she doesn't want to go back to that place again. She begins her simple morning ritual, her temporary tranquility. She cups her palm under the faucet and lets the cool water pool. She stares back at the mirror and in return, her reflection gazes back with a kind of longing. She lets the water splash against her skin and *this is it. This was exactly what I needed.* Every cool droplet is caressing her like a small hug, instantly calming her. The overbearing thoughts are finally at the back of her head and each splash of the water cascades over her tensed wrinkles. *Did you know that water has a unique aroma? Just as a pond's water can taste different from the sea's, it smells differently too.* She can't recall where this memory has suddenly come from. Where did she hear it? Shaking her head in an attempt to ignore the previous thought, Evadne begins to reconnect with reality, her mind clearer, enough to finally decide her next course of action. She gets dressed for the day and puts on her usual auburn coat and steps outside of her apartment. *Strange...I can't hear the couple fighting anymore.* It is not a matter of concern for her so she quickly steps down the stairs, finally outside the grim building. She reaches the corner that's secluded enough and stands against the dark brick wall taking the time to stare at her phone, at that one contact she promised that she would never call.

Memories flood Evadne's mind. Her first kitchen play set, *she bought it*; her elementary school dance, *she was there backstage*; her middle school soccer try-out, *she was there in the audience*; her high school prom, *she was there behind the camera*; her first breakup, *she was there hugging me...she was always there.*

What happened then? Why is Evadne so reluctant to call someone who means so much to her?
Because then...she was not there...

Evadne presses the dial button and waits for it to connect. Somewhere in the city, the receiver takes her time to pick it up just like her. She stands there dazed, just like Evadne on the other end. To both of them, this call is not possible but somehow, it's right there in front of them. Evadne clutches the phone a little tighter, her palm turning pale. *No, this is a bad—*

“Hello, Officer Nora speaking.”. Evadne hears a familiar voice, but instead of that sweet tone that was once dedicated only to her, it is a voice with an underlying grudge masked. *Does she know?*

Evadne toughens up as much as she can. “Listen, let's keep this short for both of our sake. In the recent case of Clark Nelson, it's the wife. The wife has been suspicious since the very first day I met her. I don't know if she showed you any letter but apparently, there is one that her husband supposedly left—”

“I am aware of the letter. Anything else?”, it is as if Officer Nora is not surprised at all. *Is she aware of the killer?*

“The main thing is, the husband was not religious at the very least so he couldn't have written his last words like that. I have recordings to prove that from multiple occasions. The letter was fabricated, I am sure of it. Moreover, their house... when the wife hired me, I noticed how it seemed like the husband did not exist there, not a single picture of the couple either.”. Evadne doesn't realize she is speaking very fast until Nora interjects.

“How do you think the other man died two hours later?”. Evadne knows it, but was she sure of it?

“The lime-colored powder came from the wife. It was inside a compact powder case on her bedside table, a good disguise to hide such a poison, in plain sight. It’s highly unlikely that facial powder would be green, Plus, who would even think of investigating a woman’s makeup in this world?” Evadne chuckles.

Evadne hears Nora shuffling through something on the other end before adding, “Yes, the poison is what we informally call Aqua Tofana, a mixture of lead, arsenic and belladonna.” She stops for a second, as if she is contemplating whether or not to share any more information. “We have surveillance footage of the man walking towards the house. Now, we don’t know if he went there for the husband or the wife.”

“When was this?” Evadne asks, to which Nora quickly replies, “Five hours before the husband’s death.” *This is where I should stop.*

“That’s for you to find out from the wife. I have done my part and there’s enough proof that Jane is involved. I will send some files over. I’d prefer if you don’t contact me about this after.” Just as Evadne is about to cut the call, she adds just one last thing, “You also might look into the town hall.”

“Evadne, what do you know about that place?”. If Nora’s voice was grim before, it’s much darker now, making Evadne suspicious. “Whatever you know about the town hall or the people you saw there, forget it and never discuss anything about that place with anyone.”

What?

“I am warning you, Evadne. It’s for your own good.” The line goes blank, leaving Evadne with more questions than she started with. She decides to heed to Nora’s warning. Why?

Chapter- 4

Evadne's mind is clouded, she is tired of thinking too much. She knows that the people at the town hall are involved somehow and Nora just confirmed it but why does she not want to pursue this any further? She walks back inside the building with the sun setting behind her. She is suddenly greeted by the sight of a bruised-up man, *the husband*, on the upper floor. He just blankly stares at her, no hint of a plea on his face anymore. It is like *he accepted his fate*. Evadne continues to stare at him, she doesn't know what to do here. *It's not on my desk*. She knows that face, it is the face of death. The man has his head leaning against the wall beside his apartment, his wife's apartment actually. His eyes are the most bruised but he continues his empty stare towards Evadne standing at the lower floor. It is probably painful to keep them open like that. He is also clutching his arm on his lap and Evadne couldn't ignore how his pants are torn up around his knee, revealing multiple thin freshly bleeding cuts. *Blade...she tortures him*.

Then, he moves, breaking her train of thoughts. He grabs an envelope from the floor and holds it to her. "This is the reason today.", he says, looking at her, "You..", he stresses on the word before adding, "...were the reason today."

The confusion is written all over her face but she takes a few steps up, close enough to grab the letter from his hand. There is nothing written on top of it, so who is it from? She walks past the man, upstairs to her room. Just before entering, she mutters a quiet thank you to the man. She can't think of anyone who would send her a letter and why did her neighbor have it? She finds that the letter is sealed with a rose wax. Does she want to open it? *No, just don't*. Everything inside Evadne is screaming at her not to open the envelope. She should throw it away, should not see what's inside, should not let this letter change everything for her.

Evadne opens the envelope. The letter has the most pristine handwriting Evadne has ever seen in her life. *I know this writing but I can't remember...* The thoughts are then followed by a familiar headache.

