

## Praise for Sylv Chenoweth

"THIS ONE WAS CRUEL AND EVIL. IM DEAD. IM DYING. FUCK YOU AND YOUR DOG AND YOUR MOM AND YOUR DAD AND YOUR BEST FRIEND AND YOUR COUSIN."

— Remi Whalley

"You should be put to death for this one."

— Veni Carrizales

"Im dead bro you killed me. im dead now. and ur going to hell that too."

— Remi Whalley

"I am outside your house holding a brick."

— Aurora Rose

"The way that you write dialogue is so killer because it's done so skillfully, to balance what they're saying with how they say it as a person."

— Julian Wilshire

"I will show up. i will do it. i have your location. im rapidly approaching."

— Remi Whalley

"I love to play and have fun."

— Aedan Hall



# IMPRECATORY

SYLV  
CHENOWYTH

CANDLEWICK PRESS

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For the girl I was in junior year of  
high school — the bravest person I know



## CHAPTER ONE

Twice a week, something attends the night service at Allentown First Baptist Church. It sits in the back middle row. Always back middle, the same spot every time. Through the hymns and the altar calls and communions, it sits and stands at the proper times. It knows the words to all of the songs.

Eric remembers seeing it years ago, when it was still something closer to human. Everyone in the church remembers the scandal: a murderer targeting their congregation. Once upon a time, the creature attended Sunday morning services with its mother. It spent time in the

after-school program, doggedly working on addition and subtraction worksheets.

After the killings, the church staff kept an eye on the kid. Through foster homes and temporary housing situations and the news that there was no extended family to contact. Even when everyone realized the child had become something new. Something awful.

Hebrews 13:2 advises, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares.”

Every week, Eric makes sure there’s a greeter at the door to invite Charlie in. Just in case.

“How are you doing today, Mr. Andronescu?” Eric asks. He tries to keep his expression as pleasantly neutral as possible.

“Good,” Charlie says. The strings of his ragged blue hoodie are uneven and pocked with bite marks. He tugs at them, rubbing the cord between his fingers as his eyes dart around the office. It’s wood, mostly, far gaudier than Eric would have chosen for himself. Dark bookshelves filled to bursting with tomes he picked

up during his time at seminary, heavy wooden shutters over the window, a solid mahogany desk at its center.

It's no wonder Charlie is practically vibrating in his seat. The last man to occupy this office was neither a good nor righteous one. He crept in unnoticed, while Eric was too young and naive to see the danger.

"I'm checking in with long-term members." He smiles and rubs his sweaty palms against his slacks. "If you have any suggestions for ways we could improve, or feedback of any sort, I would love to hear it."

"It's fine," Charlie says, too-quick. He stares at the desk. "Everyone's great. I like it here."

A long beat. Eric stares at him, expectantly.

"Anything else?" he prompts.

"No." Another pause. Outside the window, Eric can hear people shouting jubilantly, on their way to a late night movie or the club. "If that's all, I should really get—"

Eric reaches out to stop him. "Hold on, son."

Charlie sits, but he doesn't look particularly pleased about it.

"I just..." Eric pauses, considers his words. "You know the shortcomings of this congregation better than anyone."

The effect is instant. Charlie stiffens, whole body tense, anticipating a blow that won't come. He meets Eric's eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Eric holds up his hands, placating. "Nothing bad! I just meant, of course, that—well, you may have an enlightening perspective on matters of church leadership here at AFMC, after—" He falters, mouth twisting into a grimace.

Charlie holds his gaze. "You mean after I watched my mom get stabbed to death in the sanctuary."

Eric winces. A long silence. Charlie stares at him, unblinking, pupils just this side of too square.

"Well," Eric says. "Yes."

"What, you think I'm harboring some sort of resentment?" Charlie crosses his arms. "I

keep coming back, don't I?" He takes a deep breath. Eric can see the tension seep out of his body, practiced and methodical. "Sorry. I'm sorry, Pastor."

"It's alright," Eric says, as gently as possible. "I understand this must be hard for you. And please, you can call me Eric."

Charlie fixes him with a flat, inscrutable look. "I was out of line."

"Perfectly understandable," Eric assures him. He takes a deep breath, in and out, and rubs his hands against his slacks again. His sweat is starting to leave marks on the fabric. His wife will tease him about it when she does the laundry. "I suppose... I suppose I've been thinking about the story of Job lately."

"Okay," Charlie says, frowning at the non sequitur. "Eric, I really need to..." He gestures vaguely towards the door.

Eric, sensing that his window of opportunity is closing, plunges forward. "The natural tendency we have, especially here in the church, is to assume people have done something to earn their suffering. That it's

some sort of divine punishment, or there's some reason they must be tested. It's what we see with Job's friends and even his wife, after the death of his children, the collapse of his business, and the deterioration of his physical body."

Charlie stares down, gaze fixed on the floor. "They tell him he needs to repent to stop being punished," he says quietly.

Eric nods. "Exactly! But Job takes it all the way up the ladder, the chain of command, until finally he gets an audience with God. And he says, *I haven't done anything wrong*. And God replies, *I know*. There's nothing he could have done differently. There's no reason for the suffering that we could possibly comprehend, and Job has to trust that God is working in his best interests. It's one of the scariest stories the Bible holds, in my opinion."

"I dunno," Charlie says, lips twisting up at the edges. "The whale swallowing Jonah freaked me out pretty bad when I was younger."

Eric laughs. Charlie's hands twitch.

“Lately, you’ve been laid heavy on my heart, Charlie, when I think of Job. When I remember that pain and grief are not punishments, but we can firmly believe they are always for the greater good.”

Charlie sits there, silent. His chest does not rise and fall. His cheeks have no blood behind them, the perpetual ruddy flush he had as a child. There is a demon in their church, and they raised him, passed between houses and kept in their prayers. Something atoning. Something here to provide salvation.

The first thing the angel said, when it appeared to Mary with good news — *Do not be afraid*. Over and over again, Scripture tells us: the natural response to holiness is terror.

Eric knows better. He can reach out and take gifts with both hands.

“There’s been a situation,” he says, weariness creeping into the edges of his voice.

“I don’t see what that has to do with me,” Charlie says, fists clenching and unclenching in the fabric of his hoodie. “I haven’t—” He cuts himself off. His jaw clicks audibly; he

leans closer to Eric, just so he can mumble. “I haven’t done anything. I haven’t— eaten any pets, or—”

“No. Goodness, no. Of course not, Charlie.” Eric reaches out, places his hand over Charlie’s where it rests limply against the wood grain. Under his open palm, the flesh is cold and rubbery.

It’s all so perfect. A gift from God, for his children who keep their eyes open, who keep their oil lamps burning brightly to await the groom’s arrival. An avenging angel, blessed and raised right here in their home. “A sensitive situation amongst our family here has been brought to my attention.”

“Pastor Eric,” Charlie says, sharp. Eric can see the outline of his canines against his gums. “What does this have to do with me?”

“I’m getting around to that. And just Eric. Please.” He shuffles around some papers on his desk, for lack of anything better to do with his hands. Across the table, Charlie digs his pointed nails into the palm of his hand.

