

On Matters of Loss, Hope, and Love



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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.



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Dedication

To everyone who's wondered if I write about them—I don't know how not to.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is the extraordinary result of the hard work of a few short months, and it has only been possible due to the unwavering support of my parents, sisters, friends, faculty members, and especially my supervisor. They have been a quiet but steady beam of light in an often bleak world, and during the times when completing this dissertation felt only like a hope, their guidance and strength pushed me forward and brought me to where I stand now. Thank you for everything, and please know you will always have my unyielding gratitude.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: An Introduction to the Stories -----	5
Chapter 2: A Journey into the Unknown -----	13
Chapter 3: Birthday -----	28
Chapter 4: The Days of Future Past -----	39

An Introduction to the Stories

From a very young age, I have been deeply fascinated with reading stories of all kinds. Be they a short piece in the daily newspaper or a voluminous hardback meant only for poring over by graduate students in dimly lit libraries, I have been attracted to them all. So, when the realisation came that I, too, could cook up such stories and create worlds of my own, I immediately began crafting the characters introduced in this dissertation. Not the most original, I notice now, but they are mine all the same.

The characters at the heart of this little exploration are siblings who are bound by shared histories, and yet, are shaped by the distinct circumstances of their individual lives and perceptions. Their connection is as primal as it is profound, and is a tether that has been found to survive not just the tests of time but also the challenges of alternate timelines and vastly different contexts. They are, in a sense, constant variables in a shifting world—the threads that tie disparate narratives into one concise and cohesive tapestry.

Why choose siblings, one may naturally wonder. The answer lies in the complex and layered nature and base of the relationship. Unlike friendships, which are often formed by choice, siblinghood is a bond of circumstance, forged by family and nurtured (or tested) by proximity. It is a relationship rife with contradictions: love and rivalry, camaraderie and competition, understanding and misunderstanding, and it is through exploring these dynamics that allowed for a richly textured narrative that is both universal and intimate.

Each story introduces these siblings, twins really, in different circumstances, illustrating how the core of their bond remains unbroken despite the vagaries of life. Whether set in the context of a broken home, one they have to either escape from mentally or physically, or the confines of one of the siblings' own minds, their relationship adapts and endures. Their personalities evolve with their environments, yet certain traits remain immutable—a testament to the enduring essence of siblinghood.

In the first story, the teenagers find themselves trying to escape the prison they have been forced to call home. Although the narrator is unnamed and their gender is unrevealed, a lot of the characteristics have managed to shine through simply through their innermost thoughts, especially about the occurrences taking place. Their determination to protect the sister, whose age has also been kept anonymous, can be considered the driving force behind the actions the narrator takes. The ways in which both of these characters navigate through the tumultuous incidents and the aftermath of the consequent trauma is what this story has tried to explore while portraying the love and strength each character carries with them for the other.

Transitioning to the second story, the siblings are driven apart in the sense that one of them has recently passed away, while the other has been left grappling with the ensuing chaos, both external and internal. The universal themes of love and loss are mostly prominent in this one, but hope does manage to shine through in surprising (or unsurprising, if you are my therapist) turns of events. Once again, the story has been put forth from a 1st-person point of view, with the character being both nameless and genderless. Except for their humane traits, not much of the

physical description has been given, but the lost sibling, due to it tying with his personal story, has had these facets explored.

The third story ventures into the realm of reconciliation, with the siblings coming together for a visit at their childhood home, and although the physicality of it alone is tormenting, the mental projections towards them fare no less sinister. Furthermore, there is the added strain of being absent for the brother and the resulting grief, confusion, and anger for the sister. Not only have the siblings been named in this segment, but they have also been assigned genders to perhaps better make sense of their narratives, and the accompanying themes of loss, love, and even hope have flashed throughout as a result.

Through these narratives, it is clear that certain recurring themes emerge, excluding the three central ones. One is the idea of complementarity, which stands to be the notion that siblings often embody contrasting yet harmonious qualities. Whether it is the balance of duty and freedom, pessimism and optimism, or even stability and reliance, the contrasts pronouncedly enrich their relationships and propel their stories forward. Another ever-persistent theme is resilience, which is the ability of their bonds to endure and adapt, even in the face of dire adversities, allowing their connection to remain a source of strength and inspiration for both the involved parties no matter the situation or timeline.

The characters, themselves, have been deliberately designed to be both specific and universal, and while their individual quirks and idiosyncrasies make them relatable, their shared experiences speak to the broader truths of siblinghood. The unnamed sibling present is often seen

to assume a protective role driven by a sense of responsibility that sometimes borders on overbearing, while the named sibling, by contrast, is frequently the catalyst for change, both in their external and internal environments. However, these archetypes are not fixed, and they evolve with each of the narratives to try to reflect the fluidity of real-life relationships.

By crafting these stories, I have, thus, tried my best to draw upon my own experiences and observations, as well as the countless read-about and witnessed accounts that have inspired me over the years. Siblinghood is, after all, a relationship that transcends both culture and time, and it is a microcosm of human connection, encompassing the full spectrum of emotions and experiences. Hence, by exploring this basic bond across different settings and timelines, I have aimed to highlight its universality while celebrating its uniqueness.

Furthermore, the process of writing these narratives has been both challenging and rewarding. It required not only the creation of compelling worlds and plots but also the careful development of characters who felt authentic and multi-dimensional for both myself and the reader. The siblings were crafted to simply resonate with readers, with their relationship evoking recognition and empathy, and at the same time, the stories were brought forth to not only entertain and engage but also to weave together the personal and the epic, the intimate and the grand.

As I conclude this introductory essay, I am reminded of the timeless appeal of stories and the connections they forge. In a world that often feels fragmented and divided, such portrayals often have the power to unite and illuminate shared experiences and universal truths. The siblings introduced in this dissertation are my humble contribution to this tradition—a reflection of my

deep intrigue with both reading and storytelling and my belief in the enduring power of human bonds.

Utilising each of their journeys, I have hoped to explore not just the complexities of siblinghood but also the broader themes of loss, hope, and love, and these characters, though not entirely original to some given their universal experiences, are completely mine and deeply personal for and to me. They are, in a sense, simple extensions of myself, fully shaped by my imagination and enriched by my experiences, and so, it is my utmost hope that readers will find in them something of themselves, and that their stories will resonate long after the final page is turned.