Dear Eva,

Have you been well? I know you have. I must congratulate you. Oh, the joy it has been to watch you decipher the Nelson murder case. I must admit, it was a little disappointing to see Jane get caught so easily. She needs to be taught a lesson for making it too easy for you. Also, I see you still have your father's coat, isn't it finally time to burn that little shit? You still love burning things, right? Oh, the joy it was to see that smile that fire had brought you.

Scared? Don't be. Please, I want you back, my puppet. It's time to come back home. Let's play with the flames again.

With love,

You know who.

She recognizes him and she wishes she didn't. Evadne could feel her breathing becoming shallow, her eyes wide with fear and confusion, going back and forth the lines of the letter, trying to find any reason to prove herself wrong, *it's not him, please.*

Her shaky eyes slowly roamed around her once safe haven, feeling as if the oppressive darkness that has been her friend, finally is getting the opportunity to pounce on her. *Breathe, please just breathe.* She tries to calm herself but the air feels too thick, *just like the fire,* she felt like throwing up instead. She could see the faint outlines of the fire around her room, *wait, no...it's not real.* What is she seeing? Terror rises inside her as she realizes that every movement she has taken till this day, *he saw them.* But, who is he? Evadne could not even recall his name, or maybe she didn't have the courage to remember. Her own heart is pounding in her ears; the thuds reminding her of a time back then. She crawls her way to the door and raises her shaky hands to open, desperate to get out of there. Her hands fall limp as she dawns on the thought that *he could see everything, whether I am in my room or even in public. He has been tracking my movements.* Darkness shrouds her vision as she slowly collides with the ground.

Evadne opens her eyes and she's laying on the cold floor. *That's weird...why did I lie down here?* She finds herself in the middle of nothing but a bunch of papers scattered around. Has she been in the middle of investigating? *Wait, when did I even start...* She tries to remember how she ended up in this situation but it's all foggy in her head. Looking around, the state of her room makes her believe that she has been here working and she must have been awfully tired so she fell asleep here. She also tries to remember when the last time was that she slept so deeply. Most days she wakes up with a headache which, surprisingly, is not gracing her with its presence today. She sees a newspaper that's almost strategically positioned by her knees and notices the front-page headline. *Strange, when did I grab this even?* The bold letters read, *ENROUTE TRAIN IN FLAMES. POLICE SUSPECT FOUL PLAY.* The article sums up how the forensics have found *residue of a flammable substance on the walls...* The police are now investigating the families of the people who were on onboard. *This feels...vengeful almost.* Evadne could sense

that something was up with this case but she could not figure out the reason why she is feeling so invested in it, she doesn't even remember when she started investigating, let alone why. Still, she has to find out what happened. Is it the fire that is bothering her or something else entirely?

She puts on her auburn coat and heads out before turning around to look back into her room one last time. *I feel like I am forgetting something.* Perhaps, she is.

She makes her way downstairs, nothing seems out of the ordinary. The stairs creak just as they always did, the rats squeak just as they always did except for just one small detail, *where is the machete?* Evadne stops dead in her tracks as she looks at the broken door which is now devoid of the weapon or even any signs that it has been there previously. *Strange, it was there since the very first day I came here...someone might have taken it away.* She chuckles a little and nods her head before making her way out. *Finally realized that it was not safe to keep it out in the open, especially in this neighborhood.*

The sun is shining brightly, illuminating even the darkest alleys beside her. She makes her way towards the station, which is not near to her place. Somehow, she reaches there sooner than expected, as if she teleported there. She purchases a ticket and chooses to wait on a corner, away from the other passengers. There are still five more minutes before the arrival time. Evadne stands there, zoned in only to be staring at a distance, far away on the opposite side of the station.

“Are you KellyJ?”. Evadne snaps back to reality at the sound of a voice that seems to be directed at her. *Wait, I know that voice from somewhere...* The voice repeats in the same tone, “Are you KellyJ?”. She looks around and spots a rugged old man, *that old man*, she remembers him, finally, in that worn-out suit, charred face. The scene has an odd sense of déjà vu as Evadne recalls him standing in the dark, *just like before.*

She feels almost inclined to answer, “No, I am not...” She couldn’t hide the confusion in her voice, she’s even more confused by the fact that she’s confused because she believes that she’s more put together with her words.

The man tilts his head to the side, a frown forming on his face, as if not believing her words. “Who are you then? Why do I recognize you if you are not Kelly?”

“We met each other, long back when I first arrived. You told me the story...”, Evadne stops, realizing that her voice is sounding airer by each word. “..the story of Kelly James.”

“Who are you then?” He repeats, again. His eyes lack any emotion. Evadne doesn’t know where this conversation is going and *should I be alarmed?*

“Hello, I am Evadne Lionel. Would you like a penny today?”, she remembers how she wanted to give him more money but when she had gone back to the location, it was as if he didn’t exist there anymore.

“No, young girl, how about I give you a penny...” he smiles, almost eerily. “...for a story today. Tell me the story of why you like to be alone.”

Evadne feels a chill run down her spine, *how did he know?* Again, she feels almost inclined to answer, as if something is forcing her, *forcing me to face the answers*. “How have you been?”. She makes a desperate attempt at changing the subject.

“A penny for a story, today it’s for you.” Evadne could not ignore the slight annoyance in his voice, which contradicts the smile on his face. *He doesn’t seem like that old man from before...*

“I...I.” she couldn’t muster the right words. The old man waits there with the most daunting patience. *What should I say?*

This trip down the memory lane is the last thing Evadne expected from this day. She doesn’t want to go, she wants to forget, but she can’t. She clutches the coat’s sleeves, she knows if she pulls any tighter, she might end up tearing it. She closes her eyes and a teardrop runs down her face, leaving streaks at its wake.

Evadne doesn't love her parents. She was told that she did, by who? She doesn't remember anymore.

Chapter- 5

“Miss, please come back inside. You are getting drenched!”, a housekeeper ushered from the doorway. She had her palm shading her eyes, trying immensely hard to look through the downpour, because she has this one job that she loves so much. It was to look after the little miss of this household who was currently standing with an auburn coat that didn't seem like it belonged to her and her arms wide open, face adorned with a smile facing the teardrops of the sky. She ignored the worried woman calling out to her. She had been waiting for the rain for so long.

