Westward Whispers

Book of
Short Stories

A.k.Finch and Jules Grant

Copyright © 2023 A.k.Finch

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The views expressed by characters in this book do not necessarily reflect the views of the author.

This book is protected by copyright law. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests, please contact the publisher at akfinch@akfinch.com.

ISBN: 979-8-89852-343-5

DEDICATION

To Ray Bradbury, the master of the extraordinary and the fantastic. Your timeless tales ignited our imaginations, leading us through the labyrinthine corridors of wonder and awe. In your words, we found the sparks that ignited our own creativity. This collection of short stories is a humble tribute to your enduring inspiration. Thank you for showing us the magic within the ordinary and the extraordinary within ourselves.

"Short stories are tiny windows into other worlds and other minds and other dreams. They are journeys you can make to the far side of the universe and still be back in time for dinner."

— Neil Gaiman

CONTENTS

	Acknowledgments	i
1	The Night of the Unclaimed Crystal	1
2	Among the Gravestones	13
3	Letters and Lies	49
4	The Party	73
5	Willowcreek on the 13th	95
6	The Cleaners	99
7	Forbidden Sunset	105
8	Author Notes	111
9	Reader Feedback	113
10	Author Bios	115

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special Thanks to Our Beloved Family and Friends,
Your unwavering support and boundless encouragement have been the fuel that ignited our creative journey. In moments of doubt, you were our guiding lights, reminding us of the power of our words and stories. Your belief in us and our craft has been a constant source of inspiration and motivation. With deep gratitude, we extend our heartfelt thanks to you for being our most cherished cheerleaders on this writing adventure.

.

“The Night of the Unclaimed Crystal”

By: A.k.Finch and Jules Grant

(Based on actual events)

Second Edition

The sudden bang ripped through the silence, startling Jessi awake. She shot out of bed, her heart pounding. "What the heck was that?" she muttered, glancing anxiously at Brad. "Did you hear it too? Get up. We need to check it out." Looking at her phone, she noticed it was only 2:47 in the morning. Her husband jumped out of bed. They rushed outside. The chill in the air cut right to the bone. A pungent odor wafted through the air, reminiscent of scorched earth and melting

plastic, invading their nostrils and making Jessi's eyes water.

“Oh my gosh! It’s freezing out here.” Then, just as Brad spoke, a jet-black pick-up truck squealed down the cul-de-sac, followed by three cop cars.

The echoes of screeching tires and flashing police lights shattered the neighborhood's peaceful slumber. Windows flickered to life as curious faces emerged, drawn by the chaos unfolding on the quiet street. Within seconds, everyone was outside. The blackened sky framed the narrow alley, its walls looming like sentinels guarding a secret passage. The echoing squeal of the pickup truck's tires reverberated off the brick façades, a stark contrast to the usually hushed whispers of wind dancing through the leaves that lined the peaceful cul-de-sac. The perpetrator didn’t realize the alley was a dead end. He slammed on the brakes before hitting the brick wall at the end of the

long, dark alley. He threw open his door and tried to make a break for it on foot. He was halfway up the wall when the cops grabbed him and threw him to the ground, knocking the air out of him.

Everyone ran over there. “Back up, everyone, back up.” One of the cops yelled.

The grey-haired cop yelled, “Call it in.” He cuffed him. A couple of cops grabbed him by his arms and dragged him to the backseat of their cruiser. He was so strong they needed some help.

“Dude, that guy must be on something. Did you see how he struggled with those cops when they were putting him in the car? It took three or four of them to get him in there.” One of the tenants said.

Everyone started clapping and cheering. The cops got their flashlights and started searching the truck. So captivated by the whole ordeal, no one went home.

The night clung to the neighborhood like a velvet curtain, the only illumination emanating from the soft glow of lampposts casting elongated shadows. The chill in the air was a silent accomplice, weaving through the silence, whispering secrets to the slumbering houses.

One of the tenants complained, “I have to get up in two hours, but I want to see what’s going on.”

“I’m calling in sick. This is the most excitement this street has seen in a long time. It’s awesome.” Another tenant said.

The officers attacked the truck with determined fury. Metal clanged as panels were torn away, revealing hidden compartments. A knife sliced through the leather seats, frustration etched on the officers' faces as they hunted for the elusive evidence. One of the cops got the loudspeaker. “This man was in possession of a large bag filled with crystal meth. He must have thrown it from the

truck or while he was on the run. We could use your help to find it."

"Hey, what was the loud noise? It sounded like a bomb." Someone asked the cops.

"During the chase, he slammed into the electrical box on the corner. As a result, the other block lost all its power." The cop answered.

Quickly, people ran to their homes to get flashlights. Some used the lights from their phones.

Jessi marveled at the unusual sight of her neighbors, clad in pajamas and bathrobes, brandishing flashlights like a united front. "This is like a neighborhood watch on steroids," she remarked to Brad with a mix of amusement and disbelief.

Brad laughed. "It is kind of funny. There are like forty people out here at three o'clock in the morning,

wearing robes and pajamas, with flashlights, looking for drugs. You don't see that every day."

"With all the stuff going on right now, that would be a great Facebook post: Cops and residents joined forces, working together to find the drugs," Jessi said.

Just then, Van walked up to Jessi and Brad.

"Hey, Van," Brad said. "What do you think of all this?"

"Well, it's kind of crazy. I heard the loud boom, and then I heard your front door shut. So I came out to make sure you guys were okay and see if you needed my help. Since you live right next door, I didn't want any danger to my place." Van laughed. He always made weird jokes.

"Oh my gosh. My phone is going to explode with all of these notification sounds." Jessi said and then looked at her phone.

Facebook and Twitter were quickly filled with posts and photos from everyone. There was less searching and more Tweeting going on. It was like a giant block party, people laughing, announcing every strange thing they found around the street.

Some had never seen what crystal looked like, so there were a lot of questions for the cops.

"What color is it?"

"How big was the baggie?"

"Maybe he swallowed it."

"Is there a reward?"

After a couple hours of searching, everyone was ready to give up. Just then…

Van's triumphant shout echoed through the night as he thrust the discovered bag into the air, his face illuminated by the glow of his flashlight. The crowd converged; their collective breath held as the officers verified the find. The cops walked over to investigate the bag. Everyone gathered around.

"Yeah, that it's it. Good job, sir." One of the cops patted Van on the back.

"I'll go call it in." One cop said, walking back to his car.

The grey-haired cop walked over to Van. "We really appreciate your help." The cop shook his hand.

One cop got on the speaker in his car. "We want to thank you guys for all the help you gave us. I know you must be tired. Thanks again."

"It's been two days, and there hasn't been anything in the newspaper about the adventure the other night," Jessi said to Brad.

"Yeah, that's weird. But everyone that has social media heard a bunch the other morning." Brad laughed. "Hey, have you seen Van at all? He wanted to borrow our shovel the other day. I told him I would look for it and bring it over. I knocked, but no one answered."

"I didn't see him, but his car is out front. He must be home. Maybe he was sleeping."

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Brad walked over to the door and opened it. "Hello, officer. How can I help you?" Brad said.

"Hello, you're the manager, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm sure you remember the other evening or morning when we searched the street. One of your tenants recovered a bag of crystal for us."

"Yes, I remember that morning very well."

"After a lot of questioning, the perp told us that he had two bags of drugs. We only recovered one. So, we need to question the people involved, and I wanted to know if you know the name of the gentleman who recovered the first bag." The cop pulled out a pen and his notepad.

"Oh, sure. His name is Van Keymin. Actually, he lives right next door. We haven't seen him for a couple of days, but his car is out front."

"Thank you for your help. Will you be available later if we have more questions?"

"Sure." The cop walked away and knocked on Van's door.

…

About thirty minutes later, there was another knock on the door. Brad opened the door. “Oh, hello again. Did you get a chance to talk to Van?”

“No, but we found the other bag of crystal. There is a dead body in the unit. The deceased had the bag in his hand. I will need you to come over and identify the body for me.”