A Journey into the Unknown

The room was suffocating, and not just because of its size. The air was heavy, oppressive, and filled with scents of stale cigarette smoke and the pungent aftermath of cheap perfume. It was the kind of mix that clung to your clothes and skin long after you'd left, except we never left. The door, always locked from the outside, was both a barrier and a reminder. This was our world now.

She sat there, stiff-backed and silent, her knees drawn to her chest. I glanced at her from where I lay on the mattress, the faint moonlight tracing her silhouette like a chalk outline. Her face was unreadable, a skill she had honed to perfection. The faint tremor in her hands, though, betrayed her. How long had she been awake, listening to the thuds and raised voices outside? Had she tried to wake me, or had she given up, knowing it wouldn't make a difference? I couldn't ask—the words seemed trivial compared to the weight of her silence. Instead, I tugged lightly at her sleeve.

“Come on,” I whispered, nodding toward the drawer by the bed. “Let's get our music.”

For a moment, she didn't move, couldn't move, it seemed, but when she finally did turn to look at me, her expression mirrored the storm churning inside me. It was a mixture of disdain and exhaustion, aimed not at me but at them, the ones who should have protected us. She exhaled

softly, her breath shaky, and reached toward the drawer. The creak of wood sliding against wood sounded too loud in the quiet, as if even the furniture feared drawing any unwanted attention.

The MP3 player was a lifeline we'd fought hard to keep. In a house where anything of value was fair game for pawning, this little device had somehow survived. Perhaps it was too insignificant to bother with, or maybe they simply hadn't found it yet. Either way, it was now ours to keep and protect. A tether to a past that felt increasingly like a dream.

She handed it to me without a word, her fingers brushing mine for the briefest second. Then, without waiting, she shuffled back to her spot on the mattress, pulling the threadbare quilt tighter around her shoulders. I joined her, the two of us huddling together like we had so many nights before. The quilt, though layered, did little to keep the chill at bay, but it was better than nothing. At least this way, we had each other's warmth.

I pressed play, and Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie No.1* filled the air. The soft, melancholic notes seemed almost out of place here, a delicate thing in a world that had no room for delicacy. She used to tease me about my choice of music, calling it moody and overly dramatic.

"You're going to make the perfect brooding teenager one day," she'd said once, a rare smile tugging at her lips.

Now, though, it was a miracle if she even uttered a word. She just closed her eyes, her head resting against the wall as if the music was the only thing keeping her upright.

I wanted to ask her about her thoughts and what brought about those harsh lines on her face, but I was afraid of the answer. Instead, I let the music fill the silence, hoping it could say what I couldn't. It hadn't always been like this. There was a time, not so long ago, when our lives had been filled with music of a different kind—the kind we made ourselves. Piano lessons, violin recitals, the thrill of performing in front of an audience—it had been within grasp, a reality we could only now reminisce about. We'd been happy then, or at least I think we were. It was hard to remember now, the memories tarnished by what came after.

I traced the edges of the MP3 player with my thumb, the ridges and buttons familiar under my touch. Our teacher had once called us prodigies, a word that had thrilled and terrified us in equal measure. We didn't understand its weight back then. To us, it simply meant we were good at something we loved. But that love had come at a cost. Friends drifted away, their parents' polite smiles masking whispers of envy and disapproval.

“Why can't you be more like them?” they'd say, and we'd feel the sting of their words even when they weren't meant for us.

The music had been a refuge then, as it was now. But even that had been taken from us eventually. No more lessons, no more recitals, as Mama and Papa had decided it was too expensive, though their sudden aversion to spending didn't seem to extend to the endless stream of dinner parties they hosted nowadays. The irony wasn't lost on us, but we knew better than to point it out. They never did like being questioned.

“Do you think we’ll ever play again?” I asked, my voice barely audible over the music.

She opened her eyes, her gaze drifting to the poster taped to the wall. It was a relic from our better days, a colourful reminder of a time when we’d dared to dream. Her expression didn’t change, but I saw the flicker of something—regret, maybe, or longing. Then it was gone, replaced by the same blank look she’d worn for weeks now.

“Maybe,” she said finally, her voice hollow.

I wanted to believe her, but the weight of reality was too much. The piano had been sold long ago, the violin too. Even if we had the instruments, where would we find the time or the energy? The days were a blur of monotony and survival, each one bleeding into the next. The music was all we had left, and even that felt like a fragile thing, something that could be taken from us at any moment.

The muffled thuds outside grew louder, punctuated by bursts of laughter and the occasional crash of something breaking. We’d learnt long ago to tune it out, but tonight it seemed harder than usual. I saw her flinch at one particularly loud sound, her shoulders tensing as if bracing for impact. I reached for her hand, squeezing it gently. She didn’t pull away, but she didn’t squeeze back either. Still, it felt like enough.

The song ended, and another began. This one was lighter and more hopeful and made the heart feel all the lighter knowing it was her composition. She wouldn't name any of her music, leaving the task often for me, believing that I was better at it, but even I was confounded on how to name a feeling I'd experienced so long ago. I glanced at her again, her face bathed in the faint glow of the MP3 player. She looked younger like this, more her age, with the shadows softening the lines of worry etched into her features. For a moment, I could almost imagine we were back in our old room, the one with the wide windows and the shelves full of books and sheet music. But the illusion shattered with the next crash from outside, and the weight of reality settled back over us like a suffocating blanket.

I didn't ask her where she thought we'd be in a few years because I was not even sure I wanted to hear her pessimism just yet. Instead, I leaned against her, letting the music wrap around us like a shield. The night stretched on, the darkness pressing in from all sides, but we stayed like that, two figures huddled together against the storm.

The music played on, its gentle notes a fragile thread connecting us to a world that felt impossibly far away, and as the thuds outside turned to silence and the cold seeped deeper into our bones, we held onto that thread with everything we had.

The hours dragged on, and the MP3 player eventually clicked off, its battery spent. Neither of us moved. The silence that followed was almost worse, a void that seemed to amplify the despair around us. I could hear her breathing, shallow and uneven, and I reached out to brush a strand of hair from her face. She didn't react, her eyes fixed on some distant point I couldn't see.

“Remember the recital where we messed up the duet?” I asked softly, desperate to fill the void.

“You came in too early, and I started laughing.”

A flicker of something crossed her face—not quite a smile, but close. “The teacher was furious,” she murmured. “Said we were unprofessional.”

