I bumbled a little bit, the same way a honeybee examines the inner rim off a flower. The entire room felt like a tower of matchsticks as though a banging shift would occur the second anyone spoke. And there would be.

I observed the crowded little office, filled with house plants and warm colors, the goodwill green rug strung haphazardly around the room. Considerably nicer than my own little closet with a recycled desk and an industrial chair, but still shared the rickety nature of the building, unlevel and odd.

My boss, Dean of Students normally so bright and loving-- a fifty-year-old Hispanic woman with eyes like coffee and stringy long hair, who put out candy for my students every morning and made treats in the wintertime for evening lectures, stared at the painting of sunflowers with a deep frown. She looked everywhere but the man in front of her, her foot tapping anxiously.

I hadn't gotten this man's name, but I had some vague notion as to who he was. Most Hansen’s professors and students didn't wear suits, they wore holey sweaters and ratty jeans. He stuck out like a sore thumb, hair slicked back and clean shaven. There's a Ronald Dahl quote-- "smile and you will always be beautiful", he obviously did not take that advice. He wore a bitter scowl. He lacked crow’s feet-- he looked as though he hasn't smiled in years. The way he looked around the room alarmed me more than his composure. It was a size-up, surmising any weakness to be had.

My boss refused to reveal any weaknesses but I saw her crying in the bathroom at Barn in the previous day. Any other day, this woman would’ve wanted to be called Annabel, both by coworkers and students. I'd offered moral support and she took my up on it. I regretted our deal immediately. This man was a dingo, a harbinger of terrible fate, of doom, ill omen. He was the purple that the sky turned before a hurricane, the feeling of falling and knowing you’re going to crash, the moment before a teacher hands back a test knowing you’ve failed, the light on an oncoming train, the moment when the doctor says, ‘I have terrible news’ but somehow even worse than those, because a doctor does not take joy in tragedy. This man did.

“Ms. Frost?” The Dean of Students nodded grimly. Fear and pain reached through my chest and settled as a lump in my stomach. “And your name?”

He’d been eyeing my boss. I’d been bitten by a golden retriever when I was four years old, taking a chunk out of my chubby thigh. The moment before I was attacked, I could see the tension in his yellow-brown eyes. He had the same kind of stare and none of the general likability as a Golden retriever. But now, he as he turned to me, he lost that look and was replaced by something else. No less intense, but more calculating. “Hi. I’m Juster. What’s your name?”

Suddenly, he looked taken aback. I realized that by giving my first name only, he couldn’t refer to me as a Ms. or a Mrs. Something about that made him uncomfortable. Good. “I am Mr. Creon.”

Mr. Creon cleared his throat and regained his comfort. He’d done this before, not to us, but to other people. “Ms. Frost and Juster, as you are aware, I have a signed petition for over fifty thousand citizens of Hansen. Your campus is in the heart of the city, where many businesses and apartments thrive. I’m am sorry to say that there is massive disapproval for the Prison Program that was considered to be implemented next year. While your proposal was approved, our fears is that this will severely hurt your university’s relationship to the city of Hansen.”

He said, ‘was sorry’, but there was something akin to glee in his eyes. “It’s too bad, but I implore you to reconsider this program.”

Annabel’s eyes flashed. The college prison program was one of the most exciting ordeals happening on campus—it was controversial, innovative and somewhat unique to our campus. Bard College did something like it. “Why are they rejecting it?” Her voice was hard. Annabel was deathly proud of it.

“The citizens feel that this program encourages prisoners to move to the city of Hansen after they are released.”

I saw it. Hansen was an overwhelmingly rich area. Condos, gigantic mansions, large-scale apartments, penthouses and yachts were all the name of the game. Hansen University was the only place the middle class could truly fit in the city. Hansen moved beyond gentrification, hipsters and rich people seemed to be their only occupant now.

“Mr. Creon. You’re aware that our college is being given millions of dollars of grants and awards for this progressive program? If we didn’t have it, Hansen University would sink under.” Annabel told me earlier that oh no, this man was aware. He represented a series of corporations that managed and rented out apartments and condos. It wasn’t really about the prisoner program—they wanted to turn our beloved college, since 1942 with pride, into a bunch of senior living apartments. His eyes gleamed. Oh yes, he was aware.