From the corner of her eye, she could see another housekeeper rush to the worried woman with an umbrella. It didn't take her long to reach the little miss's side with the umbrella now open protecting her from the cold droplets. She finally lets out a sigh she was holding in. The little girl frowned slightly with annoyance; the rain was everything to her. Her dismay didn't continue for long after the housekeeper whispered something into her ear. The ten-year-old quickly ran inside the house, past the other housekeeper who smiled at the ordeal.

The little girl ran as fast as she could, passing by each corner and her smile increasing even more as she reached the housekeeping quarters. She opens the door and finds her good friend playing with a train set which belonged to her years back. She grew out of playing with the train but it was perfect for her friend who was just six years old, hence why she gave it away happily but also, secretly.

The little boy waved eagerly and beckoned her to come play with him. She didn't waste time before running towards his side because she knew she couldn't stay long. "Miss Eva! How have you been these days? Mother tells me that you were sad and that's why she brought me today."

"Oh, nothing really. I was tired from playing alone every day. Now, enough about me, tell me about your school! Did you make any new friends? How are the teachers?" Evadne excitedly asked.

"School has been great, we learnt the alpe...alpu..." He tilted his head, trying his best to remember that word.

"The alphabets? A B C D E F G....", she started singing in a song that she knew by heart. The little boy in return chipped in by clapping his hands and joining in, "H..I...J...K..". They continued singing and clapping together until the end of the song before noticing the housekeeper from before returning, now in fresher clothes.

"Miss Evadne, your parents are already at the gate, you should go back to your room.". She placed her hand on her shoulder trying to reassure her. Evadne teared up but she couldn't show it, she knew what would happen if she did. So, she hugged the housekeeper and quickly wiped her face on her skirt before running off to her room. The little boy only stared back at her leaving. He was sad too, "Mama, why can't Eva go to my school?". The woman leans down to cup the little boy's chubby cheeks and kisses his forehead, "she needs to listen to her parents.". The boy still couldn't understand why.

Evadne trotted down past the walls, the crimson walls that have darkened with thin streaks of liquid drying over the years. Once in a while, she would stop in front of the red walls, counting

every abstract line. She always thought they were rainwater leaking, since it was an old house, but that's only what they wanted her to believe. Once in a while, she would find the wallpapers newer on some walls in the morning after she woke up, a brighter red than the dark crimson and with no rainwater streaks. She always wondered why and how. She asked questions, not to her parents but to the housekeepers.

"We have a new wall again! Now we just have to wait for it to rain" She shared with Flora once, while the woman who took care of Evadne the most was dusting the lights in her bedroom.

"My dear, the rain never stopped in this house. Let me tell you a secret, come here." She ushered Evadne to sit on the bed while she crouched down on the floor. She held her two delicate hands ever so softly, and added, "The walls are your friends, they have always been your friends, if you want to talk to someone, share about your day or even what you ate, if you are happy or sad, if you ever feel alone, you can speak to the walls. Promise me that you will."

Evadne nodded enthusiastically. She was not alone.

Then, Flora disappeared.

Evadne kept her promise. She started to speak to the wall with the brightest red color that appeared in days.

Mina disappeared. Laura disappeared. Ariana disappeared. Eve disappeared...and the walls only kept getting brighter and brighter until the red streaks appeared the day after to live on for the years to come.

Then, they finally stopped with the fire that burned brighter than the red walls. The only daughter of the house, in an oversized auburn coat, watched as the flames devoured the same walls, the whole house, from the hill close by.

She felt the grip of someone's hand in hers, and the strange echo of laughter beside her. It was so muffled, it felt far away. Who was it? It was as if the truth was locked away deep inside her soul.

Chapter- 6

Evadne knows that the old man is not the one from before. He seems similar but is not the man Evadne wanted to help when she first arrived. *There are many old men, lurking in the shadows, lurking in the ruins of the city, the ruins that everyone chooses to look away from.*

Like the others, this man stays away from daylight. A menace is what the city mayor calls them, she can't eradicate them, just like the rodents in Evadne's buildings, because even she knows that they need them. Otherwise, how would civilization move forward?

Evadne is on the train, on her way to the site of the fire. It is a two-hour ride so she takes a seat by the window, just watching nature pass by so fast, as if they are afraid of the train speeding by them. It is not long before sleep engulfs her senses. Who could blame her, as she has been exhausted from the tears that now streaked her face. A single and final teardrop escapes her eye, creating one final streak down her tired face, as she descends into another dream *or nightmare.*

The rats or cats don't interest the boy anymore, neither does the blood from his father that's now decorating the canvas. He felt like something was missing, He needed a lighter shade but he still wanted to keep the purity of the red. If only she was here, she would have made the perfect color, I am sure. He was waiting for the day she would return. He plans to propose to her, propose her death for his art.

Until then, he needs to practice.

"Hey! What are you doing out here?" The boy jolted out of his thoughts, he was forced by the girl to take a seat beside him in his doorway. She smiled at his confusion and started talking about the food she brought today. He was not confused, he was annoyed. "Were you painting all

day again?” she asked, pointing at his hand that hovered over his knees. He just chuckled at her cluelessness, her innocence. He wanted that for his next art. Perhaps, he would be generous this time, he might even gift her to his father who had been sitting in his room for the past two years, his head right beside him on the bed. His father loved little girls, he never took down the pictures from his walls, his prized possessions.

“You know, I have been seeing you for the past five months, and you have yet to invite me over to your house. I always wanted to see the inside of your mansion. It is the biggest house in our town after all.”.

“I have not replaced the light bulbs yet, it’s awfully dark inside, I am afraid you will trip. I will invite you over very soon, don’t worry. It might just be the best day of your life.”, he only smirked at her, but the girl complimented as it’s a smile she has received from him in a long time.

And the best day finally came.