“But the audience loved it,” I said. “They thought it was part of the act.”

She nodded, a faint chuckle escaping her lips. It was a fragile sound, like glass on the verge of breaking, but it was there. I held onto it, hoping it could grow into something more.

“Do you think we’ll ever have that again?” I asked, my voice trembling. “The laughter, the music, the... us?”

She didn’t answer right away. Her gaze drifted back to the poster, and her eyes traced the lines of the piano drawn there. When she finally did speak, her voice was barely but a whisper.

“If we can get out of here, maybe,” she shrugged.

It did not seem like a lot, but it was something to go by. A glimmer of tentative hope in a sea of nothing but despair. I squeezed her hand again, this time feeling her fingers tighten around mine. We didn’t say anything else. We didn’t need to. The promise was there, unspoken but

understood. We would get out. We would find our way back to the music, to ourselves. Somehow, we would.

The night didn't relent, its shadows thick and unyielding, but the faint glow of dawn finally began to seep through the cracks in the window. The light was weak, barely more than a whisper of what the sun could be, but it was enough to illuminate the room. Enough to show the exhaustion etched into her features, and mine too, reflected faintly in the dusty mirror across the room. Still, there was something about that faint light—a reminder that no night lasted forever.

She shifted slightly, her head leaning against my shoulder now. Her breaths were steadier, though her eyes remained open. She was awake, but there was a softness to her now, a vulnerability she rarely let show. I stayed still, not wanting to break the moment.

"I miss the piano," she murmured, her voice barely audible. "The way it felt under my fingers. Like it was alive."

I swallowed hard, memories of those days flooding back. The hours we'd spent at the keys, the thrill of getting a piece just right, the way our teacher's eyes would light up when we surprised him with how quickly we'd learnt something new. It had felt like another lifetime now.

"We'll get you one again," I said, the words a quiet promise. "Someday. Someday soon."

She didn't respond, but the tension in her shoulders eased slightly. The light grew brighter and slowly crept further into the room. The sounds outside were still absent—a rare and fragile silence—a gift. We sat there together and watched as the day began to unfold, and for the first time in what felt like forever, the heavy weight on my chest felt dulled, even if only fractionally.

The peace, unfortunately, didn't last long.

A faint, deliberate rattling at the door broke through the quiet. I froze, every muscle in my body tensing as my eyes darted toward the handle. Her hand tightened around mine, and for the first time in weeks, I saw genuine fear in her eyes.

The rattling grew louder, more insistent. Whoever was on the other side wasn't just passing by—they were trying to get in. My heart pounded in my chest, each beat louder than the last. I glanced at her, and without a word, we both scrambled to our feet, the MP3 player clattering to the floor.

The door creaked open, just a crack at first, then wider as a man's face appeared in the dim light. He was unkempt, his eyes bloodshot, his smile a grotesque mockery of friendliness.

"Hey there," he slurred, his voice dripping with false warmth. "Thought I'd come and say hello."

He stepped inside, swaying slightly, his gaze sweeping over the room. I moved in front of her instinctively, my body a barrier between her and him.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” I said, my voice shaking but firm.

He chuckled, a low, unsettling sound.

“Relax, kid. Just wanted to chat.” He took another step forward, and the smell of alcohol hit me like a wave. My stomach churned, but I didn’t move.

“Get out,” she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. But there was steel in it, a defiance that made him pause for a moment. Then his grin widened.

“Feisty one, huh?” he said, his tone mocking. “I like that.”

Before I could think, I grabbed the nearest thing—a broken piece of wood from the bed frame—and held it out in front of me. My hands were trembling, but I tightened my grip, forcing myself to meet his gaze. “Leave. Now.”

His smile faltered, and for a moment, I thought he might actually back down. But then he lunged, his hand reaching for me. I swung the wood instinctively, the impact jarring my arms as it connected with his shoulder. He stumbled back, cursing, and I took the chance to shove him toward the door.

“Run!” I shouted, and she bolted past me, her footsteps echoing in the narrow hallway. I followed, not daring to look back until we were both outside, gasping for air in the cool night. The door slammed shut behind us, the sound reverberating through the stillness.

We didn’t stop running until we were far enough away that the house was just a shadow in the distance. Only then did we collapse onto the ground, our breaths coming in ragged gasps. She was trembling, with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, and so I did the only thing I could—I reached out to pull her into a hug.

“We’re okay,” I said, my voice violently shaking from the rush. “We’re okay.”

As the adrenaline gradually faded, the reality of what had just happened settled over us like a heavy blanket. Her tears soaked into my shirt and made me hold her tighter as my own tears fell silently. The night stretched on, and though we were free of the house, the weight of it lingered endlessly. The scars it left wouldn’t fade easily, it seemed.

When the first rays of dawn broke over the horizon, we stood together and watched as the faint light cast long shadows on the ground. We didn’t know where we were going or what the future exactly held, but for what seemed like the first time in a long while, we had a sliver of hope, even though the fear from the night clung to us like a second skin, and I could feel her tremble against me despite the sunlight beginning to warm the air. She wiped her face with the back of her hand, then, with her gaze fixed on the horizon, as though she was trying to will herself forward.

“What now?” she asked, her voice raw and barely audible. Her eyes darted to mine, searching for answers I didn’t have.

I hesitated, the enormity of our situation pressing down on me. Even though we had no money, no plan, and no idea where to go, I was also aware of how I could not let her see my doubts, especially after everything we had just been through. So, I simply did the only thing I could do and reached for her hand to squeeze it reassuringly.

“Let’s keep moving,” I said, with my voice aiming for steady despite the fear gnawing at my insides. “We’ll figure it out on our way.”

She nodded then, and her grip on my hand tightened. It was a silent agreement and a shared determination to leave the shadows of that house behind us. As we began walking, the events of the night, however, started replaying in my mind, with each detail being sharper and more terrifying than the last. The man’s bloodshot eyes, the way his grin had twisted into something predatory, the desperation in his voice—it all haunted me incessantly.

I stole a glance at her then. She was staring straight ahead with her expression unreadable, but her shoulders were tense, and her steps lacked their usual grace. She had always been the quieter one, the observer who stayed out of trouble and avoided confrontation, and seeing her so shaken and so fragile made my heart ache in ways I couldn’t yet put into words.