“Oh my gosh. Yes, of course.” Brad and the officer walked over to Van’s apartment, and Brad saw the dead body lying on the bathroom floor with the bag in his hand. “Yes, that’s Van.”

“Thank you. Van must have died of an overdose. We’re going to have to tape off this unit. The coroner is on his way.”

Jessi and Brad sat on their porch, the faint glow of dawn revealing the exhaustion etched on their faces.

Jessi sighed, gazing at the now quiet street. "Who would have thought our sleepy little neighborhood could hide such darkness?"

Brad nodded, his eyes distant. "It's a reminder, I guess. Life's unpredictable, and sometimes it catches up to you."

“Among the Gravestones”

By: A.k.Finch

(Second Edition)

January 20, 1853

Thunder and lightning rumbled through the small city of Benicia. It terrorized the people like a beast from a nightmare. The town recoiled as an unprecedented storm unleashed its fury, thunder, and lightning, conspiring like a beast from a nightmare. It came in quick, without warning. The chilly winter weather cut straight to the bone. The inhabitants took refuge in their homes, waiting for any sign of relief.

Norman and Tabitha Thorn, sitting in their candlelit living room, in front of the warm fireplace, took comfort in being safe and dry.

“Norman, do you ever wonder what it would have been like if we had been blessed with a child?” Tabitha glanced over at him.

“Yeah, Tabby, I do. All these years and little feet never graced our home.”

“Norm, sometimes it’s weird. I can almost hear the faint sound of laughter echoing through these walls.” Tabitha said softly. In her heart, wishing desperately for a child.

Unbeknownst to them, in the shadows of the room, an unseen force began to stir, listening to the echoes of Tabitha's unspoken desires.

A heavy scent of burning embers filled the town's air. Winter was already in full swing, and the storm intensified every moment. Every fireplace in the small village was in use. Yet, as quickly as the storm rolled in, it moved out, leaving something behind…

Curiosity tugged at Norman and Tabitha Thorn as they exchanged glances, silently deciding to brave the aftermath of the storm. The heavy scent of burning embers still lingered, carrying an ominous undertone that whispered of secrets yet unveiled. As they cautiously swung open the front door, a wall of impenetrable fog greeted them, shrouding their small city in an eerie silence.

The couple stepped onto the porch, their breath visible in the frigid air. The fog enveloped

them like a spectral cocoon, robbing them of visibility. For an unsettling moment, they were blind to the world around them, senses heightened by the unknown.

Then, almost as if the veil of mystery responded to their presence, the fog lifted abruptly. In its wake stood the Thorn residence, untouched by the storm's fury. Yet, just a few steps away, a sight awaited that would send shivers down their spines.

A lone gas lamp flickered in the cold breeze, casting an ethereal glow on the porch steps. Amidst the dim light stood a toddler—a vision of innocence in the aftermath of chaos. Tabitha's gaze swept the surroundings, her eyes searching for the missing pieces of this cryptic puzzle.

The distant howl of a lone wolf echoed through the quiet streets, as if nature itself acknowledged the peculiar turn of events. Little did they know that this chance encounter with a lone child marked the beginning of a journey that would unearth stories long buried.

"Norman, look!"

Norman took a couple more steps further onto the porch, saw the child, and looked around, "Now, where did you come from?"

The young girl moved forward onto the next step and held her hand out toward Tabitha. Taking a few steps toward the mystery girl, Tabitha noticed a mark on the palm of her outstretched hand. It looked like a strange birthmark shaped like a

diamond. Tabitha stepped closer, slowly taking the young girl's hand into her hers.

Thunder rang through the town one more time, with such intensity that it knocked the three of them off their feet. Tabitha stood and grabbed the girl's hand to help her up. When their hands touched, they both got a small shock, followed by nausea and an electric surge that flooded over Tabitha in an instant. Looking at the child, Tabitha could not understand how there was something familiar about her, like she had always known this little girl.

"Norman, I think we need to keep her. I mean…I think she was sent here for us."

"What are you talking about Tabby? Let's just think rationally for a minute. We can't just

keep something that ain't ours to keep. I'm sure her parents are looking for her."

"Think about it, Norm, we can't have any children of our own. I think the Universe brought her to us. I can feel it. I need to protect her."

"Have you lost your mind? Norman walked over to Tabitha and placed his hand on her shoulder. "We need to take her to the Sheriff."

Tabitha glanced down at the girl and felt a slight pain in her left hand between her middle and ring finger. Looking at her finger, she noticed the same diamond shape symbol was carved into her flesh.

Her eyebrows knitted together in confusion. "What the… How in the world?"

The toddler moved closer to Tabitha and wrapped her small arm around Tabitha's left leg. Tabitha placed her hand on the young girl's head, touched her soft hazelnut brown hair, and slid her hand down, noticing the softness.

"Now, don't go getting attached. Her parents are probably worried sick. They probably got lost in the storm somewhere."

"But let's just think about this, Norm. I have never seen this little girl around these parts. Have you? Plus, look at this." Tabitha held up the girl's hand to show Norman the unusual birthmark, and then held up her hand and showed him her finger. "Can you explain that? I didn't have that mark before. How did that happen? She was meant

for us. Let's just wait it out. See if anyone comes looking for her. Please, Norman."

"What will we tell people? All of a sudden, we have a toddler? How will we explain that?"

"We can say she's our niece or something like that."

Norman picked up the little girl and carried her into their home. Tabitha followed close behind him, closing the door slowly and glancing around to make sure no one was watching.

"Well, what shall we call you?" Norman said, setting her down.

Tabitha looked at the girl, "Maybe we should call her Lilith. I love that name."

"Lilith. Good choice Tabby. Lilith it is."

The Thorns kept to themselves for several months after the storm brought their mysterious new family member. Much to their surprise and happiness, no one came looking for Lilith. With every day that passed, they fell more and more in love with the little girl. She was exactly what they needed.

As the years passed, Lilith became the perfect daughter for Norman and Tabitha. She filled their ears with everything they needed to hear. In their eyes, she could do no wrong. More and more, Tabitha felt the overwhelming need to protect the child. They couldn't imagine their lives without her.

♦♦♦

January 20, 1858

Norman and Tabitha filled the dining room table with birthday gifts for Lilith. The decision to celebrate her birthday each year on the day she found them was an easy choice. They waited in the kitchen for Lilith to wake up. Norman poured steaming cups of coffee, unaware that the warmth would soon be eclipsed by the chilling events to unfold. He carried the cup over to Tabitha and placed it in her hands. "Five years." He pulled out the chair next to his wife and sat down. "Five years with this little girl." He reached over and grabbed Tabitha's hand. "What do you think?"

Tabitha took a drink and looked at Norman. "My feelings are all over the place. Sometimes I'm

so happy, and she's the sweetest little girl." Tabitha leaned toward Normand and lowered her voice. "Other times, I get this feeling in the pit of my stomach. The feeling that we let something evil into our home." She took another drink and looked around to be sure she wasn't overheard by small ears.

"Well, I can honestly say that I think being a mom agrees with you. You haven't been sick a day since our little girl got here. You also don't look like you have aged a day. You look as young as you did on that stormy day."

"Yeah, I've noticed that too, and it adds to the weird feeling that I get sometimes."

Norman looked at Tabitha, “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, Tab. Most women would give anything to look like they don’t age.”

“Anything? Would they really give anything, Norm?” Tabitha rubbed her left temple with the weight of the world in her thoughts.

♦♦♦

December 18, 1862

A ferocious wind howled in from the East, sending chills through the air. The overcast sky loomed in a somber shade of gray, ominous charcoal clouds racing across the heavens. The storm took the town by surprise and sent everyone running for cover. The school had released the children just minutes before the weather changed.

Normand and Tabitha anticipated Lilith coming home drenched and cold.

The front door slammed. Lilith stood by the door, a mess, dripping and cold. Tabitha grabbed a towel to dry the child. Upon closer inspection, Tabitha noticed that Lilith's dress had been torn in several areas, and her arm had a cut on it.

"Oh my goodness, what happened?"