He enjoyed it to the brim, he filled his paint bucket to the brim too. He loved her expression, they kissed for the first time too. He believed his kiss would purify her tainted blood. The butcher knife now lay cold inside one of his empty cages. The knife belonged to his mother; she probably brought it from one of the houses she worked for when he was younger. The knife was not alone in the cage, as laying on the far corner of it was a broken toy train.

“What a shame, I won’t taste any home cooked meals anymore!” He exclaimed out loud, dragging the body up the flight of stairs, leaving a familiar streak of blood behind. He kept his promise to his father.

At this point, Evadne's headache doesn't surprise her anymore. She leans her head on the palm hoisted on the table in front of her. The train still has about half an hour more before reaching the station near to the site. Her throat feels parched and she is wondering if this train has any sales trolley for water. Just as she was about to get up, she noticed a bottle of water on the seat beside her. Did someone leave it there? She didn't have anyone sitting beside her throughout the whole ride and people usually maintained their seat locations properly. A few days ago, she came across an article, a blog post of someone applauding this new rule of single travelers getting two seats in public transports, especially if they are women. This law is made to ensure the safety and comfort of female travelers. Evadne couldn't help but wonder if the law, which is supposedly applicable to both men and women, would truly be followed for the men. So, Evadne knows that she doesn't have anyone beside her. Who left her this bottle, that too with a note of *Good Luck* attached to it? Just when she is about to look around in case she spots someone eyeing her with the bottle, her head starts hurting again. She hears a familiar muffled voice, *Good Luck...* The voice echoes just as it pounds inside her head. She sits back and quickly opens the bottle. It is intact, at the very least, she didn't have to worry about it being poisoned. The water cools down her throat and it dramatically dissolves the headache. She finally feels a bit better to concentrate back to what is at hand.

She has been carrying the newspaper with her only, so she goes back to reading the article about the fire. It says there that the fire abruptly lit on a moving train and the cause could possibly be some kind of a gas, of which the residue can be found on the train walls. *I wonder how accurate this article is. The agencies here have a habit of publishing false or wrong information, whether they are aware of it or not. So, I wouldn't put it past them not to investigate properly before letting the world see. If only they knew how to do their jobs right.* Evadne could already spot

some questionable statements, *the substance was compressed inside a salt shaker and it rose to flames due to contact with a table candle decoration...okay so it reacts to heat.....the passenger on the opposite end noticed the...why does it say the bottle was empty.*

Evadne slams the paper on the table, “absolutely useless”, she mutters under her breath. She closes her eyes, trying to force her mind to rest before she reaches the station. Something made her feel like this would be the last time she would get any peace or quiet, something is telling her it would be the calm *before the storm*. She grips the bottle in her hand just a little tighter. It doesn’t help. So, her mind drifts away to a child splashing and playing with her father in a lake. It was her favorite thing to do. Now, it is helping. Deep down, Evadne doesn’t want to go near the fire, the train in flames, she wants to visit the water fountain, back in the city. *No, I want to go to the lake, the lake of Vivi-*

The train comes to a halt and she notices the station they are in; she must have missed the announcement. *It’s time*. She quickly gets off, leaving the now half-filled bottle at the corner of her seat. It didn’t matter to her. From the station it will be a twenty-minute car ride to the site, so she hops inside a taxi and...

“Going to the train site, miss?”, the female driver asks, quite cheerful. It feels revolting, Evadne almost cringes. “I was waiting for you.”, she says again and then there is this tone, that feels like those pitch-black nights.

“I’m sorry, what?”. Evadne could only breathe out these three words. She just stares at her through the rear-view mirror. She discreetly starts looking for anything to defend herself with in case of something. She sees a foldable pocket knife at her side, nestled between the edges of the seat. It feels almost unbelievable that it is there, just when she needs it.

“I am just kidding; I made a bet with the other drivers today to scare my passengers in any way I can. They wanted to see if a jolly good woman like me is even capable of scaring anyone” She turns to her window and looks outside, “Silly fellas!”.

Evadne follows her gaze and sees a couple of other taxi drivers laughing and bidding goodbye to her driver. She pockets the knife as discreetly as possible. The ride towards the site is driving her on edge. She is pointedly looking for the signs of routes, in case the driver has other plans. *3 km...2 km...1 km...* She ought to stop at 600 meters, because that’s where the railway line should be. From there, it will be a five-minute walk. She tries to think of every possible method the driver can use to trap her, and there are way too many possibilities in this locked space.

Fortunately, the driver doesn’t turn towards any shady routes, and they reach her stop after a few minutes. “Thank you, keep the change.”, Evadne urges, rushing to get out of that uncomfortable ride as the driver pockets the fare. She attempts to walk away, *walk, don’t run*.

“Miss, wait! I almost forgot.”. The driver waves at her from the car, “How about you take this water?”

Skeptical, she replies after a few seconds, “No, I don’t need it. Thank you.” She turns back feigning as much confidence as she could but before she can take another step, the driver runs and stops her.

“Miss, I had a deal, please take this, I must insist.”. Evadne can hear the silent but deafening plea in her voice.

“What deal...Ughh, whatever, listen, I already told you, I don’t need it. Leave me alone, I have work to do.”. She moves towards the side, ignoring the driver’s request and walks away. This

time, she didn't stop her. *For heaven's sake, this gave me a headache.* She tries to ignore the pounding in her head. She has more important things to worry about.

Focus.

Then, she is there, in front of the train, with one side burnt to ashes, the rails melted, the people devastated. *Huh...how did this happen?* She is there now but when did she even reach?

“Miss, have you seen this little boy? He was wearing a checkered coat. My son...” An old man, possibly in his sixties sobs and falls at her feet clutching what seems to be a beaming young boy in a picture. “We had a fight, he left home to visit his mom. He was on this train. Oh, lord, my poor son, where is he...?”. Evadne watches as the old man looks at her for signs of hope but she could only deny having any knowledge. Somehow, it breaks him even more and she didn't know that was possible.

Then, she feels a small tug at her coat's sleeve, she turns to find a teenage girl, her arm covered in bandages, bits of her scorched skin peeking through. “Miss, may I make a phone call, please?”. The pleading in her voice almost makes Evadne choke but she tries not to show it. She doesn't take long to pull her phone out to hand it to the girl. The girl stares at the device for a good minute. “What was his number...”, she mumbles under her breath.