“I’m aware, but that is Hansen University’s problem, not ours. Our goal is to keep the city of Hansen safe and out of the hands of criminals.”

Now, this happened in a bit of a blur. I stood up and walked over, clapped me hands and grinned at him. Ah ha, I thought. I’d caught him. “Now, listen to me, sir. Let me pull out my laptop but I have scientific evidence that proves you wrong. We were discussing it the other day, actually.”

He raised his eyebrows. He was a tall, unattractive man with a long, crooked nose and jarringly white teeth. He was maybe forty or so. “Very well,” he hissed out.

It took an awkwardly long amount of time to boot up my clunky little laptop. I was terrified that it would try to update when I turned it on, but it just needed a few minutes.

I pulled it up on Google Scholar. “See, Scientific American, refereed journal. Peer-reviewed. Good stuff. Here’s what it says: ‘Prisoners Undergoing University in Prisons are No More Likely to Commit than the Average Citizen”.

His eyes narrowed, but a slow, eerie grin creeped across his face. “You’re a scientist, then?”

“Yes, I hope I can consider myself one.” Thirty seconds before, I thought I had this in the bag. That this all could be over and done with.

He leaned in, like a cat playing with a half-dead mouse and snarled. “What you don’t know, Juster, is that I consider myself to be a social scientist with public relations as a specialty. Here’s the thing: your little study doesn’t matter.”

Now, that made me furious. “What do you mean, the study doesn’t matter? It does! That’s how we make human progress! I can show you other articles! Here, this one from the National Crime Institute, over 20,000 people studied that they are at no higher risk of being reincarcerated! Here’s another one, Institute of Justice--no higher risk!”

I scrolled down Google Scholar frantically, pointing out at least twenty studies before he cut me off.

“You may be right, but it *literally doesn’t matter.* The current public opinion in the City of Hansen is that these people are criminals and will commit crime in their area.”

“…What?” I’d never heard anything so ridiculous in my life. I turned bright red and I swear, my hair fluffed up and my eyes got wide. Creon just smiled at me, tapping his fingers on his plastic chair merrily. “We’ll broadcast it on TV, then! They’ll change their minds.” I huffed at him.

It was an empty threat, but he didn’t have to know that. Hansen University didn’t have the money to paint the staircases, much less have a TV program.

Another smile. “There’s been broadcasts on local television about this program for months now. We’ve always had ‘tough on crime’ politicians in Hansen City and the local jail is in a small town, which is the main source of income and oh, and there’s a bed quota to meet. There is no public support, Juster. You can’t change peoples’ minds in a few months, particularly where there is money in it.”

I sputtered. My Senior year literature teacher told me about a term in Greek which literally meant “An Anger Which Rises Above”—Furiosa. This was the best term I could describe it. How could anyone tell a scientist something so heartless?

I taught and studied Aquarium Science. People never had any trouble with the fact that jellyfish, essentially being weird little robots, got stuck in corners and therefore you had to have a special fish tank that was completely rounded. They believed me on that. I told that to people at parties, to my students, to my friends, to my colleagues. No one ever denied that. The moment I brought up that Climate Change might have something to do with Sea-star wasting disease, my very sweet and intelligent grandfather would roll his eyes. Why would he debate that vs. the fact that jellyfish can’t do square tanks? Where’s the evidence? they would demand. We don’t know for certain, they said. But they never asked once to show them how jellyfish got stuck.

But Anabel just glanced at me. I was extremely embarrassed. “Mr. Creon. I may not be able to speak for the University right now, but I am personally determined to make the prisoner program work. That’s the only message I have for you right now.” Firm, stern and professional speak for ‘go fuck yourself’.

Mr. Creon ignored her and instead rested on final look at me. He titled his head, giving that same, menacing smile. “So, I suspect I’ve upset you?”

I took a breath. My emotions got the better of me, even after years of therapy for Asperger’s. I couldn’t help it—Creon’s statement was like finding out that Santa Claus wasn’t real. I swallowed and said, “I’m going to fight this. I won’t let you have what you want. I’ll arrange meetings with the press. I’ll talk to politicians. I’ll talk to corporations.”

“Good luck. I’ll schedule another time to meet with you.” And Creon left, closing the door behind him quietly.