Tears welled up in Lilith's eyes, tracing delicate pathways down her cheeks, "It was those kids again. They hate me. They are all jealous."

"Come now, sit down, dry off, have some hot tea, and tell me what happened." Tabitha sat at the table with Lilith as she held the hot mug in her

hands, warming her body. “Okay, tell me what happened at school.”

Lilith paused for a moment, glanced at Tabitha with wide, innocent eyes, and began to tell her tale. “It was after school, I was minding my own business, some kids came over to me and started saying stuff about my beautiful boots.” Lilith wiped the tears from her eyes and continued her story. “They pushed me down and ripped the sleeve of my dress while some boy tried to take my boots. I got up and ran home as fast as I could.” She took a drink of her tea, Tabitha touched the torn part of her dress.

“Well, don’t you worry. We’ll just get you a new dress.”

Lilith smiled, “I love you so much. Those kids are just jealous because you and Papa love me and give me better things than they have.”

Norman walked over to the table, “But how did your arm get cut, Lilly Pie?”

“Oh, it must have happened when they pushed me down. I can’t remember.” She began to cry again, even harder than before. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

“Of course we believe you, child, don’t you cry anymore.” Norman leaned over and gave Lilith a hug.

There was a knock at the door. Norman walked over and answered the door. “Afternoon,

Sheriff. Father Necrosis. What can I do for you both?"

"Afternoon, Norman, I wish we were here in better circumstances, but there was an incident at school." Sheriff Olson took off his hat and held it against his chest.

"Oh yes, Lilly Pie was just telling us about it. I hope you know who the kids were, but we aren't going to make an ordeal about it."

"Make an ordeal about it? The Benton boy is dead. We got a bunch of kids saying it's Lilith's fault."

"What? That can't be true. They are wrong."

"Norm, you know this isn't the first time there has been trouble, and Lilith was at the center of it, but this time a boy is dead. We're gonna need to talk to her." Sheriff Olson said.

"I understand why you're here, Sheriff, but why are you here, Father?"

"The children said that Lilith was talking in some weird language they had never heard before, and the Benton boy started choking. Now I need to see what that was all about. Does Lilith speak another language, Norm?"

"No, of course, she doesn't. The kids have to be lying. Lilith told us that they get jealous of her."

"Norm, we need to see her and talk with her. She might need to come with us." The Sheriff walked into the house, and Lilith ran to her room. "Hi, Tabitha. Can I ask you some questions about Lilith and what happened today?"

Father Necrosis entered the house and walked directly to Lilith's room. Lilith was standing in the middle of her room, silent, staring at the door. "Hi, Lilith. Can I talk with you?"

"Where's Papa?" Lilith looked past the father toward the doorway.

"He's talking with Sheriff Olson right now. He'll be here in a bit. Do you mind if I look around your room?" Father Necrosis began to pray under his breath. He noticed that Lilith began to get fidgety and uncomfortable. Father Necrosis began

to get goosebumps; he rubbed his arms vigorously with his hands, and he felt the temperature drop drastically. Small clouds of vapor filled the room with every breath. The father walked over to his bag and pulled out some oil and Holy Water. He began sprinkling the water around the room and on the girl.

Screams filled the thin icy winter air and traveled for miles. The screams were coming from Lilith's room. Thunder and lightning began to make itself known with more and more intensity every second. A thick fog came in from the East and covered the town.

Tabitha stood up, "Norm! This reminds me of the day that Lilith came to us." A twinge shot into the mark on the side of her finger. A small

amount of blood dripped from the mark. Tabitha wiped her finger on her dress and gave Norman a hug. She then began pacing in the kitchen, nervously.

"Lilith, stop that right now. This will soon be over." Father Necrosis shouted and continued praying louder and louder.

Lilith stopped screaming, looked at the father intently, and spoke in a deep, gravelly voice, "No matter what you do, you can never get rid of me. I've been around for a long time before you even existed."

Father Necrosis threw some Holy water at her face. Lilith began to scream again while her skin sizzled and burned. He took the oil, rubbed some on his hands, then placed them on her head.

Norman tried to take his mind off the cries ringing through the house. “Tabitha, I have to get out of here, or I’ll go mad. He’s hurting our little girl!”

“He has to know what he’s doing, right? He’s a Priest. I’m sure everything will be fine. I pray everything will be fine.” Tabitha walked over to Norman and grabbed his hand.

“I’m going to go outside and work on that doll house I’m building, Lilith, for Christmas. Next week is coming up pretty quickly, and it will keep my mind off of all this.” Norman grabbed his coat, hat, and gloves and stepped out into the stormy, foggy day.

Tabitha nervously fiddled with her pinky ring while she paced back and forth in front of

Lilith's bedroom door. Hearing the girl's anguish was unbearable. *He's a Priest. He must know what he's doing. Everything will be fine. Lord, please protect my little girl.* Her need to protect Lilith was strong. It took everything to fight the urge.

At that moment, the screams stopped. Tabitha stopped pacing and stood completely still, facing Lilith's room. The silence was almost maddening. She felt paralyzed with fear. All she could hear was the pounding of her heart. "Father? Lilith?" Tabitha's voice quivered with emotion. Attempting to speak again, words caught in her throat, rendering her silent. Suddenly, silence. The thunder and lightning stopped instantly, and the fog lifted.

Lilith's door slowly opened, and Father Necrosis emerged from her room. "I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do." Using a cloth, he wiped his glasses and then wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"What? What do you mean, nothing you could do? Tabitha ran into her daughter's room. Lilith's inert form lay on the bed, her unblinking eyes staring into eternity. She fell to her knees next to her daughter's bed. She grabbed Lilith's hand. When there was no response, she began to shake her, "Lilith, Lilith," she yelled over and over and over again, with anguish in her voice and tears streaming down her cheeks.

Father Necrosis returned to Lilith's room. He slowly began gathering his belongings and

shoving them into his bag. “Get up, woman. Do not mourn for that thing. She was pure evil.”

"Evil. No, she wasn't evil; she was gentle and kind. Get out of here. Get out of my house.”

“Kind! Are you insane? She caused death and destruction all over town.”

“Tabitha?” Norman shouted as he ran into the house. “Is everything ok? I don’t hear any screaming anymore.” He ran to Lilith’s room and pushed the door open. Tabitha was standing in the middle of the room. As he stepped into the room, Tabitha fell to the floor. He caught her just before she hit the ground. “Tabitha! What happened? Lilith? What happened to our daughter?” He gently set Tabitha down and walked over to Lilith.

"I will get some of the men from town. We will be back to burn that body. That's the only way to make sure that thing is dead." The Father placed his hand on Norman's shoulder.

Norman shoved his hand off of him, "Get out of here and don't come back. We'll take care of our daughter. If you come back here, I'll kill you myself."

♦♦♦

June 21, 1863

"Tabitha, it's been over six months since our Lilly Pie passed. I can't walk past that playhouse anymore. It's too painful."

"I feel the same way, but what would we do with it? You put so much time into it. She would have loved it so much."

"Let's move it to the cemetery and put it right near her grave. I think she would like that."

"Okay, Norman. I think that's a good idea. Let's do it." Tabitha delicately brushed away a tear, her arms wrapping around Norman in a comforting embrace. "She left us so young." She threw her face into her hands and began to weep uncontrollably.

♦♦♦

May 25, 2014

Tabitha walked down the path leading to the group of visitors. The sky was an intense azure shade with wisps of white clouds scattered

throughout. There was a slight breeze that carried the light, fragrant scent of eucalyptus through the cemetery.

"Hello, my name is Tabitha. Thank you for visiting the Benicia Historic Cemetery. I'll be giving all of you a tour around the cemetery. Most people don't know that Benicia was the capital of California for a short time in the 1800s. We'll take some time and stop by the headstones of the famous residents we have here."

One of the visitors raised their hand, "Excuse me, Tabitha? What is that thing over there that looks like a small house?"

