

Prologue

Gabe sat staring at the blank canvas as he had for the last few weeks. Growing bored, he walked over to water the plant in the small room he'd rented. As he gazed out the window watching the day fade into night, he lost hope that inspiration would ever strike.

In an attempt to rally himself, he closed his eyes, imagining the motto of his people — Catch the Vision, Empower the People, Create Lasting Change. Letting the phrase course through his veins, trying to draw power from it, he let the energy he gained push out of him like a sunbeam attempting to send inspiration her way.

A few moments later, he saw a faint vision hanging in the air. He grasped it gently, like catching a butterfly. The fragile dream sent a tingling sensation down his spine and restored his hope. He worked quickly, grabbing his sketchbook and making a plan before the idea was lost. She was finally ready.

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The Golden Hour

It was just reaching the golden hour, and Lucy mindlessly washed a pan as she stared out the window and smiled at the warm glow that shone behind the willow tree. Dusk was her favorite time of day. The soft tones that photographers loved so much moved her soul and gave her goosebumps.

She had cooked roast beef, mashed potatoes, and green beans for dinner for herself and Colt. This was the perfect meal for taking one last stroll through the acreage in their backyard. He wouldn't be home from work for another thirty minutes. The sides could remain heated on low on the stove and the roast could stay warm in the oven.

She opened the creaky screen door. Right before it slammed shut behind her, their cat Garfield darted out. He followed her as she walked along the stream that ran next to their house. She took a deep breath in and allowed the vibrations of the magic hour to enter her body, then breathed out all the tension and anxiety she was carrying. A soft breeze blew from the west, pushing back the wisps of her hair that had come loose from her bun. She watched the sun begin to set. She imagined

herself chasing the sunset until she was one with someone else's sunrise.

As her body finally started to give in to the beauty of the afternoon, the car door slammed and jolted her senses. Her heart raced, and she ran back inside as fast as she could. Garfield followed, but the door slammed in his face before he could get inside.

Colt came through the door. "Hey," he huffed.

"How was your day?" Lucy inquired, not out of curiosity, but out of a routine obligation.

"Miserable. Same as every day."

As he walked through the room with a scowl on his face, Lucy forced a slight smile and spoke softly, "I made your favorites for dinner."

"Good. I'm hungry. I doubt it will help get off the stink of this shit day." Colt closed his eyes, shook his head, and let out an exasperated sigh.

Lucy knew no matter what she said, it would set him off. She decided not to say anything at all, but he was looking for a punching bag.

"Don't you have anything to say to me? Why are you looking at me like that? You think I shouldn't be complaining, right?"

"I didn't look at you...I mean, I think it is fine for you to vent about your day. That's why I am here."

"Yeah, right," he huffed again. "I'm gonna go vape on the porch."

Lucy stayed in the living room as he pushed by her. She heard the creak of the screen door.

"LUCY!!! What is Garfield doing out here?"

"Oh, yes, sorry. He must have gotten out when I took a walk before dinner."

“It must be nice to have time for walks. You have to watch him. The coyotes and vultures would love to gobble him up. He was my grandma’s favorite companion. It means a lot that she entrusted him to me. Don’t you get that?”

Colt picked up Garfield and stroked his head gently. He leaned his face into Garfield’s and whispered in his ear, “I’m sorry she did that to you.” Holding Garfield tight, he turned his back to her in a protective gesture. He turned his head back towards her and glared, his eyes burning into her with vitriol. Under his breath, but intentionally audible, he said, “Fucking moron.”

Lucy’s stomach tightened. The tightness crept up to her voice. “Honestly, I didn’t mean to let him out. He’s fine now and I’ll try to be more careful in the future.” She hoped her words would calm his anger, but she knew this mood all too well.

“You better.”

The sun had set, the magic hour was over, and all the light that had poured into her for a brief time just minutes ago had now, once again, turned to darkness. They said little at dinner. Colt didn’t thank her for making it, or offer to help with the dishes as per usual.

The days had been going on like this. They’d continue like this — it felt as if to the end of time. Lucy had once thought if he would change jobs or she found a job to bring in more income, things would be different. Both had happened. She worked as a bookkeeper at a local nonprofit and he left being an English teacher at a middle school to teach at a community college, which at least left him less depressed than teaching preteens. Lucy loved to watch him teach. She would watch his lectures that were posted online sometimes. He seemed so

different, so nice, so like the person she met and fell in love with. Only she knew the darker side that created her living hell.