“An extensive CPS investigation has been launched against Daniel Whittaker, the father and guardian of one of our students. For weeks, she’s been showing up to youth group events with injuries. A few weeks ago, she ended up in the hospital with three cracked ribs and a black eye, which she claims are from falling down the stairs. Despite providing all of this evidence to the proper authorities...” He shrugs helplessly. “They said there was nothing they could do without more solid evidence. It seemed reasonable to bring this to your attention so you could...” He trails off, lips pressed thin, gesturing as he waits for the gears to click.

Charlie stares at him, brows furrowed. He cocks his head to the side in a way that reminds Eric of his son’s new puppy. “What?”

“What *what?*” says Eric, confused.

Charlie raises his eyebrows. “You want me to *kill* him?”

Eric stares at him for a moment, mouth open, before gesturing uselessly with one hand. It does nothing to help his bafflement.

“Well.” Eric looks Charlie up and down, waving in the general direction of... all of him. The waxen skin, the jagged nails and long teeth and hunger in his eyes. What else is he here for, if not to give in to his nature?

Charlie barks out an incredulous laugh.

Eric clears his throat, trying to get the conversation back on track. “This is a chance to bring justice into places where—”

“You think, what,” Charlie interrupts, hands in the air, “I’m fine with just going around and slaughtering people’s crappy dads?”

“Where you didn’t have any yourself!” Eric lowers his voice with effort. He doesn’t want to upset the office receptionist with all his yelling. “Would you not, years ago, have wanted someone to protect you? To defend you?”

“Yeah!” Charlie says. “Yeah, and that was your job!” He drags a hand down his face. “Do you, do you think I *already* kill people? You let me come back here every Sunday, and you all thought I ran around and ate homeless

people? How is that any better than what this guy's doing?"

Eric blinks at him, thrown. This— this isn't what was supposed to happen. "You have a sense of perspective and personal interest when it comes to these matters. Clearly, whoever you were sent to take care of, it would be providing the world with peace and safety."

"Whatever happened to all of the, you know, love your neighbor stuff? Forgive him not seven times but seventy times seven?"

"Ecclesiastes tells us there's a time for reaping and a time for sewing. When the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, there was a time for mercy. And once that time was over, God sent a destroyer to take away what mattered to Pharaoh the most. Charlie, God gave you these gifts so you could help people."

"You think it was a gift," Charlie says, incredulous. "You think what I am is a gift."

"God doesn't let us handle more than we can bear. Like Jonah, we can't run for long from what we were made for. That fear, that hesitation to step into your purpose, that's the

hold the devil still has on you, son. Besides, it's not like you're—" Eric pauses, cuts himself off.

"Like I'm what?" Charlie growls. Actually growls, hackles raised as much as any street cat Eric has fed behind the sanctuary. For a moment, Eric stops seeing the pudgy kid he slipped strawberry-filled candy. Instead, in front of him there is something more ancient than this church, than even the European cathedrals Eric toured during seminary. He stares at Charlie, mouth agape and useless.

Charlie laughs again, but it's a sharp and hollow sound. "Have a good day, Pastor." Then he's gone, moving faster than Eric's eyes can pick up on. The door opens and shuts. He's alone in his office once more.

"Shoot," Eric says, and then, for good measure, "*Dang* it."

He tilts his head downward, rests it against the edge of the table and feels the smooth wood dig into his forehead. He prays, then, reciting familiar words.

## IMPRECATORY

Psalm 139:19: an imprecatory psalm. A desperate call for the destruction of evil in the world. *O, that you would slay the wicked, God!*

## CHAPTER TWO

Nights go like this:

Ashira's alarm goes off at 9:15, though she's usually already awake. Graveyard shift at St. John's starts at 11, and she likes the extra time to get ready. She uses her crutches to get from the bed to the shower— or a fireman carry, if Frank slept over.

Body scrub, rosehip body wash, fancy lotion, perfume, deodorant. She pulls her hot pink braids into a bun to tuck under her satin scrub cap, also pink. It took exactly one grab-by dementia patient to never wear her hair down at work again. Then she picks out a set

of scrubs from her closet which, surprise, are varying shades of pink.

Charlie will inevitably have slept through his 8:30 alarm, and his 8:35, and the millions of alarms between that and Ash getting dressed. His shift at the diner doesn't start until midnight, but if he wakes up and Frank's in the middle of a story, he always makes her start from the beginning. It's easier to make sure he's lucid.

Frank shows up sometime in the middle of this routine and lets herself in. Ash gave her a spare key nine months into their relationship. Ash also paid an extra three dollars to get it adorned with Darth Vader's face.

Generally, Frank spends fifteen minutes in silence on the couch, pressing kisses into the cat's fur until Fritz starts to squirm. Ash never rushes to get dressed. Then it's her turn. Usually she's still using crutches, but Frank can easily support her weight, arms a firm band of muscle around her. Ash scratches at Frank's scalp and playfully tugs on her locs before pressing kisses to every part of her that's

cute. Which is her cheeks, and her jawline, and her lip piercing, and the bags under her eyes —

Around this point, Charlie starts making gagging noises to announce his presence. This means it's time to properly lock on her right leg and prepare 10 p.m. breakfast. Brupper, as Frank lovingly calls it.

Tonight is no different. Ashira methodically pops three slices of sourdough bread into the toaster. She puts five eggs in a pot and sets three different timers on her smart watch. Frank, cradling Fritz in her arms like a human infant, stares at Ash with stars in her eyes.

“Hey, Bosch,” Charlie says as he enters the living room. There's a light blue minifridge tucked beneath the side table. He beelines for it, pulling out a vacuum-sealed container of crisp O-positive.

“Adronesco,” she says amiably. “What's up, man?”

“The usual.”

Ash watches him open the silverware drawer. The drawer slides out of its track,

jamming on the way back in. “Fuck,” Ashira says with great feeling. “Didn’t you fix this?”

Frank says, “I fixed it last weekend.”

“You’re gonna have to fix it again, I fear.”

“My tools are all the way down in the truck,” Frank whines, and then settles the cat against her chest. “See? Fritz is so comfy and cozy. It would basically be a crime to make him move.”

Ash rolls her eyes, huffing out a laugh. The drawer juts out at a downward angle, like a broken neck. Slowly, the cutlery inches closer to the drooping end. She turns back to the eggs and pretends not to see it.

Charlie sits at the secondhand kitchen table and sips blood from a red solo cup. The stuff stains like a motherfucker, is the thing, and Ashira never forgave him for ruining her limited edition Kuromi mug, so now he has to deal with looking like a frat bro every time he’s hungry.

“I’ll have groceries for you tonight,” she says, pointing at him as she delicately transfers

two of the eggs into an ice bath. Frank likes the insides to be jammy.

“S’fine. We’re not even out of bags in the mini fridge yet.”

“We’re out of A positive,” Frank says sympathetically.

Charlie shrugs. “Yeah, but O isn’t that bad. Kind of like normal Coke when you want Coke Zero.”

“You can take a little sip of my nectar,” Frank offers. “As pals. As buds. Just a little drink between bros.”