"Oh, you're asking about The Lilith House. Legend has it that about 150 years ago, a man by the name of Norman Thorn was building that house

for his daughter as a playhouse. However, she died before the house was completed. The mom and dad had it moved for her and put it right near her grave. People say that the parents were never seen or heard from again after that day. It's a very interesting tale. If anyone is interested in hearing more, we can talk about it at the conclusion of the tour."

"Can we go look at it? Are we allowed to look in there?"

"Sure, I don't see why not. Let's head over there. I have also heard stories from the night security that if you listen closely around midnight, you can hear Lilith playing with her toys and laughing." Tabitha absently twisted her pinky ring as she shared the eerie tale with the captivated visitors.

"So creepy. Are people allowed to come in here that late at night?"

"No, sorry. We close at 9 pm. But, they have caught people trying to sneak in and take a look at the house." Tabitha glanced down at her finger with the diamond-shaped scar.

♦♦♦

When the tour had finished, Tabitha walked back to the playhouse. The wind whispered through the rustling leaves, carrying with it the scent of eucalyptus. It was a ritual she performed almost every day, a silent communion with the memories that lingered in every corner.

Tabitha sank into the old rocking chair, her fingers instinctively caressing the

small diamond-shaped scar on her left finger, a permanent memento of a time when fate wove an unexpected thread into the fabric of her life.

"Lilith," she whispered, the name an echo in the stillness of the little house. The wooden walls seemed to absorb the sound as if they held the secrets of a lifetime. She glanced around, half-expecting to see the ghostly remnants of a child's laughter dancing in the air.

As her eyes traced the details of the playhouse, memories of a time long gone flooded her senses. The laughter, the joy, the unspoken promise of a future filled with the pitter-patter of little feet – all etched into the very essence of this tiny haven.

But now, the air felt heavy, laden with an unspoken sorrow that clung to the walls like a haunting melody. Tabitha closed her eyes, trying to shut out the painful images that flickered in her mind – Lilith's innocent smile, the warmth of her embrace, and the day it all came crashing down.

A tear slid down Tabitha's cheek, a testament to the enduring ache that nestled in her heart. She had lost more than a daughter that fateful night; she had lost a piece of herself. The pain was a quiet storm, raging within, leaving behind scars that time failed to heal.

"Lilith, my sweet girl," Tabitha whispered again, her voice quivering with a mix of love and regret. The rocking chair

creaked beneath the weight of her emotions; each sways a silent lullaby to a memory that refused to fade.

In that moment, the playhouse transformed into a sanctuary of grief and love, a space where Tabitha could confront the echoes of the past. The pinky ring, an heirloom worn with pride, felt heavy on her finger, a connection to a life that danced on the precipice of the extraordinary and the inexplicable.

With a heavy heart, Tabitha opened her eyes, her gaze lingering on the empty spaces where toys once lay scattered. The flicker of hope sparked within her, an irrational yearning for the impossible – to

hear Lilith's laughter once more, to feel the warmth of her presence.

The day was fading, casting long shadows that stretched across the small playhouse. Tabitha rose from the rocking chair, a reluctant farewell whispered to the memories that clung to the air.

“Lilith, I might have gotten some people interested. If they come back tonight, be ready to have some new friends to play with.”

The door closed behind her with a soft click, leaving the playhouse to the ghosts of a time that could never be reclaimed.

As Tabitha stepped out into the fading sunlight, the weight of the past settled

on her shoulders. The cemetery embraced her with an almost eerie tranquility, and yet, in the silence, she could almost hear the faint laughter of a child – her Lilly Pie – dancing on the edge of her consciousness.

In the gathering dusk, Tabitha walked away, the diamond-shaped scar on her finger glinting in the twilight. The Lilith House stood as a silent witness, holding within its walls the untold stories of a family bound by love, loss, and a connection that transcended the boundaries of time.

Letters and Lies

Second Edition

By: A.k.Finch

The smell of bacon filled the air. As Stasi set the breakfast table, she caught herself lost in thought, her eyes flickering with an enigmatic gleam that Sean couldn't quite decipher. Sean grabbed the morning paper and set it at his seat. They both sat down to enjoy breakfast together before their hectic day began.

“It smells delicious, Hon,” Sean said, then started to browse the paper. “Hey, Stasi, did you

see this? Community Memorial Hospital, isn't that where you were born? It says a nurse switched babies, and there is an investigation."

"Oh, weird," Stasi didn't seem very interested. "I'm sure they'll get it all figured out. Doesn't this kind of thing happen all the time? You better eat, Sean. You don't want to be late."

"It says she worked there from 1980 to 1997. You were born there during that time. They want families to go in and do DNA testing. Stas, you need to go in there and do the testing." Sean noticed Stasi fidget with the small, silver locket that dangled around Stasi's neck. Sean had never seen her take it off. Little did he know, it held a secret that would unravel their lives.

“Sometimes, secrets are safer buried, don't you think?" Stasi glanced over at Sean and noticed the puzzled look on his face. “You know how busy I am at work. It would be impossible for me to get the time to go over there. Plus, I’m sure this has nothing to do with me. I better run or I’m going to be late. You should get going too. See you later. Love you.”

- - -

“Hello?” Stasi answered her phone.

“Hey, Hon, I know you’re busy. I just wanted to let you know that I helped you out. I took some hair from your brush and took it to the hospital. That way you don’t need to go down there.”

"You what?" Stasi absentmindedly rubbed her forehead, the weight of her unspoken truth pressing down on her. Her gaze lingered on the framed photo of her and Sean she had on her desk, a tinge of guilt surfacing in her eyes.. "I can't believe you did that. I told you I'm sure it had nothing to do with me."

"Wait, are you mad? I was just trying to ..."

"No, no. I'm not mad. I'm super busy at work. My boss just came in, and if he sees me on the phone, I'll be in trouble. I better go." Stasi grabbed her keys and jumped in her car. *What am I going to do? This could ruin everything. If Sean finds out about me ... I've been lying to him this whole time, he'll leave me for sure. How can I*

explain all of this to him? Would he even believe me if I told him where I'm really from?

Stasi took a drive past her old colony, careful not to be spotted. *If they find me, they'll either kill Sean and drag me back here, or kill both of us. I can never go back. I don't agree with their plans that they have for Earth. Either way, Sean and I are dead.* Stasi pulled out a small device from her pocket, its surface adorned with intricate patterns. With a subtle gesture, the device emitted a soft hum, responding to her touch in ways that defied Earthly logic.

- - -

"Hey, Stasi, this was in the mail. It's from the hospital. I'll bet that it's your results from your

DNA test." Sean set the envelope down on the table next to Stasi.

Stasi felt a twinge of uneasiness in her stomach. She thought it would take much longer. After all, this paper contained information that could compromise her whole existence. *What could they have found out from some hair…What if the others come looking for me… It's been three years since I fled the colony and I haven't had any trouble…. until now*. She took a deep breath to relax her nerves. Her hands were trembling.

"Well, are you going to open it?" Sean asked.

"Of course. I'm just nervous. What if . . . "

"I know, but you will never know until you open it." He said, tapping the envelope. "You need to know. We need to know."

If you only knew. . . you wouldn't want me to open it either. "Why? What will it really change? My life has been great so far. I have had a great life and it's mostly because of you. What if what is in that letter changes everything?" Stasi smiled with an odd sort of grin that puzzled Sean.

"Listen, if you won't do it for yourself, do it for the hospital and all the other families. Do it for our own children, when we have some. Wouldn't you want them to know the truth?"

Hmm, wouldn't I want my children to know the truth? The truth is that I'm from a planet called

Belletone, and I was sent here to destroy humans, but I fell in love with one. "Sean…how would you feel about having an adventure? Let's just be spontaneous and take a trip, anywhere you want." Stasi said while grabbing Sean's hand.

"Quit changing the subject. Come on. Do it quick, like ripping off a bandage." Sean sat down next to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Do you want me to open it for you?"