“You think he’ll...” Her voice faltered, and she swallowed hard before continuing. “Do you think he’ll come after us?”

I shook my head quickly at that, more to reassure her than because I believed it. “No. He won’t. He knows we’ll tell on him if he does.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line hearing that, and she didn’t respond. As a result, the unspoken truth hung between us: we had no one to tell. The thought made my stomach churn, but I forced myself to push the feeling aside, as we could not exactly afford to dwell on our vulnerability. Not then, at least.

The road we were on stretched on empty and unyielding before us. The morning air was crisp and carried with it the faint scent of dew and earth. It was a stark, albeit refreshing, contrast to the suffocating staleness of the house, and I found myself breathing deeply, as though trying to purge the remnants of that place out from my lungs.

We walked in silence like this for quite a while, and the only sounds heard were either made by our footsteps or the occasional rustle of leaves. My mind raced along the route, and I tried to piece together a plan to have something to look forward to. Maybe we could find a shelter or a kind stranger who could help us, or maybe we would stumble upon a town where we could blend in and start fresh. The possibilities fuelled by the kernel of seemed endless, but tragically, so did the risks. Every step away from that house felt like stepping into the unknown for us, and it was both liberating and terrifying at the same time.

“Do you remember that small park by our old house?” she asked suddenly and broke the silence.

Her voice, tinged with nostalgia, made her sound softer than she was.

I nodded. “We always used to play tag there after school.”

A faint smile ghosted across her lips. “And you just always let me win.”

“I did not!” I protested, although the memory brought a small smile to my face as well. “You were just faster than me,” I shrugged.

Her smile lingered for a moment before fading away. “I wish we could go back there. Even if only for a little while. It felt safe and sound there.”

“We’ll find another place like that,” I said firmly, though the words felt hollow. “Somewhere we can... just be us again.”

She didn’t respond, but her hand in mine felt steadier now, less desperate. It was a small victory, but I clung to it. As the sun climbed higher, the warmth began to seep into our bones, easing the chill that had settled over us during the night. The world felt bigger out here, more open, and for what seemed like the umpteenth time that day, I yet again felt a flicker of something akin to hope.

We passed a small diner on the edge of a sleepy town, its neon sign flickering faintly in the daylight. The smell of coffee and both fried and baked goods wafted through the air, making my stomach growl loudly. She glanced at me, a hint of amusement in her eyes, and I could not help but laugh softly at the bewildering situation.

“Come on,” I said, pulling her toward the door. “Let’s see if we can scrounge up something.”

The bell above the door jingled as we stepped inside, drawing the attention of the lone waitress behind the counter. She was older, with kind eyes and a tired smile. Her gaze lingered on us for a moment, taking in our dishevelled appearance, before she gestured toward an empty booth.

“Sit wherever you like,” she said, her voice warm but matter-of-fact.

We slid into the booth, the vinyl seats cool against our skin. I glanced at the menu, my mouth watering at the sight of pancakes and eggs, but the few crumpled bills in my pocket were a stark reminder of our reality. I looked up at her, my stomach twisting at the thought of disappointing her again.

Before I could say anything, the waitress appeared with two steaming mugs of coffee. “On the house,” she said with a wink. “You two look like you could use it.”

Her kindness caught me off guard, and I felt my throat tighten. “Thank you,” I managed to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

She nodded, her smile softening. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

As she walked away, I turned to her, my sister, who was cradling the mug in her hands like it was a lifeline. Her eyes met mine, and for the first time since we’d left the house, I saw a glimmer of something in them—not quite hope, but close. It was enough to remind me why we were doing this, why we had to keep going.

“We’ll be okay,” I said, more to myself than to her. “We’ll figure it out.”

She didn’t respond, but the faint smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth was all the conviction I needed. We both would make it. We both would be okay.

Birthday

The verandah was dimly lit by the soft, flickering glow of birthday candles, and the expectant faces surrounding me blurred at the edges along with their eager smiles and raised phones waiting to capture the moment. My stomach twisted into a knot so tight it felt as though it would swallow me whole. Being in the midst of this debacle, sweat gradually began to gather in all sorts of uncomfortable places on my body: the nape of my neck, the palms of my hands, and even the soles of my feet were not spared. Yet, years of practice in concealing my emotions allowed me to mask this dread. My face betrayed nothing but the polite, practiced smile of someone who had grown adept at enduring any and all kinds of unwanted attention.

When had I perfected this poker face, I wondered. The question incessantly gnawed at me, though the answer had been as obvious as the candles burning before me. Sami. It had always been Sami.

I glanced at my parents, hoping for some reprieve, some excuse to escape this unbearable moment, but their faces, once so familiar, had become outlandish—unwavering and insistent. Their eyes brimmed with a strange, desperate hope. It baffled me that they had pushed for this celebration, this farce of a birthday party, especially after everything. Worse, they had invited relatives whose whispered gossip would ripple through the family for weeks. However, I'd spent a lifetime being the good child, the obedient one, and now did not seem like the time to throw out at them all the questions that churned within me. The top contenders among them would be

the likes of: How could they not miss Sami as I did? Or if they did, how were they not swallowed fully by the all-consuming grief?

My mother's voice suddenly cut through the haze. "Come on, blow out the candles, we're waiting!" Her voice carried a strained cheerfulness that didn't quite reach her eyes. She stood there, with her hands clasped tightly, as if merely holding even her composure required such physical effort. Her tentative smile wavered as she gestured toward the cake. It wasn't an elaborate affair either—just a modest chocolate cake with white frosting, but its presence felt like an affront, an abhorrence even. Did she really think this ritual, this celebration, would fix anything? Did she believe it would mend the fractures that ran deep through our family? I searched her face for an answer but found only her fragile hope staring back eagerly at me.

The candles flickered, their tiny flames dancing with a cruel kind of mockery. Each one felt like a reminder, not of life, but instead of what was missing. Sami and I had always celebrated the day together. Even as children, when birthdays were a spectacle of balloons and laughter, the day had never belonged to just one of us. We were twins—bound together by more than just our shared DNA. Our lives had been intertwined from the very beginning, and now, the thought of marking a new year of my life without him felt like a grave betrayal.