Charlie snickers around his bendy straw. Ashira can tell from the gleam in her girlfriend’s eyes that she is not kidding. Frank thinks about Edward Cullen more than maybe anyone else, which is a very high bar.

“I got asked to kill a guy today,” Charlie says, apropos of nothing. He takes a long, loud slurp of blood. “By a clergyman.”

“*Hey,*” says Frank.

It takes a minute for the words to even process. Ashira takes a deep breath in and lets it out slowly. One day she is going to throttle

this white boy and she can't even be held responsible for her actions.

Charlie takes another sip, makes a face. "Like. Is that not crazy?"

"Yes," Ash says, trying very hard to regulate her breathing. "You should probably tell someone about that."

He frowns. "What, the cops? I think the whole problem to begin with is that the cops didn't do shit."

Normally, his weekly trips aren't a point of discussion between them. Charlie knows how she feels about church. After spending her formative years at the front of every service, surrounded by her aunts and uncles and cousins, screaming for her to stand up and walk through the power of the Spirit... It had pretty much soured her on the whole thing forever. Telling her parents that their beloved son is actually a woman was really just the nail in the coffin. Besides, she thinks, no one that loving and omnipotent would send her seven new burn patients in one week.

Frank hums, considering. “Who does he want you to kill?”

“Some guy at the church.” Charlie shrugs. “Apparently he’s beating his kid and nobody will do anything about it.”

Ash makes a sympathetic noise. Every week she sees plenty of people in the ER covered in bruises. Most of them, she refers to the hospital social worker and crisis services. Some of them she can’t.

“You should just kill him,” Frank says.

Charlie laughs wryly. “Okay, yeah. I’ll keep that in mind.” He stands up and stretches his lanky body with an unsettling series of pops. “Did anyone feed Fritz?”

“Dammit,” Ash says, both hands occupied with the now hard-boiled eggs. “No. I forgot.”

Frank stands up. “I can do it. Anything for my sweetest and most special son.”

As she heads into the pantry to grab the dry food, Ash turns to look at Charlie. “You alright?”

Charlie gives her what is quite possibly the least convincing nod ever. “Yeah. All good.”

Ashira studies him closely. They've been through everything together since they met online in seventh grade, both planning and saving to move out the moment they hit eighteen. They bonded over their shitty lives and, more importantly, badly written television shows with 23 seasons. She owes her sanity to him, through signing their first lease, through the time she and Frank almost broke up, through the hell that was nursing school.

Just like the hospital, though, there's nothing she can do beyond triage. Not if Charlie won't take it. Instead, she wraps her arms around him and lays her forehead against his clammy shoulder.

"Cold little freak," she tells him with great affection. "You know I'm here if you need anything."

"I know," he says, and then he takes a massive swig of blood to avoid the conversation. Unfortunately, Ash is much more patient. She has years of practice waiting him out.

Eventually, he swallows and says, "It feels like there's something wrong with me."

“Bullshit,” Ash says, carding a hand through his hair. “You’re my best friend. There’s nothing wrong with any of us, and anyone who says there is is an asshole.”

He breathes in, unsteady. “I mean it. Like—like genuinely wrong.”

She shakes her head. “It’s just a bad week. It’ll pass.”

“Yeah,” he says, quiet. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“It’s *food time* for the world’s *best* boy,” Frank sings from the other room, backed by Fritz’ frantic meowing. The moment cracks. Charlie grins, and Ash dissolves into helpless giggles next to him. Whatever jagged edge she thought she saw behind his eyes smooths over and disappears.

“We’ll do something special when we get home,” Ashira declares. “I’ll have fresh blood, and you can bring back some of your raspberry trifle for me, and we’ll do a marathon of Paranormal until neither of us can see straight.”

“Okay,” he says, still smiling. “Sure.”

## CHAPTER THREE

The issue, Charlie thinks, is that there's something evil inside of him that needs to be cut out. The secondary issue, then, is that he has a twelve hour shift to work.

Pastors make his skin prickly and hot, which he's pretty sure has nothing to do with the memories of his mother on the floor, limp and dead-eyed. Hands clamped tight around his small shoulders.

He still attends Allentown First Baptist, though. For that small slice of time — taking the body and blood, an irony which is not lost on him — he feels normal. Human. Lovable.

Like he's a part of the community. He brings Mrs. Mary the newest dessert he's been working on at the diner, and she brings him whichever vegetables from her garden are in season.

Every Sunday afternoon, back when he was a child — before Pastor White, before her death, before before before — his mother would dress him up in his favorite clothes, the ones that weren't itchy or too tight, and she would sing along to the radio while they drove the ten minutes to a white building with a belltower on top.

The sanctuary felt infinite, the smell of floral perfume and songbooks with pages that crunched when he turned them and heavy wooden pews. Colored light filtered into the darkened room through the stained glass windows, rich blues and reds fracturing across his white slacks. His mother's patent leather heels would click against the pink tile floor, and when they walked between the white columns to get into the front lobby, there was always a man with pockets full of butterscotches or

strawberry-filled hard candy that he offered to everyone as they entered.

Charlie would sing a few songs with his mother in the pews. He thought her voice was the most beautiful in the whole wide world. Then came Sunday school, complete with a coloring sheet and a lesson — about a flood that covered the earth, about a Father who sent his Son to die on a cross so everyone else could be saved, about talking donkeys and fallen angels and laying down your life for the lives of strangers. Sometimes they would roll out a boxy old TV and put in a tape with some animated movie about heroes of the faith. Those were his favorite days.

After, his mom would come pick him up, gently holding his sticky hand in hers and guiding him downstairs, to the basement that smelled like antiques and old paper. All of the old women would bring a crockpot or a side dish, and his mom would help him spoon a little bit of the things he wanted onto the plates — he only ever tried a little at a time, because some foods were too squishy or too

hard — and he would tuck himself into his mother's side, safe and warm, nibbling on collar greens or chicken and dumplings.

Charlie never forgot that place. It's still there, sure, the same bricks and foundations. The candy man — his name was Matt Rogers, he lived to eighty-seven — died a couple of years back. Their congregation raised enough money to renovate the sanctuary after the accident. The stained glass windows are all different now.

He still attends every service he can, though. He doesn't know what else he's supposed to do.

Rick's Diner is a hole in the wall, still decked out with cracked red vinyl booths from a time when sockhops were en vogue. The floors stick against Charlie's work shoes. Company policy requires each of the beleaguered employees to wear folded paper caps.

He clocks in two minutes before midnight. The night shift is slow, just overnight workers

and college students and people with nowhere else to go, all shuffling in and out at a steady pace. He runs through the motions, practiced and familiar after eight years of routine. Frank rags on him for it sometimes, working the same dead-end job six days a week, but he can't imagine being anywhere else. The monotony is soothing.

"Kid," Marcus calls. Charlie is twenty-eight years old; Marcus can't be more than five years older. Marcus works Tuesday and Thursday nights. He's always willing to taste-test the bullshit that Charlie and the line cooks make. "Got a guest here for you."

A girl, no older than eight or nine, sits on one of the red high top stools. She kicks her legs back and forth where they dangle above the ground.