“Are you alright? Can you not remember who to call?” Evadne asks. She doesn't know if she should put her hand on the girl's shoulder to console her or not. She opts not to.

“No, I can't seem to remember anything...after the fire...”, *me too*, the girl gets lost in her thoughts, *poor thing*. She turns to look around and realizes that many here are lost in some way or the other. *Like me...why does this...feel so familiar.*

Chapter- 7

“This zone is not under KellyJ’s jurisdiction, we would appreciate it if you do not overstep your line.”. Evadne is tired at this point, tired of hearing the same sentence in different versions from every single police officer here. However, she is not surprised. She is used to the officers like Nora back in the city because of their history together.

She needs to find a way to sneak inside the train, or whatever is left of it. She waits and waits for the perfect moment. She has been stealth all her life even when she was younger. She had to move under her parents’ eyes. Night falls and one officer decides to take a bathroom break while the other is on his phone playing some game she could hear from a distance. The only thing that might break her cover would be her auburn coat. She has to leave it somewhere. She looks around and takes off her coat. She has been wearing a midnight black turtleneck today and she can't be prouder of her choice in wearing dark outfits all the time. She carefully folds the auburn coat and leaves it near the root of the tree she is hiding behind. She carefully moves across the grassy field and slips inside just when the officer groans in frustration as he loses the game.

The train inside is looking to be in much worse shape than the outside. *As expected, fire forgives none.* This cabin is perhaps the dining hall, she figures that much out from the setting of the tables and chairs. There is a gaping hole leading from the roof to one side of the train. It is no surprise that many passed away here, many lost their own from what she can guess from the outside. *Many were lost...*But, amidst the destruction, why is it that Evadne starts feeling a sense of...*comfort?* Why is she not ridding herself of those thoughts? Why is she feeling at home? *Because this is how I left my home...*

As if on cue, her steps take her to the last table of the dining cabin. She finds a pristine white envelope, standing out like an anomaly as if the ferocious blaze was scared to scar it. As if the sea of ashes built to desolate couldn't dare to harm the purity of it, but was it really as pure as she's believing? *It is...*

Her final steps to that letter feel heavier than usual, as if her body is telling her to walk away from it. However, her heart yearns for something else and curiosity gets the best of her. The envelope is delicately sealed with rose wax. *I saw this somewhere.* Her fingers gently pull the seal open and the letter feels as if it is the softest flower to touch. *Like...the dandelions from my mother's garden..* Now, if only the words engraved on it resembled the purity it previously showcased. Dread washes over Evadne's demeanor and her hands start shaking as she reads the first word, *Eva*. She can hear it. She remembers that voice painstakingly as if it was just yesterday. She can hear that malicious laugh beside her. Her hands quickly drop the letter as if it is burning her. Evadne can still see every word even if it is at her feet. Maybe she expected these words to catch up to her sooner or later.

Eva,

Did you like my surprise? I hope this is enough to bring you home. How many more do you need? Don't make me wait for too long. Who knows, what if you join in on the next one like good old times? Come back.

With love,

You know who.

Evadne starts praying to whatever god that exists for this to be just another nightmare. This isn't the reality she dreamed of when she took the decision, that one decision that she believed could have been the cure to her endless bad dreams from the minute she was born into this world. She falls back to the chair behind her, not even caring about the ashes and dirt anymore. She sobs into her palms that are now covered with dirt. She somehow just wants this to be another nightmare, the same nightmares that she always wanted to escape from.

I never asked to be born a daughter of murderers...no...psychopaths. That's what they were. And, now, it's him.

Chapter- 8

You know the feeling you get when your body is screaming at you, making it physically taxing to take another step, alarm bells ringing inside your head, enough to give you a headache. That's exactly how Evadne is feeling as she is sitting inside that one specific train that she swore to never take again. She wants to scream at the train driver to stop and let her off. She had multiple chances to get off the train, actually, like at every stop at different stations or even before the train started from her station where she arrived an hour early, but she stayed rooted to her seat, trying her best to swallow the lump forming inside her throat. *I need water...* She didn't bring any bottle this time and it would be a while before the next stop.

"Young girl, do you need some water? Are you alright?". Evadne views an old lady sitting opposite to her, holding what seems to be a bottle of water to her. "You look a little pale", she adds with a slight frown of worry.

"No..." Evadne replies before even thinking. She is built that way; she doesn't want any help. "Actually, may I?", but then, what changed?

The woman happily hands her the bottle, and it doesn't take long for relief to wash over the entirety of Evadne's body, as if it finally has some peace. She mutters a quick thank you and makes a note about buying the lady another bottle during the next stop. Although the lingering thoughts remain just like before, thanks to this woman, she can at least think a bit clearer.

"On your way to see your family, dear?", she asks. Evadne cannot figure out if it is curiosity or if it is just small talk.

No...

“Yes, perhaps.”. She lies, albeit a white lie. She has to.

“First time visiting Vivian in a while?”. The old lady guesses right, but how?

“You could say.” Evadne’s gaze hovers outside the window. “Never thought I would return.”. She contemplates if she should keep the conversation going. She won’t. “How about you?”.

“You could say...”, she repeats in the same tone as her and laughs right away. Evadne, although she does not laugh back, now takes the time to observe her. She is wearing a green dress, that perfect leafy green and small raindrops printed on it. It reminds her of morning dew on a grassy field when the sun is finally starting its duty for the day. It seems very bright; *she is very bright*. The dress compliments her perfectly. “I used to work in Vivian before, just before my masters passed away. I don’t particularly like the place anymore. It’s too dark and grim for me. I think the trees and the hills have taken it on them to hide the valley from naked view, barely any sunlight passes.”, she giggles.

“Are you visiting someone then?”, Evadne queries, just for the sake of conversation, or so she believes.