I closed my eyes for a moment, shutting out the world, and immediately, countless, unbidden images of Sami flooded my mind—snippets of his laughter, infectious enough to light up a room; his teasing remarks that always carried just enough warmth to soften their edge; the way his face would scrunch up in concentration when he was lost in thought. These memories both came as a

balm and a dagger, though comforting in their familiarity while being painful in their finality. Sami was gone, and no amount of wishing and reminiscing would bring him back.

Realising this, I drew in a shaky breath and opened my eyes. My mother's expression hadn't changed, but I could see the tension in her shoulders now along with the slight tremor in her hands. She needed this moment, it seemed, this semblance of normalcy, and I couldn't deny her that. For her sake, I leaned forward and blew out the candles on both halves of the cake. The room erupted in polite applause, but the sound barely registered. Rather, all I could hear was the silence where Sami's voice once would have been.

After the spectacle was done with, I retreated to my room, gradually peeling off the mask I had worn all evening. As soon as the door clicked shut behind me, the quiet seemed to press in, heavy and suffocating. My room felt different now, emptier somehow, even though nothing substantial had changed. It was Sami's absence that loomed large, a phantom presence that refused to be ignored.

I sank onto the edge of my bed, my gaze falling on the shoebox tucked beneath it. It was a small, unassuming box, but it held the pieces of Sami that I couldn't bear to let go. His favourite hoodie, soft and worn from years of use, the sketchbook he never let anyone see, its pages filled with his chaotic, beautiful art, the headphones he always had around his neck, one side slightly cracked but still functional. I reached for the box slowly, my hands trembling slightly as I carefully lifted the lid.

It was the scent of him that hit me first, faint but unmistakable. It instantly brought the lump I'd been avoiding all morning to my throat, a bittersweet reminder of what I had lost. I picked up the sketchbook and flipped through its pages slowly, my fingers tracing the lines of his drawings. They were raw and expressive, each one telling a story that words could never begin to capture. One page, though, struck and stopped me cold. It was a drawing of two figures—twins, unmistakably us. In the sketch, one figure seemed to be fading, its edges dissolving into nothingness, while the other stood alone, its shoulders slumped, its face staring at the retreating figure.

We had been nine when Sami first showcased an innate talent for drawing. We had been sitting in our backyard on a lazy summer afternoon, basking in the warmth with the golden light filtering through the trees, when I suddenly noticed him sketching something intently in a notebook with a pencil in hand. I remember teasing him for his sincerity and seriousness on such a relaxing day until he showed me what he had drawn—it was a bird in mid-flight with its wings spread wide. It was breathtaking, and I had been rendered speechless.

“You’re amazing at this, Sami,” I had told him. “You should show everyone. No, you HAVE to show everyone,” I urged my brother.

But Sami had only shrugged at that, a shy smile playing on his lips. “It’s nothing really, just something to pass the time,” he’d dismissed the notion, and instead of pressing further, I had also just chosen to let it go.

A sob tore through me now, sharp and unrelenting. “Why, Sami?” I whispered, my voice breaking. “How could you just leave?”

The waterworks came abruptly then, hot and unyielding, as I clutched the sketchbook to my chest—as if holding it tighter would somehow bring him back. The grief was like an unrelenting tidal wave, crashing over me and pulling me under. I didn’t fight it, though, and instead chose to let it consume me, because, in that moment, it was the only way I could feel close to him.

Even back then, it was evident there had been parts of him he had kept hidden as if the world was not ready for the full brilliance of who he was, and judging by the circumstances he was in, I believe his decision had weight to it.

The relationship and bond we shared had always seemed unyielding and unshakeable to me. Growing up, we had naturally been inseparable, with our twin connection a source of fascination for those all around us. We finished each other’s sentences, laughed at jokes only we understood, and defended each other with a fierceness that took everyone aback. So, when Sami came out to me at fourteen and admitted that he was grappling with the possibility of being asexual, I had tried to be his anchor and offered him support in any way he deemed fit. Even so, I saw the evident fear in his eyes and the suffocating weight of societal expectations pressing down on him.

“It doesn’t change who you are,” I had told him, meaning every word. Yet, my words weren’t enough to shield him from the ignorance and stigma he faced.

One memory of such an instance will always stand out vividly. It was a rainy afternoon, and we had been huddled in his room, listening to the rhythmic pattern of the raindrops outside. Sami had confided in me about a conversation he had overheard at school, where some classmates had dismissed asexuality as something “apparently not real.”

His voice had trembled as he had asked, “What if they’re right? What if there’s something wrong with me?”

My heart had ached for him then with an intensity like any other I had previously faced.

“They are wrong,” I had said firmly and frantically while reaching out to grasp his hand. “You are perfect the way you are.”

He had smiled then, a small, grateful smile, but I noticed how it did not quite reach his eyes.

As the months passed, Sami withdrew further into himself. The light in his eyes slowly dimmed and diminished and was instead beginning to be replaced by a haunting sadness that no amount of reassurance could dispel. I did not know of the ways I could have helped him out of it, and the sheer helplessness and uselessness continuously gnawed at me. He had always been the strong one, the one who faced the world with courage and humour, and seeing him falter had been like watching the sun fade from the sky.

The day I found him is a day that will forever be etched in my mind. It had been an ordinary day really—bright and warm, the kind of day that felt like it held promise. I had gone to simply check on him on my way out, a routine so ingrained that I hadn't thought much of the locked door that would not budge or open despite the incessant knocks against it. When I got the door key while reasoning that he must be in the shower, though, the sight that greeted me was anything but routine. My legs had instantly given out beneath me as I collapsed next to his lifeless body, and the room had begun spinning. The pool of blood flowing from his wrists was a vivid stream that has forever seared itself into my memory, and it was this unsightly visual that allowed me to finally scream then. It had been a raw, guttural sound that tore through the stillness and propelled my parents into rushing and running towards us, their faces twisting in horror as they panickedly registered what had happened.

The days that followed were a blur of muted colours and muted emotions, with our house becoming a hollow shell of its former self. The laughter and warmth that had once defined our family were replaced by an oppressive silence. I went through the motions of life, but everything felt dulled, like I was living from within a pane of glass. It was said that I was withdrawing into myself, but when you suffer from a loss this insurmountable, is there really any other way to be? My parents, while coping in their own ways with their grief manifesting in strained conversations and long periods of isolation, tried to reach out numerous times, but it felt like their grief was a language I couldn't understand and vice versa. They had seemed to move forward, step by hesitant step, while I remained rooted in place, unable to let go of the past. The guilt was starting to become suffocating. Could I not have done more? Should I not have noticed the signs earlier?