"Oh?" Charlie says, pausing to give a table refills. "It must be my lucky day!"

"You're Mr. Charlie," she says when she sees him. She holds out her hand to shake, like some sort of tiny businesswoman. He shakes it with great solemnity.

“The one and only.” He points at her shirt. It’s four sizes too big. “Freddy Fazbear, right? I like him, too.”

She beams at him. “He’s my favorite! Well, maybe not my favorite. I like Bonnie a whole lot. And Glamrock Chica.”

He nods, pulling out his notepad with a dramatic flourish. “What do you want to eat, honey?”

“Pancakes,” she says with a decisive nod. “And my name is Rosa.”

“Pleased to meet you, Rosa,” he says. Charlie puts in an order of pancakes with whipped cream, a side of bacon, and chocolate milk. The bell over the door jingles; he goes to take the order of a mother and her teenager.

It started with a single kid. A girl named Latoya. She’d been in a group home with him years back, the one he eventually aged out of. She’d stopped by when she saw him in the window, hoping there was some extra food he could give her under the table.

Charlie spent his years in foster care starved for both attention and sustenance.

Some of it was the fault of his guardians, but most wasn't. There was no good way to ask for blood. He already looked like a freak and stayed up all night; there was no need to make things worse. Until he moved in with Ash, he'd spent his days sickly and malnourished. The first bag of blood she'd brought him had felt like revival.

Another kid came by the next week. Cameron. He left for college last year, a prestigious state school. Charlie helped him write his admission essay over sandwiches and omelettes.

And, well. Charlie didn't need to spend a lot on food, and the diner threw out loads of it besides. Maybe a bit stale, often perfectly edible.

After that, they just... kept coming.

While she finishes her food, he fixes her up a large paper bag of homemade bagels, a loaf of sourdough, four cans of beans, a thermos of vegetable soup. Upon second thought, he throws a can opener in there as well.

“How’s it going over here?” he asks when her plate is empty.

“Thank you, Mr. Charlie!” she says, throwing her arms around him. “My mama says you’re welcome to come over anytime you want.”

He lets out a surprised *oof* as her weight hits him full force, but it doesn’t hurt. Not really. He’s invulnerable, and she’s... tiny. He doesn’t remember ever being that tiny, though of course he must have been.

“Of course, kid. Anytime.” He ruffles her hair. “Get home safe, okay? It’s getting late. Let me know if your mama likes the soup. It’s a new recipe.”

She nods at him enthusiastically before heading out into the night. He watches her go, hoping she doesn’t run into any trouble on the way home.

And it’s— good. it’s a good thing he’s doing. But as he watches her leave, he feels the coldness set in. He feels it the moment he’s alone, the moment he slows down enough to stop running. The familiar hunger, the sense

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that he's evil. That nothing he can ever do will  
be enough to scrub his soul clean.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Sundays are Charlie's day off, so on Sundays, he visits his mother.

Riverbrook Cemetery consists of about an acre of land, graves dotted along the walking paths. It's upkept, grass trimmed and flowers laid to wilt on top of headstones. An office sits in the middle - the *dead* center, Ashira says when she accompanies him. He does not laugh, but his mouth twitches in amusement enough that she must get some measure of satisfaction. She says it every time. Charlie keeps bringing her.

He leaves his car in the lot, ignoring the weird rumble it makes as he puts it in park. It's fine. Frank can look at it in the morning.

The Trader Joe's off Sutherland was almost empty. He'd dropped in ten minutes til close, ignoring the murderous glare of the lone cashier, and bought a bouquet of poppies and baby's breath. If he were a better man, he'd know what the flowers mean — one for grief, for love persisting, for maternal love, for death — but he'd gotten caught up trying to improve his tiramisu recipe and lost track of time.

So, in his hands, he carries the haphazard bouquet and a slice of tiramisu, packaged neatly in Tupperware. It was his mom's favorite. He didn't like it until he was older, the taste of coffee so bitter it made him gag. He's pretty sure she wouldn't know the meaning of the flowers either, and they're purple, so that's what counts.

It feels inappropriate to be wearing black, as a vampire, in a cemetery, at night — so he's got on a worn t-shirt with a picture of Snoopy and... the fuckass little bird whose name

escapes him. Linus was always his favorite, anyway.

It's a new moon out. The stars twinkle overhead, winking in and out against the inky blackness. His mom's gravestone is small, paid for by the congregation. Charlie couldn't find it in him to show much gratitude, especially when they erected a similar monument for Pastor White. They'd whispered under their breaths about how his mother and the good Pastor had died heroes, trying to protect him from an intruder. That time in his memory is fuzzy, unreal. He wasn't mad, because he wasn't much of anything at all.

In the end, he had attended both funerals.

There wasn't much left of her to bury. He remembers that.

"Hey, Mama," Charlie says, brushing dirt off the lettering accumulated since his last visit. *Maria Andronescu / Beloved Mother and Friend*, followed by the dates. She had been twenty-nine, when she died. Charlie will be older than her soon. "Brought some tiramisu. It's — uh. Ash really likes it." He clears his

throat. Sinks to the ground, braces his back against the cool stone. It feels, inexplicably, like it's thrumming with heat against the clammy expanse of his skin. "It's good to see you. I, um, this week I used more sugar and a little less mascarpone. I'm worried last week's attempt wasn't sweet enough, but I didn't bring you any of that, so I guess you. Y'know. Wouldn't know."

Charlie clamps his lips together against the sudden urge to cry. Instead, he brushes his hand absently against the dirt beneath him — the dirt where, six feet below, there's a collection of skin and muscle and formaldehyde that used to be his Mama. It feels gritty, gets under his nails and stains his fingertips. He keeps rubbing.

*God, keep her safe*, he thinks. *Let her know I still love her. Let her know I'm doing well. Take care of her soul for me.* And then he sits, and is silent.

After about a half-hour, he stands up. Brushes the dirt off his pants, which ends up smearing it around more than anything, as the

dew has soaked its way into the ass of his jeans. He retraces his steps, unlocks his car, puts the key in the ignition and turns it.

A sputter, a stall, and silence.

Charlie blinks once, twice. Tries it again, but this time the engine doesn't even give him the old college try. It just sits, stubbornly, willfully silent, and reminds him of the fact that the jumper cables in his trunk require another car to be of any use.

*"Fuck,"* Charlie says, balling his hands into fists and thumping them against his thighs. Ashira is at work until seven, at least. He can sit here in the parking lot surrounded by graves for five hours, but he doesn't particularly want to.

It's as he's sitting there, lamenting the premature loss of his car battery, that the bus crashes.

City Bus P-57 is an ancient, rickety contraption, at least forty years old with peeling paint and a rattling engine. Its driver, an elder-

ly gentleman named Wallace Edison, retired from his job at the bank two years ago, and took up a part-time position driving the late shift on city buses. It keeps him out later than most men his age, but after his wife passed half a decade ago, he doesn't much envy going home to a dark, empty apartment.

Last week, Wallace went to the doctor with chest pains and vomiting. He's a smoker from a long line of smokers. As of last June, he's been on one tablet of Prinivil a day for his blood pressure. The nursing staff was overworked. All his vitals came back clear. They sent him home with an antacid and instructions to call back if things worsened.