After dinner, he told her he had an early meeting in the morning.

“Could you rustle me up a roast beef sandwich that I can grab on my way out tomorrow?”

Not wanting to set him off, she headed to the kitchen. When she opened the breadbox, she froze and braced herself for a tongue lashing. The grocery store had run out of Colt’s favorite bread the last time she went. Now, there was only one piece left.

“Colt, it looks like we are out of bread. Can you pick up something else for lunch tomorrow and I can swing by the grocery store in the afternoon?”

“No, that is a waste of money and your roast beef is going to go bad if we don’t finish it soon. Just go to the store and get some more now.”

With a sinking soul, Lucy turned away, rolled her eyes, and grabbed her keys and purse. She never had the energy to cry anymore. Taking a seat on the couch, she laced up her tennis shoes. While tired, getting out of the tension of the house also came with the ability to breathe a little. Her nerves were always so on edge and she knew she would screw something up when Colt made requests of her, even something as simple as picking up a loaf of bread.

She put her hands on the doorknob and just as she was about to leave, Colt pulled her back, gently wrapping his arms around her. He whispered in her ear, “Could you also pick me up some blue e-cigs too? I love you.”

And there it was. He always did this—Jekyll and Hyde. She

turned and looked up at him. "Of course. Love you too."

Pecking him on the cheek, she slipped out. Joni Mitchell's voice came in to soothe her when she turned on the car. Backing up past their manicured lawn, she stopped at the mailbox to grab the mail. Their street was dark yet peaceful, so she hesitated for a moment before turning the lights on.

Driving past the local elementary school, post office, and drugstore, she soon arrived at Pete's Groceries. It was 9:00 p.m. and they had just closed. She thought she could beg her way in. All she wanted was a loaf of bread after all. Pete and the staff knew her. She stepped out of the car, walked towards the door and saw a family leaving—a young mother and father pushing a stroller of a two-year-old. She paused and just watched them. They probably realized they were out of something essential like bread and made a late-night grocery run... together. They were chatting and smiling with one another, and Lucy felt a pang of jealousy.

She remembered learning that a black hole was a dying star—the light collapsing in on itself. Her insides felt like that — a vacuum of darkness that was pulling with all its might to rip her heart from her chest. She watched and stared as the family loaded up the car.

She couldn't convince the teenager locking up to let her complete this quick chore.

"Please... I only need a loaf of bread. I can see it from here."

"Sorry ma'am, I closed out the last register. I got somewhere to be."

Lucy's annoyance at this youngster wielding power over her was short-lived. It melted away as she sunk into her current reality. As if the thought of going home wasn't bad enough, the thought of going home empty-handed and getting berated

was absolutely deflating.

She drove a few more miles to the Walmart. A crescent moon accompanied her fantasies of an alternate universe where she had chosen a different path. It was November and fifty degrees. She rolled down the windows and let the cool air hit her face. The westward wind from that afternoon had grown stronger. When she was close to the Walmart, she saw a man hitchhiking on the side of the road as she approached a stoplight. He couldn't have been more than twenty, so he was less of a man and more like a kid. He was Black, dark-skinned, on the taller side, wearing a shirt that read, "John 3:8."

Lucy grew up going to church and, as a teenager, took part in youth group. She didn't know that many Bible verses, but that one rang a bell. She couldn't quite remember it. The light turned green, but she hesitated to drive on. The man smiled at her and she looked into his kind eyes. There was a deep desperation she recognized. For a few seconds, Lucy felt like she was looking into a mirror. She considered leaning out the already open window and asking him where he was going, but she heard Colt in her head.

"You know better than that. What were you thinking, idiot? Picking up someone on the side of the road?"

She heeded the voice and continued to the Walmart. When she was just about to turn down the hill that led to the parking lot, a shopping cart manned by a large teenage boy darted in front of her. She was only going three miles an hour, but the sight shocked her and she reflexively slammed hard on the brakes. Shaking her head and catching her breath, she assessed the full situation. Another smaller adolescent had taken a ride in the basket and the boys were now laughing. "That was awesome dude," one kid shouted. Their game of