Tears spilled out of my eyes. I don’t know if I’m writing this correctly, but there was something incredibly upsetting about Creon that I couldn’t even articulate. Saying that my research didn’t matter because of public opinion hurt. The worst part was, he had only confirmed my worst fears.

Anti-Vaxxers. Jenny McCarthy was living proof that you could site all the studies, have all the data and peer-review everything and still somehow not change minds. This was the first time it truly got personal. That’s what the change was: I’d never done a study on vaccines before, but I helped review thousands of records of Bard College students.

I wondered if I’d ruined Annabel’s meeting. By all accounts, it went terribly. Perhaps there was something up her sleeve that she couldn’t have pulled with me in the picture.

Anabel wept a little, though not so badly as yesterday and put a box of tissues between us. “Thank you,” she said finally.

“What?”

“Thank you. That was a hard, necessary meeting that wouldn’t have gone well anyway. I’ve already met with Creon once and he was even worse, which is why I was crying before. I’m very afraid of him.”

Now, I should’ve comforted her about this. That there was no reason to be afraid and that we had nothing to worry about. However, there was something to worry about. Creon was frightening.

“I didn’t break everything?”

“Ha, no.” She smiled at me, through her tears. Her mascara was running and her pantsuit was wet. “He’s the broken one, not you.”

After I’d regained part of my composure, “I meant what I said, by the way. I’m willing to do all those things.”

“Don’t worry. Really. We already have a PR team that’s on the hunt.”

I knew, in heart of hearts, that I wasn’t the right person for the job. I wasn’t Bill Nye the Science Guy, I couldn’t bring science to the public properly. Scientists aren’t meant to be Public Relations people—we tend to scuttle back into our labs when thrust out in broad daylight. When testing epigenetics (how trauma relates to our DNA such as terrible events like genocide and wars), my coworkers realized that we would have to create a literal “Rat Holocaust”. The whole idea made me squeamish, so I dropped the project but if the media found out me considered testing out “an animal genocide” PETA would be on our doorstep the next morning.

I wanted to be, though. So, I resigned myself to keeping an eye on things. “Can I at least watch out for suspicious activates?”

Anabel laughed a little. I knew I was that odd professor that fumbled around a lot, distractedly waving to students and panicking about grant applications at two AM. I would’ve never been hired to teach at another institution—the students had a special kind of patience for me and I had a special kind of love and appreciation for them.

For example, universities are very touchy on the language people use now days. I tried to be politically correct as often as I could, but there was no telling how to really be PC when you’re autistic. The social conversation changes so quickly and uniquely that once I think I have something down—that ‘Africa-American’ best, then half a decade later ‘black’ was the polite term, I ended up with being told ‘people of color’ is better about a year later. And then I mixed up ‘people of color’ for ‘colored people’ and couldn’t figure out why the black students in the classroom were snickering.

“Sure. Shoot anyone on sight.”

“Alright,” I said with grave determination, “But I’ll suck dick to keep the university open.” I closed the door upon hearing hysterical laughter.

Chapter 2

I came home to my facility apartment. I’d successfully secured tenure five years back. The building was old and dusty, but there was a joy that took place in my apartment every time I walked in, no matter what sort of day I was having. It was mine. I’d achieved dreams beyond dreams by becoming a professor—I was paid to rant about what I loved. All furniture was from Goodwill, except for the IKEA couch that I’d been given by my parents.

While Mr. Creon skived me out, I felt a flood of relief when I came home. I was out of the woods for now. There were worse things to meet: like polar bears. Did you know that they’re the only animals on earth that will actively hunt humans? They’ll wait outside of cabins for days on end. Not even sharks do that. We just sometimes end up looking like seals to them, hence surfer dudes getting bitten off the coast of California.

I was comforted by the fact that Creon was probably not hiding somewhere in my rock garden.

Maximus, my thirteen-year-old cat, nearly tripped me as he ran to brush against my legs. One of his eyes were darker than the other, a yellow pupil and a green one. George, one of my students, found a mean, starving stray and couldn’t take it in. Thus, Maximus had terrorized the village ever since.