"No, I can do it myself. But before I do. I just want you to know how much I love you and wouldn't change any of this." She grabbed the envelope, her hands still shaking. She tried to steady them as she slit open the top. Stasi's eyes briefly glowed with an otherworldly light,

imperceptible to those around her. She shook it off,

The letter read:

Dear Mrs. Hamilton,

The results of the DNA test have come in. Your DNA does not match with any of the other families with children who were born at Community Memorial Hospital. Some kind of foreign matter was found in your results that made your test inconclusive. There were also some

proteins found that might indicate that you are pregnant. Further investigation is required. We will need you to come in to run more tests. Please call to make an appointment as soon as possible.

Regretfully, Steven Coldman.

"Well, what does it say? Stasi?"

"Huh? Oh, umm, it confirms that my parents are really my parents. Just like I thought. It doesn't change anything." She leaned over and

gave Sean a hug. She got the feeling that he could sense something was off. She stood up and walked into the other room where they kept the paper shredder. Without any hesitation, she inserted the letter.

Stasi walked over to the closet, grabbed two already packed backpacks, and then grabbed an empty duffle bag. She walked into the bedroom and started packing. While packing her bags, Stasi carefully placed an unusual-looking device into one of them. Sean barely noticed, assuming it was just a trinket. Trying to keep her composure, Stasi grabbed the lockbox she kept under the bed, pulled out a gun, and stuck it in the duffle bag. She yelled from the other room, “Sean, I have to tell you something very important. Try to keep an open

mind. I'm not sure if the others will come looking for me now…"

Just as she was talking, the doorbell rang.

Stasi quickly grabbed all the bags and ran over to Sean. "If you want to live, we need to leave right now. I'll explain later."

Sean seemed completely confused and not sure how to react. "What? What is this all about? I don't understand. Who's after you? And why are they after you?"

Stasi grabbed Sean's arm, "I'll explain everything, as soon as we get far from here. Let's go out the back."

They ran as fast as they could through their neighbor's yards. They ran through the crowded

streets until they reached a bus stop several blocks away. “We need to ditch our phones,” Stasi told Sean. “Take out the batteries and the sim card, and throw them in the trash.”

“What is going on? Why are we getting rid of our phones? I don’t understand any of this. Stasi! You need to tell me right now. What the heck is going on? I’m not moving until you explain this.”

Stasi grabbed Sean’s face with both hands, “This is going to be hard to understand, but just let me talk, and then you can ask questions. I’m not from around here. My colony came here with the intent to take over this place in five years. When I met you, I fell in love with you, and I left my colony. Now they are looking for me, well. . .

looking for us. We just need to get far away from here, and then I can explain more."

"You're not from here…meaning America?" Sean asked.

"No, not from America, not even from Earth. I'm from a planet called Belletone."

"OK. This is a joke, right? Is this some kind of prank or something?"

"No, it's not a prank. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before now. I've wanted to tell you for a long time. But, but I didn't know how you would feel. I'm so sorry. Let's just get on the bus."

They rode the bus in silence for four hours, yet it seemed like an eternity. The silence was deafening. Every once in a while, Sean would

glance over at Stasi with a blank stare. Stasi was worried. She had never seen that look in Sean's eyes before.

When the bus pulled over to the bus stop, Stasi and Sean got off of the bus. "You probably have a million questions. I want to answer them all. Let's find a hotel and get a room so we can talk somewhere private." Stasi said while glancing around to see if she noticed anyone watching them.

. . .

Stasi and Sean entered the upscale hotel, the plush carpet muffling the sounds of their hurried footsteps. The lobby was adorned with crystal chandeliers, and the scent of exotic flowers lingered in the air. Stasi scanned the area, her eyes

momentarily locking onto a figure near the concierge desk.

Sean, still bewildered by the day's revelations, followed Stasi's gaze. "Who are you looking at?"

Stasi hesitated, then grabbed Sean's hand, steering him towards the concierge desk. As they approached, a tall, enigmatic figure turned to face them. The stranger's eyes held a glint of recognition as they met Stasi's.

"Zelarin, melishara." Stasi greeted the stranger in a language Sean had never heard before. It flowed from Stasi's lips with an otherworldly cadence.

Sean tried to make sense of the unfamiliar sounds. "Stasi, who's this? What language are you speaking?"

Stasi cast a quick glance at Sean, her eyes urging him to trust her. "Sean, meet Zelarin. An old friend."

Zelarin nodded respectfully, his gaze fixed on Stasi. "Nelthar, Stasi. Lan'shol nevaara." His words carried a weight that hinted at a shared history.

"Vosh'dara lan," Stasi expressed.

"Rav'kanor veshti," Zelarin handed Stasi a strange looking metal key.

. . .

The hotel room was fancy. Sean knew that it was much more than they could afford.

"I'm going to wash my face, and then I'll finish explaining everything to you." Stasi said.

While Stasi was in the restroom, Sean walked around the room deciding. His head was spinning from all the events of the day. Sean placed his hand in his right coat pocket and felt around for a small button that was sewn into the lining. *Should I press the button?* Sean quickly pressed the button. *I feel sick to my stomach. How long will it take for them to track my location? What's in these bags? How did she have them ready so quick?* Sean opened one of the backpacks. It had a couple rolls of large bills, some clothes, and a gun.

"Ok, now we have some time to talk." Stasi said while walking out of the bathroom.

"Why do you have all this money, and a gun. How did you get these bags together so quick?" Sean's voice was shaky.

"I already had the bags packed in case of an emergency. The money is also for an emergency. Let me explain some more. I left my colony when we met because I fell in love with you. I realized that I could never go through with their plan. That's why they are after me. They want to bring me back in. They probably wouldn't have found me so quickly except that you sent in some of my hair."

"How did giving your hair to the hospital help them find you?"

"They have agents everywhere. That brings me to the next thing I need to tell you. The letter from the hospital said that I might be pregnant. Isn't that exciting? Some good news in all this craziness."

"Pregnant? Good news? Are you crazy? What would the baby be? What would it look like? What do you look like? Is this your real body? Or do you look like something from an alien movie?" Sean grabbed his head with both hands. *This isn't happening. How could I be so careless? A baby? With my target? I'll be dead.* " Ok, let's cut the crap Stasi. This isn't my first rodeo. We didn't find each other by mistake. I am an agent that seeks out aliens to keep our planet safe. You can't be pregnant. I know that human DNA and alien DNA do not mix."

Tears formed in Stasi's eyes. "You are what? This whole thing was planned? The colony altered the DNA of the females so that we could get pregnant and populate the planet. Sean, just remember how much we love each other. This will all work itself out." Stasi was trying to remind Sean that they really had feelings for each other.

"I don't think I can do this. I don't even know the real you…and a baby?" *The baby could be a monster for all I know. I can't have that thing be half mine. No one can ever know about the baby.* Sean grabbed the gun from the bag. He pointed it at Stasi.

Two gunshots rang out through the hotel. Guests were running, and the sounds of screaming

echoed through the halls. The police searched every room until they came to room 247. No one answered, so the management opened the door with their key.

"Looks like we have a suicide on our hands. It's strange, though. Looks like she shot herself in the stomach and then shot herself in the head. No one else was in the room." The officer told the manager.

Sean quickly fled the hotel, being careful not to be seen. He noticed a man approaching him on the street. *Who found me first, the colony or…. I'll just keep calmly walking. What can they do? There are too many witnesses.*

"Agent Anderson?" the man asked.

Sean slowly stopped walking and turned to face him. “Yes.”

“The Department of Security wants to thank you for your deep undercover work and for turning in the hair sample. We have been looking for her for a couple of years now.” The man held out his hand.

Sean shook the man’s hand. “Just doing my job.”

The Party

By: A.k.Finch

We pulled over to the curb. I paused for a moment before I opened the car door. Just then, mom pushed me.

"Matt, Go! You'll have fun," my mom said as she gave me another shove out of the car.

Have Fun? There wasn't going to be anything fun about this party. What is her definition of fun? Spending a couple of hours with the guys whose main goal at school is to humiliate me and make my life miserable? Where is the fun in that? I shut the door and slowly headed over to the

entrance of the pool area. When I got to the pool gate, I was greeted by Marvin Hammer, or "Sledge," as he preferred to be called. The name seemed to stick. I'm not sure if it is because of his size, the way he plows down the other team on the football field, or because it just sounded cool with his last name. You have to admit that "Sledge Hammer" is an intimidating name.