The bus waits for no man, so at 6 p.m. sharp, Mr. Edison set off along his usual route.

This Sunday, however, the sleepy atmosphere on the night bus sharpens as the driver slumps, motionless, across the wheel of the rapidly accelerating bus and directly into a nearby streetlight.

Among the passengers on the bus are two men on the way home from the office, a

handful of women traveling back from book club, a young man with more marijuana in his body than blood, and a young mother with her toddler resting in her lap. The mother — Marzieh — isn't paying any attention to the driver. Her son has finally gone to sleep. She lifts up a silent prayer for this small miracle, brushing the hair away from his tiny cheek.

The next moment, she's on the floor. The moment after that, smoke begins pouring into the main compartment of the bus. People are screaming, wailing. Marzieh reaches for her son, who has awoken and started to cry. The grime of the bus floor sticks against her cheek.

The birth of her son had been something of a miracle itself. Marzieh and her husband had tried unsuccessfully to conceive for years, spending time in and out of fertility clinics and obstetricians' offices. It wasn't the end of the world, not really, not after traveling all the way to America for her husband's job, after integrating her way into a new culture and a new life — but it had felt like it, especially compared to her sister's brood of six children.

Finally, after months of treatments, the doctor informed her that she was officially pregnant. The next nine months passed with the speed of an eternity. Each day, she awoke convinced the baby was gone. When each scan showed a growing, thriving boy, she thanked Allah again for small miracles.

These moments, the cold metal stirrups at the doctor's office, the rough stubble on her husband's cheek, the look in his eyes when he first held their child: Marzieh thinks about them all in an instant as she clutches her son closer to her chest.

*Please*, she begs, reaching a shaky hand to the blood pouring down from her temple. *Please. Save my son. Save my son.*

"Maman," her son says through snot and tears, trying to get her attention. She pets a hand through his hair. A screech of metal sounds from the front of the bus. The smoke is thick, cloying, and she can feel it filling her lungs as she tries to cover her son's mouth and nose without choking him further. Another screech of metal. Someone at the back of the

bus is saying something, but she can't parse it through the ringing in her ears.

"Maman, look — farishta," her son says, pointing with one chubby finger, head tilted to the side. She looks up, at that. *Angel.*

In front of her, there is something playing at being human. It's got some sort of mask over its mouth, but its eyes are like a dog's: shiny, inhuman, pupils the wrong shape. Its nails are sharpened points. Marzieh watches as it peels a hole in the side of the bus like wrapping paper. When it turns towards her, her arms tightening around her son, she sees that it is wearing a Peanuts t-shirt. Woodstock, her favorite.

"Ma'am," it says, sagging with visible relief when it sees her eyes are open. "Ma'am, my name is Charis. Please take my hand. You need to get out of here."

She gapes at it.

"You need to get out of here," it repeats. It's got a higher-pitched voice, but male, almost like her husband's. "Take my hand. The bus isn't safe."

She swallows a hysterical laugh at this statement — *no, really, the bus that's on fire isn't safe?* — and chokes out through her parched throat, “Son. My son.”

The thing — the demon, the angel — reaches out and gently lifts her son into his arms. “I got him. Take my hand.”

Dazedly, she reaches out, feels his cold lifeless skin against her palm. In an instant, she's sitting on the pavement, her son in her arms, looking helplessly up at the night sky. She can't see any of the stars, not since she moved to the city, but she finds herself staring at it anyway. Up there are things she's never seen. In front of her, there is a thing she has never seen.

The thing — the man — the angel is back inside the bus. Passengers and passersby are scattered on the sidewalk around her, a generous distance from the smoldering wreckage of the bus. An older Black woman is talking on the phone to someone Marzieh supposes must be 911. A man she distantly recognizes

as the driver is sprawled in the middle of the road, posed like he's fallen asleep.

Marzieh stares at him, the blood coating the side of his face, the way his skull and some of his chest is caved in. She knows, in her heart, that this man is dead; he looks cold, waxen, lifeless. The sense memory of touching the angel careens through her head. She finds her hand reaching out without her permission, even though she's a good twenty feet away from the dead man.

"Okay," the angel says. He's back. The makeshift mask slipped since he helped her, and she can see his face in full - gaunt, lips so pale as to be blue. His eyes, smudged by some sort of punk eyeliner, flash unnaturally under the streetlights. In his arms is a limp woman, white, mid-30s, long red hair tangled and matted with blood and soot.

"Okay, there are ambulances on their way. Sir, keep holding pressure against that — it's great, you're doing a great job. I need to — "

He chews his lip, an anxious habit her husband shares. The teeth that dart out are sharp

and hooked like a cobra's. *Dracula*, she thinks numbly. "I need to get this woman to the hospital. Stay away from the wreck."

Suddenly, she becomes aware of her son again — clinging, her shirt grasped in his pudgy fists, letting out coughing sobs that wrack his small frame. An ambulance wails in the distance, closer, closer. She needs to take her son to them. She needs to make sure he is okay.

Superimposed in her vision, dancing in front of her eyes as she once again looks up at the stars — like an afterimage of staring at a too-bright light, the glow of it dancing blue behind one's eyelids — she can still see his hooked teeth, his uncanny eyes, the way he had softened when she turned out to be alive.

Ashira's in hour four of her shift when Charlie comes through the door, her black mini-skirt tucked over his face like a bandit mask, the limp body of a stranger in his arms.

It's no wonder he's trying to cover his face. His movements are jarring, uncanny. Normally, he takes the time to soften the shape of his body. Make it look more natural. More human.

In the light, his eyes flicker green, tapetum lucidum: the caught, blank stare of a wild animal. It flickers across her mind — *he's done it, he's eaten her, he needs me to cover up the crime* — before she assesses the head wound and broken ribs. Just like that, Ashira is gone and Dr. Thompson returns.

“Red, level one, I need a crash cart and defib now.” The head wound looks rough. She doesn't like the way Charlie has the woman's head propped up. “What the hell do you think you're doing, moving her like that? She needs her spine stabilized.” He knows this. They spent sleepless afternoons studying the same flashcards.

“Faster than the ambulance,” Charlie says. Flat, automatic. She would chide him further, but he's covered in blood up to the elbow.

Instead, she nods as she takes the woman from his hands and stabilizes her on a gurney. “Accident?”

“Crash. The bus crashed,” he babbles. He’s shocky and pale, though it’s hard to tell from his normal pallor.

“Alright,” she says evenly, then, to her coworkers, “Mass accident, expect more by ambulance.” Nurse Richards steers the gurney towards the back, rapidly checking the woman’s vitals. She should follow. She should.

“The driver,” Charlie says. He tries to push his matted hair away from his face and only succeeds in streaking blood through it. Ashira’s not sure he notices. “He didn’t— a pulse, you told me to check for— and he didn’t have one, and she did, I can’t do CPR, right, because, because I don’t have any air— and there— I called, well, someone *else* called, and she was hurt bad, the rest were—”

“Breathe,” Ashira says. She bodily drags him out of the waiting room and into a vacant room. “Breathe,” she says again as she closes the door and sets him in a plastic chair across

from the exam bed. "It's alright. You got her here. You did your best. Okay?" No reply. She sinks down on the chair to his right. "Were you at the cemetery?"