One night, unable to sleep, I ventured into the kitchen for a glass of water when I found my mother sitting at the table and staring at an old photo album. Her eyes were red and puffy, and her fingers seemed to be trembling as she traced an image—probably one of Sami’s. I hesitated at the doorway, unsure if she wanted company and unsure if I was fit enough to provide it. But then she looked up and saw me, and it was then I noticed how my mother carried the same earnest look my brother had.

“Come here,” she said softly, her voice thick with emotion. I ran and sat beside her, and together we flipped through the pages and relived moments that felt like they belonged to another lifetime. It was the first time we had truly acknowledged our grief together, and it brought me my first small measure of comfort.

Some days later, on a windy evening, I randomly found myself wandering to the park where Sami and I had spent countless afternoons as kids. The swings creaked softly in the breeze, and it was almost like their rhythmic sway was a haunting echo of our laughter. I sat on one of the swings on a whim and felt the cool metal chains digging into my palms. The air around me was thick with the scent of blooming flowers, and it served as a stark contrast to the emptiness I felt inside.

I closed my eyes and let the memories wash over me yet again. Memories of Sami pushing me on the swings, his laughter ringing out as he challenged me to go higher, the way he’d jump off

mid-swing, landing with a dramatic flourish and a triumphant grin. Those moments felt like they were from a lifetime ago, from a different world where grief was just a distant concept.

“I miss you so much,” I murmured, my voice barely audible. “Every day.”

The words hung in the air for a while before being carried away by the wind. For a moment, I felt a flicker of something—comfort, perhaps, or maybe just the faintest hint of peace. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to help me breathe at that moment.

In the weeks that followed, I started seeking answers in places I had previously avoided. I started therapy, even though the idea terrified me at first. The sterile office, the stranger with kind eyes and an encouraging smile—it all felt alien and invasive. But as I slowly began to talk, to untangle the innumerable knots of emotions within me, I found a strange sort of relief. Naming the pain may not have made it disappear, but it did make it bearable at the very least.

I also began volunteering at a local LGBTQ+ centre. It was Sami’s memory that led me there, his struggles that propelled me to help others who might be wrestling with similar fears. At first, I was hesitant, unsure of what I could even offer. But over time, I found solace in all the connections I made, in the various stories shared. Each person I met reminded me of Sami in some way or the other—their laughter, their courage, their quiet vulnerability.

The centre became a refuge for me too, a place where I could channel my grief into something meaningful. I helped organise as many events as I could, sat in on the support groups, and I even

shared my own story when it felt appropriate. In doing so, I slowly but surely began to heal, and not by forgetting Sami, but instead by honouring him and everything that made him, him—my twin brother I'll love to my very end.

My parents and I began to find new ways to navigate our shared grief. It wasn't easy—there were arguments, misunderstandings, and moments when the pain seemed insurmountable, but there had also been moments of connection, of quiet understanding. We started to talk about Sami more openly, sharing memories of his that made us laugh and cry, and bit by bit, the tension in our home began to ease.

On what would have been our 16th birthday, we all decided to honour Sami in a way that felt true to his spirit. We spent the day volunteering at the centre and helped to organise a community event. It stood to be a celebration of love and acceptance, a testament to the light Sami was and had brought into our lives.

As the sun set that evening, we released lanterns into the sky, their warm glow a symbol of hope and remembrance, and watching them rise, I felt a sense of peace I hadn't experienced in a long time. Sami was gone, but his memory would always be a part of me, a part of us.

Grief never ends, it seems. It does not fade away neatly like the closing of a book. It does, however, change and evolve. It becomes a part of you and gets woven into the fabric of your being. While the pain of losing Sami will always linger, I now believe so too will the love, the joy, and the connection we shared. Hence, this quiet moment of reflection carried with it only a

single whispered wish along with the lantern: one for peace and healing for Sami, so when I move forward while carrying him with me, it will not be as a weight but as a light.

The Days of Future Past

The imposing house stood before her in all its former daunting glory. The dark, broken windows, the surrounding overgrowth, and the ghosts of her past reminded Sara of all the reasons she had never once looked back at Sunshine Manor. Even the name was as deceitful as the people who once inhabited it, she thought with contempt. The once-pristine structure now felt like a rotting corpse, decaying under the weight of time and memory. It was an uninviting sight, one that had never held any warmth, even in her earliest memories.

She could feel herself growing bitter with the corrosive acid that the house and its ghosts leaked into the very air she breathed, but like a soldier on a battlefield, she could not wrest herself away from it no matter how many wounds it inflicted. The house had always demanded something from them, and she could never escape it. Each creaking board, each cracked window, each forgotten room—they all held something Sara had left behind. They were wounds not just of the body, but also of the soul. She needed to face them now, whether she was ready or not. They both did.

Heaving a weary sigh, Sara decided just to rip the Band-Aid off. She had come this far, hadn't she? She could go the rest of the way. As her hand reached for the front door, a sudden presence startled her—a hand on her shoulder, a voice from behind.

"Hey, Sara," the voice called gently.

Panic, hurt, and relief all battled inside Sara, swirling like a hurricane. But when she turned around and actually saw Sami in the flesh, anger won. She wrenched her shoulder away from his hand and scowled scornfully at the one man who knew just what horrors lay ahead of them.

"You know better than to touch me suddenly like that, or have you been gone so long that you've forgotten?" Sara sneered, her words as sharp as a blade.

Sami realised his mistake a second too late. He had been so preoccupied with tamping down his grief and dread that he momentarily forgot how she was. How they both were, really. He remembered how, even as children, Sara would shy away from physical contact like a skittish kitten, only letting people touch her once she had truly come to trust them. It was unsurprising, her lack of trust in him now, but it hurt all the same.

"Sorry," Sami held up his hands, the apology earnest but laced with a heavy sense of guilt.

"Figured you'd hear the car," he gestured behind him with a thumb.

"Oh, I did. Just didn't expect it to be yours," Sara shot back, her tone a mixture of sarcasm and something much deeper, something closer to resentment.

Sami winced but took the blow without a fight. What else could he expect after he'd chosen to leave her alone in this house all those years ago?