“Yes, just my old friends from work. Unfortunately, not many are alive, they suffered tragic deaths.”. Sadness, it almost seems like this woman is foreign to the idea of pain. That might explain the confusion on her face after she utters her own words. *But how does she not know sorrow if she has lost her friends...* “They succumbed to the fire...yes, they did...they suffered beautiful deaths...”. Evadne visibly freezes, and slowly lifts her head to meet the gaze of the lady. She seems in a daze, far away in the deepest corners of her mind. She is too scared to dwell

on the story anymore so she decides to ignore the lady completely. *I'll just get her the bottled water and sit somewhere else from the next stop.*

However, that stop never arrives, because she succumbs to a restless slumber as the trees and the nightly sky pass by.

“Oh, young lady, are you missing your taxi?”, he asked in the purest of voices. “Do not worry, it’s parked right behind my house, I wash it every day just as you requested.”, he added while carefully brushing the woman’s hair. “You know, I never expected you to return. You had every option to escape actually. You must be a sad little rat.”. Once the woman’s hair was brushed enough, he braided it just like how his mother used to do so on Eva’s hair.

“Hey, you need to stop giving me that look, you know? I’ll come to brush your hair in a minute, just wait..”, the man looked at the other woman from his peripheral view on the chair sitting at the corner of the room. He finished tying the braid of the first woman with an elastic and quickly rushed over to the other one as if she was eagerly waiting for her turn.

None of the women spoke. They were not women anymore. They were just severed heads who once prayed for their turn to never come.

Then, all of a sudden he mutters, “I am waiting, Eva.”. He stared, point blank towards an unknown that she was secretly watching the scene from.

She jolts awake, shivering, unable to breathe. She runs towards the end of the compartment and outside to the door of the train. For a second, she wants to jump off the moving train, she wants to escape the nightmare. Instead, she opens the window attached to the door and takes a deep breath. *Breathe in...breathe out...breathe in...breathe out...* She leans against the wall, feeling

the rocking of the train calming her down. She realizes that it is deep into the night. *I should go back to my seat. I think I had some leftover water, I'm parched.*

She returns to her seat but notices that the old lady is not there anymore. *Strange...I thought she was going down with me at Vivian.* She finds a man awake one seat behind her darting his eyes around with fear.

“Excuse me, I am sorry to bother you but have you seen the woman who was sitting here?”. Evadne points at the seat opposite to her. “She was wearing a green dress.”, she adds, thinking it will help the man remember.

The man, in return, takes his time to reply, the fear causing him to shake back and forth as Evadne continues to speak. “No!”, he exclaims, louder than Evadne was expecting.

She mutters a thank you and sits back down. She looks at the now empty water bottle she left on her seat from before. *I wanted to get her another bottle of water, I shouldn't have fallen asleep. But why would the lady get down at another stop? Her ticket had Vivian written on it, although it seemed different than mine...older and more worn out like a paper you could find as a relic at the museum. Maybe she cut the ticket very early on and wasn't able to take good care of it...*

“Attention, all passengers, the train is now approaching the final stop at Vivian. The estimated arrival time is 7:00 pm. Please be aware that our exit doors.....” Evadne zones out the rest of the announcement. She's here, she's back, but where is her excitement? She watches as the train crosses the mountainous roads, across the lush forest and grassy fields and then one last forest before the final stop. *I am waiting, Eva...wait what? What did I just think about?*

She passes by all the carriages and finally steps down to the land of her birth. She wishes she didn't. Her steps feel as heavy as ever, as she approaches the very familiar road. She can almost see the silhouette of her younger self running past her to get on the train. She remembers that young girl wanting to escape the place that carried unimaginable horrors that only she was aware of.

Evadne takes a deep breath and just as she is about to take one last step, something runs past her feet just before she could register what it is. She looks to the right where she thinks that black shadow moved only to find a rat going past the benches of the station, deep into the forest. She isn't surprised or scared to see a rat. She has grown up having them around, they lurk around in the smallest corners of the town. *We had rats at my apartment building too.* She recalls her neighbors complaining nonstop about it. She honestly never minded them. It's like she believes she co-existed with them, in her mind, she, too, was like these rats. *Maybe I still am...* she walks down the stairs of the station with echoes of rats squeaking in the forest beside her.

One step after the other, then suddenly she's standing on top of a hill, a familiar hill. She looks around. *What...when did I get here...where was I going again?* She tries to focus her vision towards what's in front of her. *Wait a second, where am I?* Then, all of a sudden it hit her, the same grass prickling at her feet, the same view with the pine trees now reaching new peaks of the sky, larger and older than before. She starts shaking, she starts breaking, and she screams as she hunches down realizing this is where she stood after the fire, watching as it consumed the lives of her birth parents. Why did she think she was ready to face reality? She gasps and she hurls at the grass, curling her fingers around them as tight as she could. She didn't have water with her. Trembling, as if she is freezing, she tries taking one breath after another. Failed attempts lead to

more and finally, just as she is breathing a little. She sees someone's feet beside her, standing not too close or too far away from her body on the ground. *Run...*

Ever so slowly, tiredly, she navigates her eyes from the feet to the face of the young man. She is met with a blood-curdling smile. "Hello, Eva.". She chokes, just before something hits her head.

Chapter- 9

It isn't the first time Evadne has fainted. However, it is the first time her mind has been playing all the dreams she had forgotten. The dreams that preceded the headaches, the nightmares long hidden deep inside her soul, all are playing like a broken record to maim her forever. Is this a warning for herself?

She feels something with her palm. She knows what it is but she couldn't connect it. It hurt, her body, her mind. Everything is painful. Then, she finally feels it, *water...* She finally opens her eyes ever so carefully, fearing to see what is ahead of her. Her palm is gently touching the ripples of water on the lake. She could recognize the Hyde Lake from miles away, grazing the side of the town just by the forest. *This is it...*

Tears stream down her face as she faces the lake of her peace, her calm. This is the lake that guided her from when she was a baby. The ritual is a myth that the townspeople like to believe. Every new born baby has to be bathed in the Hyde Lake to become a citizen of the town. To the people of the town, the lake is a dormant god, a forever sleeping deity they have to pray to with the birth of every female baby. Once every hundred years, one would be blessed with a guidance for their whole life, to navigate the ever changing world, should they choose to accept it.