He’d gotten remarkably softer over the years. Maximus the Cat didn’t even nibble anymore, instead enjoying a quiet retirement in the Sluggle Household—me and him against the world. I walked over to my gigantic beanbag chair that was found on the side of Flaremount Street, grabbed the yowling beast and tossed in my lap. The TV, perched precariously on my dresser, was a small, old, obese thing that turned on with a loud hissing noise—it only had a hundred channels and frankly, that was all I needed. Television was mostly an excuse to cuddle with Maximus.

It started on CNN. I’d missed the first part of the broadcast, but it hardly mattered—a large caption sat at the bottom of the screen “Sandy Hook Shooting: 20 Children Killed in Total, Six Adults Dead.” The rest of the report was mostly white fuzz.

My stomach hurt. They must mean, I thought, astonished, children as in teenagers. And then the scrolling headline revealed my worst fears “Sandy Hook Elementary School”.

What kind of maniac would do such a thing? Maxiumus meowed unhappily and I realized I had clutched him to my chest.

How does anyone properly articulate such an event? I certainly couldn’t. I turned it off, recollecting the same emotion I felt on September 11th, 2001. Confusion and horror and anger—the ‘why’ came out immediately, then the grief. But the ‘why’ was never particularly satisfied. I knew it had to do with a man named Osama Bin Laden, but any explaination I found never truly answered why such a thing would happen.

Americans flipped TV channels, trying to make sense of such an atrocity. News reporters attempted to calmly report it, but there seemed to be an exact lack of answers that day and every day after that. 9/11 felt personal. I couldn’t even remember what I really saw or what the conclusion was; the only report I found any meaning in was The Onion’s big, bold headline, “HOLY FUCKING SHIT: ATTACK ON AMERICA”. And later, ‘Not Knowing What Else to Do, Woman Bakes American Flag Cake’.

I decided that was too much for one day and set my alarm for three AM. The kids were dead, there was no ‘ground-zero’ to pull out survivors. I’d donate a hundred dollars to funeral funds tomorrow and give fifty to the local firefighters’. No work tomorrow, it was one of my days off.

Chapter 2

The next morning, I turned on the 18-year-old television and instantly regretted it. Back to the local channels, ‘Sandy Hook Shooter: Adam Lanza had Asperger’s’. The world paused and then rolled, the cold October morning suddenly feeling too hot.

My laptop was on from last night. I opened the news tab and saw, ‘Are People with Asperger’s Dangerous?’ and the text below it, ‘Symptoms of Autism include social isolation, outbursts and feats of rage’. ‘Autism—Experts Weigh In’. I didn’t click on the articles.

I don’t remember that day very well. I sat down on my bed and rolled mechanically onto my stomach, tears streaking across my face. I glanced, futile, at the article that was framed against the wall— “Autistic Professor at Hansen College Shakes Things Up’ it was my pride and joy, every reason I got up in the morning. The media is a fickle creature, but it still hurt.

I wanted desperately to disassociate myself from Lanza. Many shooters were depressed, I thought, but it didn’t mean that ¼ of America’s population committed mass murder. But I thought back the brief picture that was taken of Lanza—flashed on the screen. He had that ‘look’—the same ‘look’ that I did. Wide eyes, staring straight ahead. I had the same hard stare, which I always initially talked about to my students that they should not, ‘please’, be alarmed by the way I watched people.

 Whatever plans I had that weren’t sobbing in my tiny facility apartment had been annilated. Breakfast was out of the question, couldn’t rose interest in lunch. Finally, Sherls knocked my door at five or so and slowly opened it.

Sherls was my best friend in the whole world. He was a researcher who studied politics and social sciences. “Uh, hey.” He said to my bright red face. I liked him best because he was just as awkward as I. Although never officially diagnosed, we both tried to pretend that he didn’t autism. Sherls couldn’t get a girl or boy, for that matter, to save his life. He couldn’t make eye contact, but he was a fascinating fellow to talk to once you got past everything else. “Oh. Are you uh, okay?”

The researcher was very much like a vampire. He wouldn’t go in uninvited even if you told him a thousand times to let himself in. He stood at my doorstep, shifting from foot to foot. “Go ahead. To answer your question, not great.”

“Oh, oh no. Well, um, how come?” I felt terrible about putting Sherls in this position, he couldn’t navigate these sorts of things for shit. When his mother died, I was the one attempting to comfort his sister while he sat in the hospital.