Sara's gaze hardened as she looked at him. Was this really the same brother who'd texted, mailed, and called her incessantly over the past three years? The same brother who had promised an explanation behind his decision to leave—an explanation she wasn't ready to hear then? She continued to look at him, wondering if she was ready now. If she were, would he still offer one? Her mind spiralled into questions, but the answers seemed as distant as the air she struggled to breathe.

"Come on, let's just get this over with," Sami said, his voice quieter now, weighed down by unspoken emotion. He nodded toward the house. There was a sadness in his eyes—not just from the present, but from the haunting past that he, too, carried.

Sara hesitated for only a moment before she turned, her resolve hardening like stone. It was just like old times then, wasn't it? Standing side by side, united against the house—the only constant, the only thing that had never abandoned them.

Both siblings stared ahead at the neglected dwelling, the once grandiose structure now tainted by time and neglect. It stood like a monument to their collective suffering, and they began to grow wary of the demons they would soon face inside. Would it be the house itself that proved to be the worst of all? Or would the memories it held—memories of anger, neglect, and despair—take the prize?

Sami couldn't help but wonder then, as he found himself often thinking, of what could have been, what should have been. He thought of the different lives both of them could have had if he

had simply taken Sara away from their parents that night he left. He knew that had been the end of the beginning for him, but he desperately wished it had been the same for his sister. That whole week had felt like a never-ending nightmare, but what drove Sami to do what he did—to leave her behind—had been the very people their parents invited into their lives. Their parents were addicts of every vice imaginable, and the people they associated with were no less dangerous.

They had never been given the privilege of privacy, and when these people came over, their parents confined them in the room Sami and Sara shared. It didn't matter if they were hungry or if they needed to use the bathroom, so long as they were out of sight of their parents and their guests. Unfortunately, a locked room drew attention, no matter how quiet they tried to be, and that was how Sami had found himself wrestling with the door to keep it shut. It was almost surreal to think that a child at 15 years old could have had the strength and resolve to do what he did, but what really astonished him, even now, was how entirely irresponsible their parents had been. Weren't all parents conditioned to love their children, to protect them no matter what? So why hadn't theirs?

It was this righteous anger that had possessed him to leave them all in the dead of night. He thought it was the only way out, but looking back now, he couldn't help but see the truth—how the same streak of selfishness ran in him, too. Guilt and regret were heavy shackles that bruised Sami's feet, and he didn't know how either he or Sara would ever be able to forgive him for what he had done, for what he had left behind.

Sara, sensing the waves of distress that Sami sent her way, wondered what kind of prison he had locked himself in over the decisions they'd made when they were still children. Anger flickered within her, but as quickly as it came, it ebbed away. She reasoned that as angry as she was for being left behind, it must have been far worse for Sami. He had carried the weight of that night with him, a burden that hadn't lightened in all the years they had been apart. She never had the chance to tell him that, for her, Sami had been the reason they both survived as long as they did in that house—even after he left.

Sara had long struggled with her anger at his abandonment, but she had also grown to understand that his actions—as selfish as they had seemed at the time—had been born out of a need to escape. She couldn't fault him for that, even if the pain of being left behind was sharp enough to cut her in half. She always thought of all the ways they could have lived, could have been, but perhaps the most painful thought was the realisation that she would never know.

She couldn't let herself be consumed by that, let alone Sami. They both had carried the ghosts of Sunshine Manor with them, but it seemed that Sami had carried them far longer than she had. It was clear now that his departure had not been the escape they were both hoping it to be. He had only carried the scars of their shared past, each step forward a reminder of all that they had endured and consequently lost.

With that thought, Sara's resolve softened. She knew her anger, though justified, was only a chain that kept her tied to this place, to this memory. It was easier to be angry, to hold on to that,

but to forgive, to let go—it would require everything. She could feel herself ready for that now. She realised how she should not, could not let the past steal their future.

“Hey,” she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper, “Let’s go. It’ll be okay.”

Sami looked at her, his eyes wide. He hadn’t expected her to speak first.

“We’ll be okay,” Sara continued, her heart heavy but her voice clear. “But to be so, we have to learn to let go and move forward, Sami.” She said while reaching for his hand, and this time, Sami didn’t pull away. Rather, he gripped her hand tightly in answer.

Together, they moved towards the house. They crossed the threshold, and the weight of the house seemed to press down on them both, as though it were trying to consume them all over again. Dust coated every surface, and the air was thick with the scent of mildew and decay, but there was something else too—something almost hopeful in the space between them. The house might have been a tomb for their memories, but here they were, standing together against it once again just like they did in the past.

Sara’s eyes flitted across the room, landing on various remnants of their childhood: a broken picture frame on the mantelpiece, the faded floral wallpaper their mother had once insisted was ‘heavenly,’ and the battered sofa where countless fights had erupted. Each item was a silent witness to the chaos they had endured—a testament to everything they had survived.

Sami's gaze lingered on the same objects, but his mind seemed to be elsewhere. He was grappling with the memories of that final night instead, the night he had walked away, the night he had left her behind.

"It's gotten quite a bit smaller than I remembered it to be," Sara murmured, breaking the silence once more. Although her voice was steady, there was still a trace of an evident undercurrent of emotion.

Sami nodded, his eyes misting over, but neither could tell whether the dust was the culprit or the terrible reminders of days long ago. The house had loomed large enough in their childhoods that it had been nothing but a monstrous entity that seemed to only feed on their misery. Now, however, it was merely but a dilapidated structure, stripped completely of its power but not yet of its memories.

Keeping this in mind, the siblings moved deeper into the house, and with each step, stirred up clouds of dust and fragments of their past. The kitchen had been their next destination, but Sara was suddenly found hesitating at the doorway as a result of all that was being unearthed. She remembered spending countless hours there, preparing meals for both herself and Sami when their parents were too incapacitated to care. The chipped counters and rusting appliances bore witness to her attempts at normalcy in a world that had been anything but.

"Remember that time you tried to make pancakes and instead set the stove on fire?" Sami asked, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Sara glanced at him, startled from her intense thoughts by the sudden levity.

“Do you mean the time you grabbed the fire extinguisher and sprayed the entire kitchen instead of just the pan and stove?” She replied with raised eyebrows and her own ghost of a smile.

For a moment then, the weight of the house momentarily lifted, and they felt like they were just siblings reminiscing about a shared childhood mishap.