"It's sticky," Charlie says, looking at his outstretched, bloodied palms. The look in his eyes is one she recognizes.

"Yes," Ashira affirms. "Do you want to wash it off?"

"I don't like it," he says, voice small and wavery.

"It's okay," she tells him. She shouldn't touch him. He really is *covered* in blood, carrying who-knows-what, HIV or hep C. She could catch something, and either way she'll have to fully change scrubs afterwards. There's no time to lose; there are patients out there who are going to need critical care. They're going to need Dr. Thompson at the top of her game.

"Okay," she says instead. "Let's get you cleaned off."

She hauls him to his feet, half-supporting his weight. He's a good seven inches

shorter than her. Frank always teases him for being ‘fun-size’. The room is a copy-paste of the thirty others on the floor: a sink, a sharps container, three boxes of latex gloves, an exam table.

When he stands up, there are streaks of muddy red on the paper. She notices for the first time the trail of footprints leading into the room.

“C’mon,” she coaxes. “You’ll feel better when you can see your nail polish again, yeah? That’s the worst part of this job. Not being able to get acrylics anymore. I used to tap ‘em against my phone screen, and it made me feel like a bad bitch. But I guess it also makes me feel like a bad bitch to put in IVs.”

Charlie doesn’t speak. He stares blankly down at his hands, unseeing. She squeezes out a generous amount of soap. Pink, antimicrobial, four percent CHG.

“Alright. There we are.” Pink-tinted water flows into the sink basin as she scrubs. It takes some doing, but eventually it runs clear. She pats his hands dry with paper towels, then

uses the damp brown wad to scrub at the rest of him. Elbow, cheek, chin. Anywhere there's a haphazard streak of gore.

"There," Ashira says finally. "All cleaned up."

Charlie blinks. Blinks again. "Ash, I don't feel good."

She nods as she strips off her gloves. "Frank will come pick you up. I need you to go back to the waiting room until she gets here, okay?"

He furrows his brow. "Okay."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He takes a deep, steadying breath. "Yes. Thanks."

Ashira pats him on the head. "Anytime."

He could probably make it on his own, but she still sends him with an aide to ensure he gets back. Then she goes to her locker, changes into a new pair of scrubs, and texts her girlfriend.

Nurse Richards is waiting for her when she comes back. Standing in the hallway, arms crossed over their chest in a stance

primed for gossip. Ashira keeps her expression placid, oblivious.

“How’s the patient?” Ashira asks. “The first one that was brought in?”

“Two broken legs, probable skull fracture, and potential internal bleeding. Jourdain is in there with her now.” Bad, then, but not dead yet. In their line of work, ‘alive’ is as good as it gets.

She nods. “Thanks.”

“So,” Nurse Richards says, dragging out the single syllable. “That was... a friend?”

“I have never met that man before in my life,” Ashira tells them, and then she goes to take vitals on the incoming patients.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Mama is late to pick him up.

That's the way it always starts, when he looks back on it. And he will; he'll replay it in his head, over and over, whether he wants to or not. It'll invade every single pore of him, changing him from the inside out, the memories filling his lungs like liquid. It's a dry drowning.

Mama is late to pick him up. Every Tuesday, if his mother calls to say she'll be home late, Charlie follows strict orders to walk the single block from Allentown Elementary to church.

Secretly, he looks forward to it each week. He loves spending time with Mama, but Mr. White never runs out of time to talk to him. He's never too busy with grown-up things. It makes Charlie feel special.

When Charlie pushes open the heavy wooden doors and walks into the sanctuary, Mr. White is sitting on the raised stage. His head rests in his hands. He looks, suddenly, very thin and frail, as if maybe he's sick.

Charlie feels very, very worried. Mama told him about cancer, when his kindergarten teacher had to leave during the middle of the year. *Sometimes your body tries too hard to protect you, she said, and it ends up hurting itself instead. So the doctors help. It's very hard, but they'll do their best to make your teacher feel all better.*

"Mr. White?" Charlie says. His voice echoes in the sanctuary. "Is everything okay?"

Mr. White startles. His head snaps up, eyes darting wildly until they lock on Charlie. "Oh! Pardon me, son. I forgot you were coming.

"I come here every Tuesday." Charlie blinks up at him. There's something behind

his eyes, something Charlie doesn't recognize. "Are you okay? You look sick."

Mr. White sighs. "Oh, I should have known. You've always been so perceptive." He leans forward in his chair. It looks like the motion is painful. Charlie sits on the pew in front of him, waiting. "The truth is, Charlie... recently, I've been very sick. And I'm afraid it seems to be getting worse."

Charlie frowns. He doesn't want anything to happen to Mr. White. His mama is always at work, and sometimes she forgets to come home during her break. Which is fine! He's a big boy. He knows how to use the microwave fine. It's just that sometimes he has trouble reaching the cabinets where the bowls are. With Mr. White, he never has to worry about figuring out dinner. "Like cancer?"

"Oh, very much like cancer, I'm afraid." Mr. White stares somewhere above Charlie's head. Charlie turns around, but he can't figure out what Mr. White could be staring at. "Recently, during my time with the Lord, he's sent me signs that my ministry here on earth

is coming to an end. Soon I'll be able to join him in heaven."

Charlie knows that's what everyone wants. Heaven is a place without hunger, without crying. A place where everyone is happy forever. Where exactly it is people go, Charlie isn't quite clear, but he likes to think it's way up in the sky, past the moon and Mars and even Pluto. But —

"You couldn't stay?" he asks. His voice shakes a little. It makes him feel small and stupid. He shouldn't be so upset over Mr. White going away. Everyone goes away eventually. "Just for a little while?"

"I'm afraid not, son. But I've been looking for someone to carry on with my work." Mr. White looks back down at him. "It's very important, you see, and only someone who's very brave and good can continue what I've started. That way, a part of me can live on inside them forever, even after I go to heaven."

Charlie looks at him. "I could do that!" He can. He can fix this, and then a part of Mr.

White will stay with him forever, even when he has to leave.

Mr. White frowns. “Oh, I’m not sure, Charlie. It’s a lot of responsibility. You might not be able to handle it.”

Charlie stands up now, trying to look tall. His mom says he gets taller every day. Sometimes his clothes are too small for a while, but that’s okay. “No, I can! You showed me all of your work this summer, like your office and stuff. I know I could do it.”

Mr. White hums consideringly. “Okay. If you’re sure, we can give it a try.”

He pats his lap. Charlie clambers up, crawling onto the chair behind the pulpit. Mr. White runs a hand through his hair. His Mama did that once, when he had a fever and couldn’t get to sleep. She sang to him, something in a different language her mother sang to her back home.

Mr. White grabs both his shoulders and leans in, almost like he’s sniffing him. Which is weird. Charlie squirms a little, because Mr White is grabbing him hard enough to hurt.