“You heard about what happened with the shooting?” Tears continued to run down on the bed.

He stiffly nodded. “Oh, yeah. That sucks.” The thing about Sherls was that he cared too, deep down. He just couldn’t properly communicate it. He knew why I was crying, but couldn’t do anything to fix it. Instead, he patted my head with excessive force and said,

“Do you want me to bring you anything back from the dining hall?”

“Sure. It could be anything.”

“Great. See you.”

I donated two hundred to both causes the next day.

Chapter Three

It turned out that I did not have to wait very long to meet Creon again. The week passed unremarkably, and on Thursday, I’d turned to pet a kitten that Joseph, one of my Marine Biology students was carrying. It wasn’t unusual—we have plenty of prospective students touring the campus, people visiting, etc., but what caught my attention was that this gentleman was taking very exact, very methodical pictures of our south hall among a group of men wearing suits.

Out of the sea of faces, I recognized one. Creon. I didn’t quite realize what I was doing, really. I’d spent all week thinking about our meeting, miserable and flustered by the whole incident. The university was my life, my home. When I first came through, I didn’t think there would be any place in the world for me.

“Hey, you!” I wandered over, clutching my hat against the cold September wind. I was feeling more off than usual—my period had just started, for one thing and I didn’t get much sleep.

A kind of circle formed around me, a sea of suited chests swirling around me. These men hadn’t been informed of our meeting. “You! You! You!” They watched, curiously as Creon folded his arms and huffed. “Hey! Hey! Hey! You’re not supposed to be here! Are you here for another meeting? It’s next Tuesday! Not this Tuesday! Next Tuesday! Not today! Anabel—I mean Ms. Frost told me!” I think it must’ve been quite an image. A dumpy, short academic, dressed like a marshmallow to protect myself from the cold and face hidden by a scarf, wildly shouting and pointing (with my entire hand, I was wearing mittens) at a red-faced man in the crowd.

I could hear someone behind me giggling, but I kept going. “What are you doing here? Shoo!” as though to disperse a cluster of pigeons.

Creon snorted. To my credit, I think I must’ve done something to him that hasn’t happened in years, he laughed a bit and then composed himself. For a split second, he wasn’t so intimidating and evil. “Juster, this is a campus in the heart of downtown Hansen. Anyone can be here.”

“Is it?” I demanded (it was).

“Yes.” That cat grin was back, but it was better than the dog stare.

“Okay, but you should still go away. Nobody likes you here.” Another head tilt. The men encircling me were laughing and huffing, shaking their heads.

“Am I being harassed?”

“You’re the one doing the harassing!” Creon had a mean, ugly face with ugly pale blue eyes and an ugly nose, disproportionately large for his face. And that was saying something, he had a huge face and a huge, hulking body. He wasn’t fat, but big and hunched over. On the contrast, I stood up straight and tall at my full height—gloriously, five foot nothing.

“You’re the one that came up to me.”

I counted eight men in total. To the east, a small parking lot sat. “Well, you better get out of here.” One of them, to the back of me, had gotten a camera out and started taking pictures *with flash*. I turned to face this asshole, on his guest sticker it said “Jennings”. “Can you stop that?” Flash, flash, flash. Another one whooped, his name was “Francis” and a few laughed, “Donald and Ron”. The men right beside Creon didn’t move a muscle. They seemed to anticipate some sort of brawl. Flash. It was a bright one, too.

Here’s what happens when I get overstimulated. First off, the situation is generally stressful already. Dizziness, then blurriness. Life seems to speed up and then slows down and then speed up. “Hey, I think I need to go. I have a class to teach.” But I was encircled and *Creon wasn’t moving.* They didn’t respond. “Um, hey. I need to go.”

Flash. A laugh. To make it worse, these men kept of sort shuffling around—they’d provide some sort of opening, but then close it. “What are you doing? Let me leave! Why are you taking pictures?”

Flash, flash. “Please let me go.”

Finally, “Help!”

It didn’t happen often, but I was a crier when I got overstimulated. I’m not proud to say that I panicked, but it was like being in a malevolent tilt-a-whirl. Suddenly, I saw my chance, right between Creon and one of the silent fellows.

I realized that I had to run for it. And did I ever run for it.