"You don't have to stay. You can just drop off your gift and go." He said in his usual gravelly voice.

Looking back, my mom's car drove off in the distance. "I wish I could, but it's too late." I proclaimed that fact to Sledge and then walked away as quickly as I could. I hoped no other words would spew out of his sewer mouth.

Sledge laughingly remarked, "It's your funeral."

It's my funeral...It's my funeral... The words kept replaying over and over in my head like a skipping record. Trying to shake off Sledge's intimidating words, I began searching for the birthday boy.

I walked across the pool deck and scanned the place to find somewhere to drop the gift off. I noticed a huge crowd inside the pool house. *That must be where Brad is*, I thought. He usually had quite a crowd around him. After all, he was voted most popular in school. *Maybe I should just get the unpleasantries out of the way now and go say hi.*

I pushed my way through the crowd, almost tripped over several different feet, and ended up at the front of the crowd. “Hey Brad, here’s your gift.”

“Throw it on the pile with the rest.” Brad pointed to the enormous mound of gifts piled on the table.

I threw my gift on the pile and thought*, I vote him most likely to make me throw up in my mouth.*

To my left, I noticed a fire pit on the deck of the pool. It was far enough away from the commotion. I think that will be my spot for the night. *I can hang out there and be out of everyone’s way*.

“Would you mind some company?” a voice came from behind me.

Pretty sure that no one would talk to me at this party, I ignored it.

“Can I sit with you?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. I looked back to see who it was.

She said, “I came bearing gifts,” showing me the bag of marshmallows and two sticks.

“I think you’re in my English class. You’re new this year, right?” My voice cracking. *She is beautiful. I can’t believe she is talking to me.*

“My family moved here this year.” She says while handing me a marshmallow and a stick.

“So, how do you like school?” Taking the marshmallow, starting to roast it over the fire, and trying to be as cool as possible.

"It's been okay so far, but I think it's starting to get a lot better." Giving me an adorable smile, my heart began pounding so loud I was pretty sure she was hearing it also.

It felt like my head was on fire. I bet my face was as red as a firetruck.

"You don't seem like the other girls at this party. I mean, you aren't throwing yourself at Brad. What made you come here?"

She put a marshmallow on her stick and started toasting it. "My parents made me come with my brother. I didn't really want to be here."

"Oh, who's your brother?" I asked.

"Marvin. Well, you probably know him as Sledge."

"Sledge, is your brother?" She could sense the shock in my voice. "I mean, he's so big, and you're so beautiful." "I'm sorry that didn't come out right."

"Don't worry. I know what you meant. And thank you." She smiled. "What about you? Why are you here? This doesn't seem like your crowd."

"My mom and Brad's mom were roommates in college. Brad and I were good friends when we were little. Our moms just don't see how different we are now. I didn't want to come, but now I'm glad I did." I gave her a quick glance and a smile.

The sun began to set quickly. The sky was illuminated with a mix of red and blood orange that cast a glow on anything and everything that it

touched. The party was in full swing by now. The roar of laughter filled the area. The pool was packed with people jumping, splashing, doing cannonballs, and playing the usual games people play in pools. There were more lights at this party than the electrical parade at Disneyland. It suited Brad. The party was loud and obnoxious, just like him.

"Do you want something to drink? I'll go get it for you." I said.

"Sure, that would be great. Thank you."

I pushed my way through the crowd of dancing partiers and made it to the pool house. The crowd inside the place was five times worse than the mass outside. Just then, I noticed several ice chests filled with cold drinks around the food area.

I grabbed two sodas and headed back to the fire pit. I was amazed I got back in one piece and still had the sodas in my hand.

She was still there, waiting for me. I was a little shocked. I thought she might take it as an opportunity to make a break for it.

I handed her a soda and sat in my seat. The flickering light from the flames made everything seem more festive. The party was loud, but I could still hear the relaxing crackling sound of the fire.

"Thank you for the soda." She said with a grin. "I guess we haven't been officially introduced. My name is Paige. What's your name?" She said, holding out her hand.

"My name is Matt. Matt Williams." I grabbed her hand and shook it.

"Oh, Matt is my favorite name," Paige said with a huge smirk.

"Really, why?"

"Because it's yours."

"That's a great line. How many times have you used it?" I said with a slight laugh.

"It's the first time I've used it. Did you like it?" She said. The soft glow of the fire reflected on her face made her appear to be sincere. "Can I see your phone?"

"Uh, sure, why?" I handed her my phone, not sure what she was going to do with it.

She leaned over, put her arm around me, and snapped a photo of us.

She quickly put her number in my phone. "There, now you have my number, and I'm using that picture for my contact." And handed the phone back to me. She was not like any other girl I had met, and I found it refreshing.

"Can I get your number?" She asked.

"Yeah, okay. It's 555-357-4747."

Just after she put my number in her phone, some of her friends grabbed her and pulled her to the dance area.

Well, that didn't last long, I thought. I decided to enjoy the peaceful fire and not let it bother me. I slightly glanced over my shoulder to see if I could find her in the crowd of dancers. There she was, dancing with Tony. If she were dancing with him, she'd never come back over here.

Tony was one of the guards for the Bulldogs, and he was built. He wasn't too bad on the dance floor either. I quickly turned back so she didn't notice me look at her. The pathetic loser I was, all by myself, while she was over there with her friends, having fun.

This party officially sucks. It can't be over fast enough. The air started to get a little cool. The warmth resonated from the fire. It felt nice. I reached to grab a marshmallow, and a hand touched my shoulder.

"Sorry about that. Those guys are jerks." Paige said and sat back down in her seat.

It felt as if I had a smile on my face that reached from ear to ear. I tried not to seem so happy to see her, but I couldn't stop grinning.

"What are you doing over here? It looked like you were having fun. Your friends seem nice." I said.

"They aren't my friends. They're Marvin's, really. I can't stand them. I just put on my best game face and get through the day. It's his fault I had to leave my real friends. If he wouldn't of…" She stopped and looked down.

"If he wouldn't of, what?"

"Oh, nothing. I shouldn't have said that. I can't talk about it. He could get in a lot of trouble. So, did you miss me?" She smiled and changed the subject.

I didn't want to appear too desperate, and I wasn't sure what to say to that loaded question. It didn't make any sense. Why was she over here

talking to me when she could be talking with any other guy at the party? It reminded me of one of those movies where the popular girl becomes friends with the school geek in an attempt to make a fool of him. I kept thinking *any minute, they were going to come over here with a bucket of pig's blood and pour it on my head*.

I didn't really answer her question. I just laughed it off. Now I was very curious about what Sledge did. *Why couldn't she talk about it? I have to know. How am I going to get her to tell me?*

"So, where did you move from?"

"We moved from Poughkeepsie. I really miss it, and I miss my friends." Paige replied.

"Where is Poughkeepsie?"

"It's in New York." She was trying not to laugh at me because I didn't know where it was.

"Oh, I thought I noticed an accent. So, what kind of stuff did you do in New York?"

"I like to take pictures and draw. It's so beautiful in New York, not like here in California. New York has seasons, and the trees change color." She said while twisting her chestnut brown, wavy hair between her fingers.

"There are some beautiful places here in California. Have you been to the beach or the mountains? The beach is amazing. You would love taking pictures of the sunsets at the beach."

"Are you volunteering to go with me?" Paige looked at me with a huge smile.

"Sure, I would love to. We'll have to make some plans for it."

By now the sun had completely set. It sounded like the volume of the party doubled. The scent of pizza and beer filled the air.

It was a struggle to hear Paige talk. I pulled my chair closer to hers and leaned in so I could hear her better.

Without warning, Sledge had my collar in his hand, and he ripped me from my chair. "Keep your hands off my sister!" He screamed.