Unfortunately, in a house as derelict as Sunshine Manor, the moment was fleeting, and soon, the silence descended upon them, it being much heavier now than before, quite like the dust motes that hung in the air around them. The unspoken tension between them resurfaced once more, and the earlier conversation turned to things better left unsaid, with the years of absence between them seeming to stretch even farther.

Sami then reached for Sara’s hand again, and this time, she didn’t pull away.

“Let’s finish this together,” he said, his voice steady with newfound determination.

Sara nodded, a small but genuine smile breaking through the storm of emotions on her face. For the first time, the house didn’t feel quite so suffocating. Together, they turned to face the rest of the shadows that Sunshine Manor held, ready to confront whatever came next.

They climbed the creaking staircase, its groans echoing like the whispers of the house itself. The upstairs hallway stretched before them, lined with doors that led to rooms they had once called their own. Sara's breath hitched as she stood before her childhood bedroom door, especially with the way the peeling paint and splintered wood seemed to pulsate under the dim, dusty light. She could hear the faint creaks of the house settling as if it were breathing around them, a hulking beast that had always been alive in her nightmares. Sami stood a step behind her, his presence quiet but solid, and although he offered no words, only an unspoken reassurance, she noted how he had been the anchor she hadn't realized she needed until now.

For years, Sara had avoided even the thought of this place, burying it under layers of anger, sorrow, and a fragile determination to move forward. Yet, here she was, hand trembling as it hovered over the doorknob. The air felt heavy and thick with memories she had no choice but to confront. Each one clawed at the edges of her mind, demanding to be seen, to be felt.

"You don't have to do this, you know?" Sami murmured, his voice soft but steady.

"I need to," Sara whispered, her voice barely audible. It was more to herself than to him. She drew in a shaky breath and turned the knob, pushing the door open.

The room was a mausoleum of her childhood. Dust blanketed everything, muting the once-bright colours of the posters that still clung stubbornly to the walls. The stuffed bear on the bed slumped over, its fur dulled and matted. The desk in the corner, where she'd once spent countless hours writing stories to escape the reality around her, stood like a sentinel, its surface marred by

scratches and faded ink stains. A cracked mirror leaned against the wall, reflecting a distorted version of the room and its past.

Sara's legs felt heavy as she stepped inside, her movements slow and deliberate, and immediately the memories came unbidden, crashing over her like waves. She saw herself as a little girl, curled up on that same bed with the bear clutched tightly to her chest, while the walls echoed with the sound of her stifled sobs and desperate attempts to drown out the shouting from downstairs. Her fingers brushed against the desk as she passed, and she could almost feel the ghost of a pen in her hand, the frantic scribbling of a child trying to write herself into a different life.

"I thought I would have forgotten by now," she said, her voice thick with emotion. Her fingers lingered on the desk, tracing the grooves carved into its surface. "But it's all still here."

Sami stepped closer, his gaze sweeping over the room. He saw the same things she did, but his mind filled in the blanks differently. He remembered sitting on that bed with her after their father's rage had stormed through the house like a hurricane. He'd told her stories, weaving tales of far-off lands and brave heroes to make her laugh, even if only for a moment. He remembered the nights they'd sat at that desk together, Sara's head bent over her writing while he tried to teach her algebra, even though he barely understood it himself.

"You have always been stronger than you think," Sami said quietly. He reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder, his touch gentle but firm. "Even back then. Especially back then."

Sara's shoulders shook as she let out a choked laugh. "But I never felt strong for a moment. I felt like I was drowning."

"Maybe you were," Sami admitted, "but you didn't sink, did you? You kept going. And you pulled me along with you, Sara. More times than I can count."

The weight of his words settled over her, and for the first time in a long time, Sara felt a flicker of something other than pain when she thought about their shared past. It wasn't quite hope, not yet, but it was close.

Her eyes landed on the broken picture frame lying facedown on the floor. She bent down and picked it up, brushing off the dust. The glass was shattered, but the photo inside was still intact. It was a snapshot of them as children, their arms wrapped around each other and wide, toothy grins on their faces. It was taken before the worst of it, before the house had turned into a prison and their parents' love had withered under the weight of their addictions.

"Do you remember this day?" Sara asked, holding the photo out to Sami.

He took it from her, his lips curving into a sad smile. "Yeah. That was the day we built the treehouse in the backyard. Dad had actually helped us for a change too."

Sara nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips. "It had felt normal that day, you know? Like we were a real family. Like we would always remain a real family."

The memory was bittersweet, as most such memories tended to be—a reminder for them of what could have been and a reminder that there had once been moments of light, however brief, even in the darkest of times. Sara set the broken picture frame against a lamp with a splintered shade on the desk, and the shattered glass encasing the picture seemed to glint in the dim light like a fractured star.

“We survived this place,” she said, her voice gaining strength. “In spite of all that happened here with the both of them, we did get out. Is that enough, do you think?”

Sami nodded, his gaze steady on hers. “It has to be, kid.”

They stood together in the room's silence, thinking about this new prospect with the weight of their past still ever-present, but now it strangely no longer felt suffocating. The house had taken a lot from them, yes, but it now seemed clear that it hadn't taken everything. It hadn't managed to take their shared bond, their forged resilience, or their capacity to heal.

As they turned to leave the place once and for all, Sara glanced back at the room she considered her safe haven one last time. The room looked shrunken now, less imposing, for it simply was just a room after all, filled with nothing except the remnants of a life they had both outgrown. Heaving a content sigh, she closed the door gently behind her, and for the first time, it felt like she was leaving something behind instead of carrying the burden of it with her.

The hallway draping the staircase stretched in front of them, lined with more doors and even more memories, but with each step, the house seemed to grow quieter—its grip on them loosening with each nook and cranny they explored together. Afterwards, they descended the staircase together, their movements in sync, and when they reached the front door, Sara paused once more.

“Thank you,” she said, her quiet voice soft but sincere. “For being here now. For coming back.”

Sami rushed to meet her gaze, his own eyes filled with a compelling mix of guilt and gratitude.

“I should have come sooner.”

“You’re here now, and that’s all that matters,” Sara said vehemently, and for the first time in years, she meant it.

With that cleared, they stepped out into the crisp evening air, the house looming behind them like a silent witness, and as they walked away side by side, it began to no longer feel like a monster waiting to consume them. It was simply just a house, filled with memories they could finally begin to let go and be how they were always meant to be—together with each other.