He's capable of handling this, he is, but it's just kind of uncomfortable and he —

Wet breath against the back of his neck. Charlie *screams* as searing pain lances down his spine. "Stop, *stop it*," he says. He reaches up blindly, kicks his legs and struggles.

Mr White pulls away, but it still aches. Something wet trickles down his neck. He reaches up to swipe at it, and when he looks down, he gasps. Smears of blood cover his hand.

"What's wrong, Charlie?" Mr. White sounds so caring, so gentle. "You said you were ready to take over my work."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Charlie shivers. He balls his hands into fists, trying to stop the shaking, but tears are welling up in his eyes. Something is *wrong*. He shakes his head. "I don't— I don't think so, I was wrong, please let go of me."

Mr. White sighs. He sounds sad. Charlie doesn't want to be the one to make him feel sad, not if he's so sick already. "I can't, not for

your own good. There's something inside of you, Charlie. Something evil."

"W-what?" Charlie frowns. He doesn't feel evil. But he hasn't been to school for this, not like Mr. White has.

"You remember what we discussed in Sunday School?" Mr. White still has a hand on his shoulder, holding him tight. "Everyone was born needing salvation. Everyone was born away from God."

He — he does remember that, but his vision's all blurry and he's scared. God never asked him to hurt before. God looked like crafts and VHS tapes and butterscotch candies and his mama.

"You're very lucky, Charlie," Mr. White says quietly. The cavernous ceilings swallows the words up. "God sent me to make sure your soul could be saved."

"I- What- *what?*" His breaths come in quick, sharp gasps. A pressure sits on his chest, crushing all the air out of him. He can't breathe, and it— it hurts it *hurts* it—

Mr. White shushes him. “It’s okay. It’s okay, son. Sometimes things that help us have to hurt at first.”

He’s right. Jesus and the missionaries. They suffered so much to make sure he and his mama could be saved. So they could learn about God without persecution. Jesus died and dragged his own cross up the hill. It was very awful, his teachers told him. Charlie remembers the illustrations in the picture book. If you love someone, you should be willing to suffer for them.

He gags as Mr. White does— whatever it was — again. Charlie looks down at the red smeared on his hands. He feels dizzy. It’s like there’s something under his skin, burning up from the inside. Last summer, during Vacation Bible School, they watched a video on William Tyndale. He wanted to make sure everybody could read the Bible. The Church didn’t want that, so they burned him at the stake.

Charlie feels like that now. Like he’s being asked to sacrifice some important part of himself to please God. Because this is what God

wants. If Mr. White is dying, and Charlie can help him, this is what he wants, too.

He screws his eyes shut and tries to take deep breaths, just like he does at the dentist when they have to scrape at his teeth. It feels like forever that he sits there, aching, before there's a wet pop and Mr. White pulls away.

"You're being so good," he soothes. Charlie is crying, he realizes, tears streaking down his face and dripping onto his neck. "So brave for me. This is what you were created for." He picks Charlie up easily, lifts him and settles him down on a pew. Charlie whimpers as the movement jostles him, curling into a tighter ball.

Someone pets his forehead, soft and caring. He leans into it, drinks up the gentleness. Everything burns. When he opens his eyes, the light looks weird. He closes them again. He feels cold, bone-deep, like he's spent too long in the snow. He leans into the hand more, the only warmth he can feel.

A strangled noise. His eyes snap open. Standing in the doorway is his mama, hand

over her mouth, clutching the doorframe for support.

“Mama,” he sobs. She’s here now. She’s here and she’ll fix it and she’ll make everything alright.

“Charles,” she says. The look on her face is one he has never, ever seen before. “What the hell did you do?”

He shakes his head. The movement makes him dizzy. “Didn’t— I don’t know, I don’t *know*, I didn’t—”

A hand clamps down on his shoulder, nails digging into the fresh wound. He screams, trying to get away from the pain. He doesn’t *understand*. Mr. White always helped him with his math homework. His wife cooked Charlie dinner sometimes. The two of them would talk about God, and he would patiently answer all Charlie’s questions and never tell him he was being too annoying. Mr. White has never acted like this before, never done anything to hurt Charlie. Is it— did Charlie do something *wrong*, or—

“You’re being very bad,” Mr. White hisses. He doesn’t sound like himself. He sounds scary. Charlie claps a hand over his mouth to stifle his crying. “I don’t have to kill her, but if you don’t get yourself under control, I will. It’s up to you.”

“I’m sorry,” Charlie sobs, “don’t, don’t, m’sorry—”

“What is going *on?* Jacob?” She looks at Mr. White with big eyes. Charlie has never seen his mama look like that before, either.

Mr. White sighs, and then his mama is screaming.

Charlie dry heaves. The whole room spins. There’s so much blood, spraying against the walls and seeping into the carpet. He takes a deep breath, and then another. His neck aches.

*Please*, he prays. *Please, God. I need help.*

Everything focuses, sharpens. His mama is on the ground. Mr. White is crouched above her, the whole front of his shirt wet with blood. She’s making awful rattling noises,

“Get *off* of her!” Charlie screams. When he moves, it’s like his body is new. Faster, stronger.

He doesn’t remember much after that. Someone must have found the bodies, found Charlie pressed against the wall and shaking. He went to the hospital. He spoke to the police. The thick bandage around his neck itched. Blood was still dried under his nails.

A tragic attack, the police ruled. The perpetrator was never apprehended. A miracle the child survived with his body mangled like that. Both the pastor and the mother died trying to save him.

Years later, it will eat Charlie alive at night. He attended both funerals.

## CHAPTER SIX

It's easier than Charlie expected to break into Daniel Whittaker's apartment.

He sits in front of the hospital, breaths coming in heaving gasps. He's... he saved people. The bus driver laying on the pavement, still and silent, flashes through his mind. Pressure crushes his chest. Charlie is a black hole, a void filled with murky water. He collapses in on himself under the weight of existence.

*This is what you were created for.*

Charlie logs into the church directory on his phone. Pulls up a picture, a contact number, an address. Frank is still 15 minutes away.

The apartment looks the same as all the apartments around it. Brick exterior, cracked windows, faded and peeling paint on the shutters. It feels easy, like breathing. He blinks, blinks again, and he's on the second floor balcony.

The balcony door to the living room is unlocked. Charlie eases it open, silent. To his right is a bedroom with pink walls covered in Polaroids. The bed is neatly made. He takes a moment to breathe. If Sami is gone, that will make this much easier.

The next door is closed; he eases it open. Inside is a sparse bedroom and, in the middle, a man asleep. Charlie stands over him. He feels empty, deranged. It's like someone took all the parts that make up himself and shook them until they were all upside down.

Beneath him, Daniel's eyes snap open.

"Who the fuck are—" he starts. That's as far as he get before Charlie pounces.

To his credit, Daniel Whittaker puts up a good fight. "Get off me," he yells, "you fucking freak!" But then Charlie gets a hold on his

wrists, drags them together and flips Daniel until he's pinned to the ground.

Between his clenched fist, he feels Daniel's bones grind together. They feel too light, hollow, almost like a bird's. Every inch of Charlie's skin feels like it's on fire. He feels alive, alight, giddy and lightheaded. "Beg."