"What?" was all I could get out of my mouth before I felt his fist slam into my face. The first punch caught me off guard, snapping my head to the side. My cheekbone surged with heat, a pulsing reminder of the collision. The metallic taste

of blood filled my mouth as I stumbled backward, desperately trying to regain my footing on the uneven pool deck.

"This is your fault. You made this happen," Sledge growled, his massive frame looming over me. Before I could respond, his fist slammed into the side of my head, leaving me disoriented and dizzy.

Through the haze, I heard Paige's desperate screams, the panic in her voice cutting through the chaos. "Stop it! Stop doing this! Are you going to attack every guy I talk to? Remember what happened last time?“ That infuriated Sledge. He yelled, “Mom said never to bring that up again.”

While still holding on to my jacket like a steel grip, with his other hand he gave her a shove.

He hurled her with such force that she flew backward, tripping over some stuff the swimmers left on the pool deck.

Sledge came at me again. This time, hitting me in the side of the head. It felt like my brain slammed against the side of my skull. I was dazed and dizzy.

There was a loud ringing in my ear, and everything sounded muffled. Just then, there were some sounds of screaming. I was still disoriented from the last blow. I mostly heard, “Oh my gosh, there’s so much blood. Oh my gosh.”

I wasn’t sure what was going on. Everyone seemed to be in a panic, and they scattered. It was like someone yelled fire. All I knew was that

Sledge wasn't holding on to me anymore. Someone yelled, "Call 9-1-1."

I was shaking my head, trying to understand what was going on. Sledge was right in my face and poked his finger in my chest, "This is your fault. You made this happen." He repeated it.

Made what happen? What is my fault?

Brad ran over and grabbed Sledge's shoulder. "Dude, the police are on their way. You better get out of here."

Sledge took off. I glanced toward the pool. Paige was floating, face down in the pool. She must have hit her head when Sledge threw her. The pool started to fill with her blood. It was like a large red cloud floating in the water, growing larger with every second that passed.

I jumped in the pool and pulled her out onto the deck. I could see the huge cut on the side of her head. Blood started to gather on the pool deck. "Someone get some towels so we can stop the bleeding," I screamed, but no one moved.

I felt for a pulse, but I couldn't find one. "Come on, Paige. Stay with me. We haven't had a chance to really get to know each other. What about our trip to the beach? . . ."

I pulled off my shirt and used it to try and stop the bleeding. I heard the comforting sounds of sirens in the distance.

"Paige, it's going to be ok. The paramedics are here." I told her, still holding my shirt on her head.

Three guys ran in with a stretcher. “Back up, sir.”

We all watched as they performed CPR on Paige. I know it was only minutes but it felt like an eternity.

One of the paramedics said, “Let’s call it, 9:47.”

“Are her parents here?” The EMT asked. Brad walked over and spoke with them.

. . .

For the past two months, all I could do was think about the party, Paige, and everything that happened. I still can’t get the thoughts out of my head. They even keep me awake at night. The

memories play over and over in my mind. *I need to get that out of my head.*

My phone buzzed, and I glanced down to see what it was.

A text message: “Hi, are we still on for the beach?” The picture of Paige and me popped up on my phone. I smiled.

.

Willowcreek on the 13th

By: A.k.Finch

In the small town of Willowcreek, carefully nestled between an ancient forest and rolling hills, a legend was whispered through generations. The townspeople spoke of the Silver Veil, a mystical fog that would appear only on Friday the 13th, veiling the town in an otherworldly shroud. According to folklore, the Silver Veil held the key to a hidden realm, a gateway to a dimension where time and reality intertwined.

The legend told of a chosen one, a person with a determined spirit, who, when the Silver Veil descended, would be drawn to the town graveyard. This courageous soul would unlock the secrets that lay beyond the veil, discovering the ancient wisdom guarded by mystical entities.

On a gloomy Friday the 13th morning, an eerie mist encamped throughout the town: the Silver Veil. The townspeople spoke of strange happenings. A young lady named Selah, with raven black hair that flowed like a midnight river, had an air of mystery about her. On this fateful day, she decided to explore the town graveyard. There were whispers of a mysterious legend hidden there. As Selah entered the fog-laden labyrinth of the town graveyard, the Silver Veil responded to her presence with an ethereal dance. It revealed not only the

hidden corners of the town but also the spectral chains that bound the townspeople. Airy voices echoed through the mist, revealing the stories of each captive soul, and Selah understood the magnitude of her mission. As the Silver Veil vanished, it dissipated Selah along with it.

Willowcreek emerged from its enchantment, forever changed. The liberated town, now free from the Silver Veil's grip, celebrated Selah as the hero who had unraveled the curse. The legend transformed, becoming a testament to a community's resilience and the power of an individual to break the chains of the past.

The folklore further foretold that the wisdom gleaned by the chosen one would bring prosperity and protection to Willowcreek. It was said that the

Silver Veil's disappearance marked the passing of this newfound knowledge into the town's collective consciousness, forever shaping its destiny.

Selah's name echoed through Willowcreek's history, not as a mysterious wanderer but as the champion who had freed the town from the captivating embrace of the Silver Veil. The 13th of every month became a day of liberation and gratitude, a reminder of the courage that restored Willowcreek to the embrace of the ordinary, now free from the mystical fog that once held it captive.

THE CLEANERS

By: Jules Grant

Dawn's first light filters in through the blinds of a sleepy house. Deafening silence rings throughout each room. A line of shoes sit on the ground near the front door. All members of the cleaning staff, shoeless, move as silently as a pillow hitting carpet. Two women wearing black wipe down the kitchen, and one in the living room picks up lint off a well-used chair. A man wearing all black, slowly scrubbing a toilet to not make any noise. Cautiously waiting at the bottom of the stairs, another cleaner, Ethan, steadies himself with the

banister. You see, earlier that morning, Ethan pulled the short straw, and now he must clean upstairs. One of the ladies steps into the hallway, in view of him standing at the bottom of the stairs. They exchange a worried look.

Upstairs, the two owners sleep in their bedroom behind the first door on the right at the top of the stairs. Ethan steps lightly past his boss's bedroom and all the way down the hall to the music library. The room has wall-to-wall shelving holding every record, tape, and CD they ever bought. A lounge chair occupies one corner next to a large speaker. In the other corner sits a grand piano. There, the young cleaner starts dusting all the shelving with a feather duster. He takes steps with such caution.

Back downstairs, Cosette stands in the small bar room right off the kitchen. Mirror walls reflect the half-empty liquor bottles resting on the shelves and counters. She stares out the window while wiping the nonexistent dust off a bottle of whiskey. Her thoughts drifted to the idea that maybe one day she could have a big house with a large backyard and cleaners to pick up after her; maybe one day, her luck would change. Cosette sets the bottle down on the counter with a clang that rings throughout the house. Her hazel eyes widen as she freezes. A tear rolls down her cheek.

All the cleaners in the house stop and stand so still one might think they have become statues, sacred statues. Ethan stands in the doorway of the library, straining to hear if the owners have awoken. His hands visibly shaking. He places a hand over

his mouth to muffle his breathing and crouches. Back downstairs, a kitchen cleaner, Everly, places her sponge in the sink and cautiously walks over to Cosette. Wide eyes and shallow breathing. She reaches over to her coworker. They both look up at the ceiling.

After a few minutes, Everly quietly walks into the broom closet. She runs her fingers over obituary clippings taped to the wall, all the people with unexplained deaths. Tears well up in her eyes and spill over onto her face. She slides against the wall to the floor, letting out silent sobs. Everly quickly composes herself and grabs a towel. She looks at the clippings one more time and mouths an apologetic prayer.

Ethan starts dusting the piano, careful not to accidentally drop the lid. As he moves around the musical instrument, the duster slips from his hand and hits a single key before landing on the soft carpet. Ethan rushes to grab the strings in a desperate attempt to stop the sound. It stops. He stands still, heart pounding, sweat dripping from his forehead. The door from the master bedroom creaks open. Ethan turns his head towards the doorway.