For Evadne, I am that guidance but, I lay in waste deep inside her soul, watching her, understanding her, breathing like her, moving like her. I am her.

She manages to stand on her two feet after a few minutes of trying, even though her body was telling her to lie down. She is tired and her head hurts more than ever. She remembers who knocked her unconscious and she has an idea about where she is. A mansion stands behind her

and Evadne stares at it for eternity as the sun sets on the horizon, now obstructed by large pine trees residing in the forest. She has a clear goal and she is determined, *I know what I have to do*. Her steps towards the wretched house are different than before, they are more calculated, and more confident, unlike ever previously.

Evadne stands on the porch of the house, taking in a deep breath and registering her surroundings. The windows adjacent to the porch are attached with duct tape, even the littlest pieces are barely holding on, as if they are begging to be shattered into billions to be finally left alone. The hinges of the door in front of her are rusted on every millimeter, one could easily mistake them for the original color from afar. The door itself is left ajar as if he is aware that she would come inside instead of choosing to run away. She finally takes a step inside. Darkness has settled in as the permanent residence, with small dim lamps, one at the entrance beside her, and another on the upper floor at a distance she could not fathom, as if even light feared the tainted house she is now standing in. She tries looking around, attempting to figure out the faint outlines of the furniture and raises her arms to navigate better in case she hurts herself. Just as she bumps into something, her hands quickly move to the side trying to grab anything to hold herself. *It's okay, it's just the staircase...*

“Missed me?”, someone breathes right by ear and she screams. Just as she is about to fall backwards, the owner of the voice catches her. His grip feels like it's burning her skin. She quickly composes herself and pushes his frame away with as much strength as she possibly could. She turns to the stairs and quickly runs up, unable to ignore the feeling as if she is hitting objects with her legs, maybe decorations. Just as she is about to reach the final step, the mansion lights up just enough for her to see her surroundings clearly and she stops at her tracks. Slowly, she turns behind her to see who has been speaking to her before. Her gaze lands on a silhouette

of a young man standing at the end with the most sinister smile she could imagine. His body is adorned with clothes that seem to not belong to him somehow. He is standing there with his arms wide, as if welcoming his lover to their forever home. Evadne ever so carefully, shifts her eyes down at his feet...then to the stairs she has passed. She covers her mouth with her palms as soon as she understands what lay at his feet and her own.

Severed heads.... of people I know....

The taxi driver...

Her neighbor who used to beat her husband...

The wife...Jane...

The old woman from the train...

With every realization, Evadne starts to shake, fear? anger? sadness? What? It doesn't take long for her to fall to the side and throw up. She chokes and screams words she couldn't even understand herself. She has lost it, and she only has this man in front of her who has killed everyone she ever encountered.

"Why would you do this?". She screams the words repeatedly at the man who is now laughing as if he is brimming with happiness. He continues to laugh more and more ignoring her words.

Then, finally, he looks back at her, this time trying to barely contain his evil laugh, "You forgot to look behind you?". That sing-song voice brews a kind of emotion in her that Evadne rarely encountered.

She is scared to look back. *Is this a trap?* Somehow, she feels as if it isn't the first time that she listens to this man. She turns behind her. *No...No...please no...*

Evadne could recognize that face anywhere. This time, amidst all the blood and sick reality, she wishes she is the one dead instead.

Nora...

Chapter- 10

Deep down, Evadne feels that she will not live to tell the tale of the atrocities that commenced down inside the mansion. She is wondering if anyone knows about this place *or this man*. Most days, she is locked up behind closed doors, in a room that is just too well-lit for her liking. The lavender-colored bed sheet, pale yellow pillow cases, white breezy curtains, mahogany furniture consisting of just a bedside table, closet and bed and *a toy train*...

She has lost count of the days. Some days if he feels nice enough, he would let her out to roam around. Evadne has realized a couple of things; her bedroom is beneath the mansion and she hasn't heard a voice of any other human from outside. *Doesn't anyone come here?* She also has lost count of the days since she has last heard her own voice. Whenever she is out of that wretched room, he usually follows along very closely. Most of the time she prefers to be in the kitchen because it's in the darkest corner of the house. She doesn't cook, doesn't sit on the chairs there, doesn't even look at the man as he does his work. She is disgusted to even exist in a space he used to nurture his thoughts of murder. She knows because every day, like an agonizing broken record, he has been sharing each of his kill stories with her. Every day, her hatred towards his man rises beyond imagination.

At the moment, Evadne is crouched down on the floor at the corner of the kitchen, her head leaning towards the dirty wall, her knees up to her chest. It isn't the first day she lost track of her own thoughts, or has no thoughts at all. This is how she stays for the longest agonizing time. Her clothes are worn off, torn in some places from the first day she tried to fight her way out. Her auburn coat is now long forgotten underneath her bed. Why doesn't she think of wearing it anymore?

“You know, Eva, you can’t kill me. You just don’t have it in you.”, he brings up one day. “You need someone to tell you to kill them. Do you get what I am saying?”

I will.

“How are you even your mom and dad’s daughter? They killed off people like they swatted mosquitoes every single day and you...” he laughs.

I will kill you.

“My mother stopped going to work one day, thank God, who knows what they would have done to her! However, I didn’t want to leave my favorite Eva alone so I visited every single day ever since, do you remember?”, he turns around to find her in the same position and sighs. “I am doing so much for you; I have done so much every single day since you burned the house down with your parents inside. I was always there for you since that day...and every other day till now. Have you ever noticed?”. Evadne doesn’t feel the need to answer this monster. If only she connected the dots sooner and didn’t walk into his trap. “It was excruciating to see you interact with so many people, everyone but me. This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t left town. I had to endure watching the townspeople pray for some chosen one to Hyde Lake every day!”, he adds one last line before ending his monologue for the day. “Why do only girls get that privilege, huh? You got it too, right?”.