"What?" Daniel's eyes are dilated with fear. Charlie can almost smell it on him, hanging caustically in the air like cheap body spray. His chest heaves, up and down and up.

The tips of Charlie's fingers are numb. "Beg me not to kill you."

*"What?"* Beyond the fear, something self-assured seems to kick up, overriding the dumb animal impulses of Daniel's hindbrain. "Fuck you, fuck you, man—"

He starts struggling again. Thrashing, screaming in a way that makes Charlie faintly worried the neighbors will hear. Charlie shifts, uses his body weight to hold Daniel down. He's wearing pajamas. A matching set, Charlie notes with distant amusement. His feet are bare.

“This is going to happen,” Charlie says, low. “One way or another. But if you stop trying to fight me, we can make this easy. It’ll be just like falling asleep.”

Daniel lets out an undignified noise. “What did I ever do to you, man? I never— I never hurt anybody, I work an honest job—”

“What did you ever do to anyone?” Charlie wraps a hand around his throat and squeezes, the point of his nail pressing against Daniel’s jugular. He almost shivers with it, the feel and smell and warmth of that much blood, fresh and waiting.

Daniel stares up at him, eyes darting around, breath coming in short bursts. “What the hell are you?”

“Five. That’s how many reports have been filed against you over the past ten years. CPS investigated each one, took testimony from your daughter, and left.” He tightens his grip. “Every time, they left, and you got off scot-free.”

Daniel scoffs. It’s kind of insane, Charlie thinks, given the position they’re in. “What,

you think you're better than them? With your vigilante justice bullshit?"

"Shut up," Charlie says, and then he opens his mouth.

Daniel struggles. Begs. Says he's got a mother, he's got a kid. Kicks and flails and screams, high and keening, as Charlie leans in. The first rush of blood hits him like a drug. The world swims in and out of focus. Blood pulses out of the severed artery, spraying everywhere, as he momentarily breaks the seal of his mouth against skin to breathe. To really breathe, gasp in and out,

The sensation is visceral, heady. He feels wine-drunk as he digs all five of his nails into Daniel's back, keeping him still as blood begins to gush out of the open wounds. He laughs at it, the way skin hangs from his mouth like some sort of fucked up cat, and that makes him laugh harder. It feels warm and good and right: the amount of blood, the amount of power coursing through him. Now this man is never going to hurt anyone else, and that was him. He did that. He saw that something

was wrong, and he stepped in to make sure it would never happen again.

It feels like revenge. It feels like justice. The blood seeps through the hollowness inside of him, and he can feel his heart beat in his chest. He stands, catches sight of himself in the mirror.

Below him is the remains of Daniel. He looks shrink wrapped, gaunt, skin clinging to his bones and muscles.

An awful rattling sound, a person on the verge of death. And suddenly, he isn't in the apartment at all. Suddenly he's seven years old and his mother is dying, his mother's dead and he killed her, and there's something happening to him that he doesn't understand.

Everything fuzzes into static in his head, the only clear thought coming through like a child, numbly repeated over and over: *I want to go home. I want to go home.*

Then he leans over and throws up all over the floor.

It takes a moment for his head to stop spinning. He kneels on the floor, bracing himself

against the wood. His mouth tastes sharp, sweet with bile and blood.

A sharp gasp comes from his left. Charlie spins around, ineffectively swiping a hand over his mouth and then against his pants. Everything feels sharp, clear. He can think straight for the first time in decades.

There in the doorway, wearing sweat-pants and an oversized graphic tee, is Samiyah Whittaker.

Charlie stares at her. She stares back at him. A long, long moment passes. Charlie shifts, as though maybe he can stand being her and the cooling corpse of her father.

“You were supposed to be gone,” he says, and then winces. His voice is hoarse.

“You killed him.” Her voice is flat.

“...Yeah,” Charlie says. There’s no denying it now, with Daniel exsanguinating all over the floor. “Sorry.”

It’s like he’s someone else. Consequences don’t matter. Nothing can touch him, not when he feels so real and alive. He can go

somewhere else, live a new life. He can chase this feeling anywhere.

The kid sinks to the ground and buries her head in her hands. The sound of muffled crying comes from behind her knees.

What would have made it okay? What would he want his mother's murderer to say to him?

"I can take you somewhere else," he says. "I'll—I can clean this up. I know a family who lives near here, certified to foster, and they can—" He takes a breath, and then another. He thinks he might hyperventilate. The room does not spin.

In the corner, she's laughing, tears welling up in her eyes. *Great*, he thinks. *I broke the kid*.

"Thank you," she says finally, real and raw. Like it's been ripped from her chest. "Oh my god. It actually happened. You actually killed him."

Charlie freezes in the middle of attempting to arrange Daniel into something more peaceful-looking. He turns slowly to face her. "What?"

Sami stares up at the ceiling. She laughs again, tears streaking down her face. “I thought I was going to die here.”

Carefully, Charlie steps over the body. He sits on the floor next to her, tucks himself small so he doesn’t tower over her. They sit there for a moment, staring at the cooling corpse on the floor in front of them.

“We can get rid of him,” Sami says eventually, still grinning, still crying. “I’ve thought about it. No one has to find out.”

“No,” Charlie says, shaking his head slowly. He can’t—he didn’t plan this far ahead. He feels so good, so alive. He doesn’t know what to do with his hands. “No, we need to call the cops, or else they’ll think you did it.”

“Okay,” she says. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll tell them I got back and I hid until you left.”

“Good,” he says, nodding. “Yeah. That’s good.” He fidgets with the strings of his hoodie. Blood drips off his hands and soaks into the fabric. “I really didn’t mean for you to see this.”

She laughs. It sounds hollow. “I’m glad I did. Now I can spend the rest of my life knowing exactly how he looks dead.”

“...Yeah,” Charlie says. “Okay.”

Sami pulls out her phone. The case is pink cheetah print. She gestures for him to go. He slips out the balcony, the way he came. The distance to the ground looks much more daunting than when he arrived. His hands are slick with blood against the fire escape rungs. Every time he tries to rub them against his pants, it feels like the saturation only doubles, like he’s been enveloped entirely by a wave of pure blood. Finally, sickly, he pulls out his phone and looks at the time.

Frank should be asleep, and Ash won’t be home for another two hours. That’s fine. He’s fine.

He sticks to the rooftops and empty corners on the way home, not wanting to risk being seen by anyone who might ask questions. Or, worse, might be scared. Might think he wants to hurt them. He doesn’t. He would never.

By the time he pulls himself onto his own balcony, he's a shaking, panting mess. His hair is matted against his face with blood and sweat. The coppery smell of it suffocate his senses, hangs in his nose.

Despite himself, he licks his lips.





**Sylv Chenoweth** is the author of the award-winning and best-selling List of Things trilogy and the critically acclaimed novel *Hello Listeners*. He has won numerous awards, including the Carnegie Medal (twice) and the Hugo Award for Best Novel, and was a finalist for the *Knoxville Times* Book Prize. He lives in Pennsylvania with his beloved wife, five goats, three cats, two dogs, and an axolotl.