A week later

Cosette is in the broom closet, grabbing a rag. She looks at the obituaries on the wall. A new one is tapped up. She leans her forehead against it, against the obituary for an Ethan Knight, cause of death unknown.

FORBIDDEN SUNSET

By: A.k.Finch

The pedestrians surged forward in the busy hustle of the New York morning. The street was a symphony of motion with all the yellow taxis and cars, horns honking, creating the

constant urban melody. Towering skyscrapers cast dark shadows across the sidewalk vendor's carts. The air was infused with the delicious scent of street food and the usual odor of car

exhaust.

The year was 2047, and gigantic electronic

billboards loomed overhead, casting news and regulations in a ceaseless parade of information for the bustling onlookers. Every five minutes, a cascade of new rules scrolled across screens, tablets, phones, and smartwatches, admonishing

against loitering, large group gatherings, chewing gum, and more. The city pulsated with an undercurrent of constant vigilance.

The Canny family enjoyed some time together in the fresh air at the park. Bill and Sandy Canny watched as Joel and Jimmy ran around for a bit before walking home.

“It’s good to see the boys have fun, even if just for a short time,” Bill said.

“Yes, I agree. Sadly, it’s not like when we were kids,” Sandy smiled while watching Joel jump off the

end of the slide.

"Let's go boys. It's getting late," Bill waved the boys over.

As they walked home, Joel and Jimmy jumped on every crack in the sidewalk, saying, "Sorry, Mom," and laughing.

Jimmy turned to look at his mom, "Wow, that's so pretty."

They all stopped to witness the breathtaking sunset. The day surrendered to the evening, and the sun cast a soft glow infused with hues of pink, purple, orange, yellow, and red—a glowing ember gracefully descending on the horizon. The heavens ignited with shades plucked from the Creator's palette, casting long shadows on the path. Joel and Jimmy seized the

opportunity, turning those shadows into a hopscotch canvas.

"Move along," the tall, thin officer said while motioning with his baton. "Excuse me, officer. What did you say?" Mr. Canny asked respectfully.

"You heard me. Move along. You know the rules. No standing around or gathering in groups larger than two."

"When did this become a rule, sir?" Mrs. Canny asked.

"Seven minutes ago. Check your phones. So, move along unless you want me to move you."

The officer started to walk toward Mr. Canny.

"Yes, sir, we were just taking a moment to enjoy this exquisite sunset before going.

home."

The officer didn't like the tone of Mr. Canny's answer. Tension flared in his voice as he accused the family of loitering and resisting orders. "Move along, or I will arrest all four of you for loitering."

Mr. Canny became agitated and defensive as he argued about their right to be there. "Surly, there is some type of timeframe from when a new law rolls across the screen and it comes into effect."

"Yes, the timeframe is immediate." The

officer pulled his communicator from its holder. “Now, move, or I will call for reinforcements.”

“Sorry, boys. You are forbidden to admire the sunset. That’s the new law.” Mr. Canny put his hands on Jimmy and Joel’s shoulders to move them toward home.

The officer put his communicator back in the holder. “To keep out of trouble, you should just Google pictures of sunsets. That would be the safest, smartest thing to do from now on.”

Author Notes:

In “Forbidden Sunset,” I found inspiration in the timeless work of Ray Bradbury, particularly his short story “The Pedestrian.” Bradbury's exploration of dystopian themes and the impact of technology on society resonated deeply with me. While “Forbidden Sunset” stands as its own narrative, the seed of inspiration from “The Pedestrian” allowed me to delve into similar themes and create a story that pays homage to Bradbury's enduring influence on speculative fiction.

I'm delighted to share “Letters and Lies” with you, a story that delves into the intricacies of love and deception. For those curious about its origins, and the details about how the inhabitants of Belletone reached Earth, it all began with “Monday Morning,” a prequel that provided the foundation for “Letters and Lies.” In “Monday Morning,” the seeds of intrigue were sown, and “Letters and Lies” grew from the fertile ground of its narrative. While each story can be enjoyed independently, I hope that those who read both will find a deeper connection to the characters and their journeys.

Reader Feedback Section:

Your thoughts matter! We invite you to share your thoughts, impressions, and reflections on the stories you've just experienced. Your feedback is invaluable to us and helps us grow as storytellers.

You can connect with us and share your feedback through various channels:

Social Media: Join the conversation on our social media profiles. Share your insights, favorite moments, or questions related to the stories.

Use @authorakfinch and @julesreads47 #readingcommunity to tag your posts and engage with fellow readers.

Email: Feel free to send us an email at akfinch@akfinch.com with your feedback and

comments. We look forward to hearing from you.

Review: If you loved the book, consider leaving a review on your favorite book retailer's website or on Goodreads. Your thoughts not only encourage us but also help others discover these stories.

Thank you for being a part of our literary journey. Your feedback and support mean the world to us. Happy reading!

AUTHOR BIO: A.K. FINCH

A.K. Finch is a captivating wordsmith and the creative force behind a diverse collection of short stories and three published books. Her unique perspective and keen observation of life's intricacies are beautifully encapsulated in the Fading Blue series.

Books by A.K. Finch:

Fading Blue - Book of Haiku v1

Fading Blue - Book of Haiku v2

Fading Blue - Book of Poetry and Short Stories v3

In these works, Finch spins an intricate web of emotions, painting vivid scenes with her words. Whether exploring the brevity of moments in haiku or delving into the depth of human experience in poetry and short stories, each piece is a testament to her literary craftsmanship.

Connect with A.K. Finch: Follow A.K. Finch on social media to stay connected and discover more about her writing journey, upcoming projects, and literary inspirations.

LinkedIn: Alison (Costanzo) Finch

Facebook: @ak_finch

Instagram: @authorakfinch & @a.k.finch.writes

Twitter: @ak_finch

Pinterest: Ak_Finch

About the Author: A.K. Finch is not just an author; she is a storyteller who invites readers into the realms of imagination, emotion, and reflection. Her work transcends boundaries, offering a glimpse into the beauty and complexity of the human experience. Beyond the pages of her books, A.K. Finch engages with her audience across various social media platforms, fostering a community of literary enthusiasts.

For updates, exclusive content, and to join the conversation, visit A.K. Finch's website: www.akfinch.com

AUTHOR BIO: JULES GRANT

Jules Grant is a multi-talented creative force, with a passion for storytelling that knows no bounds. As a filmmaker, screenwriter, and author of captivating short stories, she has made a mark in both the literary and cinematic worlds.

Film and Screenwriting: With a flair for visual storytelling, Jules Grant is building a name for herself in the film industry, crafting narratives that challenge conventions and leave a lasting impact. Her work as a screenwriter and filmmaker has earned recognition on platforms like IMDB.

Linguistic Explorer: Jules Grant's love for languages knows no limits. She is a dedicated linguist, exploring the nuances of various tongues and cultures. This fascination with language and communication infuses her writing with a unique depth and authenticity.

Short Stories: Besides her cinematic pursuits, Jules Grant is also an accomplished author of short stories. Her literary creations offer readers a glimpse into her imaginative world, where compelling characters and intriguing plots come to life.

Explore Jules Grant's Work: To experience Jules Grant's creative endeavors, you can watch her short films

on YouTube, where her storytelling prowess shines on the screen. Follow her journey on IMDB for updates on her cinematic projects and delve into her world of short stories, where her linguistic expertise and narrative skills converge.

Jules Grant is an artist with a boundless imagination, a deep appreciation for language, and an undeniable talent for bringing stories to life in both the written word and on screen. Her work invites you to join her on a journey of exploration, discovery, and storytelling magic.

Connect with Jules Grant:

Follow Jules Grant on social media to stay connected and discover more about her writing journey, upcoming projects, and literary inspirations.

LinkedIn: Julia Finch
Facebook: @Julia G Finch
Instagram: @julesreads47
Twitter: @alias1047
Pinterest: alias1097

Spotify Playlist

Westward Whispers
Spotify Playlist
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4bm7J4u4eKdqptGvyaBGAx?si=9f210fbf5772489d