Then, another day passes.

“I have a surprise for you, I am working on it right now, and I think it will be ready by tonight. I am so excited!”, he exclaims happily. Evadne’s blood runs cold. She is aware that this evil is not

capable of the surprise that people are generally used to. Returning to her room, she rummages every corner for anything to protect herself with. *Why isn't there just one thing???*

Then, it suddenly hit her. She quickly reaches out to the pocket of her jeans and produces the pocket knife she got from the cab. Instant relief washes over her, something she hasn't been feeling in days on end. She hides the knife back where it was and lies down on her bed. With the same thought repeating endlessly in her mind, she succumbs to a restless night's sleep.

I'll kill you.

Evadne reminds me of...me...being trapped..

The next day, Evadne wakes with multiple knocks at her door. She knows what is coming. The man opens the door after a minute, just enough for Evadne to find the comfort of the knife in her possession. She knows what is coming and she is ready. She stares blankly as the man mutters something along the lines of, "Are you ready?".

Then, it comes, that so-called surprise.

Evadne stands at the edge of the stairs, just like before. Only this time, she is more prepared and composed. However, nothing composes her for what is now laid in front of her, around her, *everywhere*...The walls are adorned with large painting frames leading down the stairs. It takes her a while to register what is in the painting. It was...

Blood...everywhere...streaks...just like back then...How could he?

She freezes at the horror that was presented to her. It is like he tried replicating the walls of her home differently, *in his own manner*. She quickly holds the side of the hand rail, trying her best

to remain standing even though her heart is tightening inside her chest, making it harder to breathe. But no, she needs to stand her ground, she has to fight her way across the terror and she does. She steels herself and clenches her fist as the man puts his hand on her shoulder, tightening his grip, indicating to her to move forward. Evadne clenches her jaws in anger? horror? fear? Perhaps this time, all. Every step down is a nightmare awakening and her descending, spiraling down to hell and maybe, even beyond. Her chest keeps hammering and she wants to just stop and curl up into a ball as destruction wails above her. She couldn't because he is forcing her down the stairs now. She passes by countless frames, all reeking of the stench of death and decay. She wants to throw up and her breath grows raspier than before. However, it is not the end...

She reaches the final frame. He reaches down to her shoulder, and breathes into her ear, "My final masterpiece."

Evadne freezes at what lies beyond her imagination, her eyes are following the streaks of blood that are far more different than the others, because the lines reach the center to...*Nora*... or whatever is left of her. Then, realization dawns on her and she breaks, like never before. She screams like never before, cradling her head with her palms. *Stop, stop, please just stop!* Her severed head is attached exactly where all the lines of the painting connect, with a machete that she recognizes from her apartment building.

He was...everywhere. He was always around me and I never saw it.

"Okay, enough!", the man says through gritted teeth, hoisting her up with a harsh grip on her elbow. "I have had enough of your tears and silence. It's high time for you to get over your past!". He pulls her closer, enough for her to feel his disgusting breath all over her face. He is

fuming, it is evident. Evadne could only glare at him with clenched jaws. “You know your future is with me, join me...”. Then, everything goes numb. “Just as you had before...”, Evadne’s mind goes white, like a blank slate, and just one thought appears in her head. She has been waiting for this very moment.

I’ll kill him.

As the glint of sunlight barely but somehow enters the mansion of horror, Evadne’s left hand swiftly goes towards her pocket and within a blink of an eye, the knife is at the man’s throat. His eyes widen, hysterics spreading all over his demeanor. He chuckles, “You can’t do it.”. He repeats the same words, but for some odd reason, she is as calm as the water. Is it because of the lake being near her, like the earnest comfort?

She smiles and after days that she has lost count of, she utters her first words, “You know, I don’t even remember your name.”. She tilts her head a bit, “The past few days, I tried to recall it so many times...”. Finally, she can see the shift in his behavior, his face contracts in disbelief and then anger. “You could have introduced yourself...”, she speaks, in a familiar sing-song-like tone he has been using with her till now, the absolute perfect mimic.

“How...”, he could barely speak. His face contracts in pain as the knife slices through his skin, just a little bit.

“It’s not me who’s stuck in the past, it was you all along. You enjoyed the idea of having control over me, over all the people you stole the lives of!”, she screams but she doesn't waver for even a second.

He laughs, “You can’t kill me..”, he repeats those words in an attempt to turn the table, to find just one second for her to loosen the grip of the weapon. It is not working, because this is what Evadne needed, the final fuel. Every nerve in her body starts screaming.

Time has slowed down around her as if everything is waiting for her finale. Finally, her hands guide the blade past his neck, from one side to the other in swift motion, to end the evil in front of her.

It's over...I'm sorry for not listening to you before.

What? Me? I never told you to...then the memory suddenly flashes in front of me. I wanted Evadne to kill him before, on that hill...during the fire...

The blade drops from Evadne’s palms, just like that man’s body. They did not matter anymore to her. She is in a trance, walking down the stairs like a ghost. She doesn’t look back anymore; she doesn’t feel like she has to. It is as if she is finally calm after long years of hard labor, she’s finally getting to breathe a little. She opens the main door, the creak echoes down the hallways of the now-empty mansion as a final goodbye.

Evadne hasn’t noticed, but the grass seems a bit greener today. It’s a shame she never got to experience a proper return to her home *or a family*...She turns back to look at the mansion one more time, *perhaps children will call it a haunted house in the future*. The sun is finally setting at the lost long horizon and she takes the time to enjoy the view of the lush, overgrown pine trees. She wishes if only she could get one more chance to marvel across the forest just like before.

Her steps lead her to the water's edge and she takes one step in, then another step. She didn't feel unaccomplished, instead, she is feeling relieved. Her goal has been achieved. Finally, she embraces the tranquil waters of the lake at the Hyde of Vivian, taking another step again.

I deserved it. I deserved the blood on my cold hands. But maybe, I deserved it to make the world a safer place. Now, this is where I choose to stay, this is my peace, my sanctuary. Thank you for everything.