And crashed right into Creon. He was knocked over, flat on his back, like a ragdoll. I’d apparently hit him with an amazing amount of force. I certainly didn’t feel it, but kept running and running until I reached the library. It didn’t occur to me to call the police, I was filled with adrenaline and scared. I ran into the bathroom, full force sobbing.

Zeke, my freshman biology student, knocked on the door. “Juster? Are you okay?”

 I swear I’m usually not a sobbing mess all the time, reader. Any good book starts out with drama and for me, drama generally means a great deal of crying. I could’ve written to you about the years and years I spent peacefully teaching, without a care in the world but it probably would’ve made a boring book, aside from the occasional agar mishap.

“I-uh, allergies! Pollen!” No one runs into the bathroom hiccupping and shaking from hay fever.

“Can I at least get you some coffee? You know, to help the allergies.” Zeke Mear gave a shit about everybody, but he and I had some good moral standing together. I liked the fellow because he gave a shit and he liked that I gave a shit about his shits.

“Yeah.” I frantically splashed my face with water and dried myself with paper towels. My hair was a mess and my entire body hurt from crashing into Creon. I stepped out of the bathroom and sat numbly in one of the big chairs. Zeke was still in the process of stealing some cups from the library boss, Joan.

I stared at the worn copy of Jane Eyre, then glanced at the policeman who’d just walked in. He stared straight ahead at me. “Are you Juster Sluggle?”

“Yes, sir.” I stared right back. He took a seat in one those old chairs.

“You know what happened back there?”

“Yes, sir. They trapped me and I knocked him over because I was scared.”

“Did they try to hurt you?”

Now that was an interesting question. I filed it away for later, but answered, wide-eyed, “No, sir. I didn’t try to hurt them, either. Is Creon dead?”

His mouth quirked up. “You know, you remind me a lot of my son. One of your students stood by and gave me a policy report. Is it true that you have autism?”

“Yes, sir. I’m the only autistic professor in this city.”

“Did they do something to intimidate you?”

“Yes, sir. They encircled me and wouldn’t let me leave. Would you like some coffee? One of my students is bringing me some.”

“Oh, no thanks. Do you know anyone by the name Creon Wellsbrook?”

“Yes, sir. He’s trying to steal our university from us. We had a meeting last Tuesday.”

“Was it a very negative meeting?”

“Well, I suppose. He’s a bit of jerk, sir. Am I going to get arrested?” He wrote all these things down in his little notepad. I paused to let him keep up.

He’d obviously been in the profession for a good amount of time. “I don’t think so. Creon Wellsbrook has a history of getting in fights with people he doesn’t like, particularly when they’re smaller than them. You might get a fine.”

 A terrifying image came to me. “What about my job?”

“You might lose it.”

“What? No sir, I’m a professor—that shouldn’t happen!” My heart seized in my throat. I couldn’t take another position at a university. I simply wouldn’t have been hired. Suddenly, I was gulping for air. “Can I go to jail instead?”

“No, ma’am. However, I don’t know if you’ll lose your job. And, because you have autism and you’re on tenure, I don’t think you will. It’s too much of a risk for the university to be sued by disability rights’ groups.”

Something quieted in me. Overwhelmingly and deeply, I wanted sleep. “Call me if you have any questions at the non-emergency number here.” He pointed to a calling card.

“Right. Thank you, John.” He smiled. John was a sweet man.

Chapter Four

It turned out that I shouldn’t have worried about my job—it was my life that was hung out to dry. My face was plastered in every corner of the internet, from Joe’s Blog, to professional news sites like the Daily Mail and even the Washington Post.

It was a short (less than ten seconds) video circulating over the internet. It was angled just so that it looked as though he’d been standing there, directly behind me, and then the camera man moved to the right, effectively catching me running into Creon, but not him stepping in the way. I was red faced, screaming. What was worse that when I ran, I brought up my arms to protect my face when I realized I was going to crash, so it looked like I had definitely tried to knock him over.

And it was everywhere. I’d counted over fifty different websites; thousands of different people had seen what transpired and it wasn’t even the truth. YouTube, over several million hits, Bing Videos, several hundred thousand and Vine—I didn’t want to think of Vine. ‘Professor at Hansen University LOSES HER SHIT, ATTACKS MAN’. Some mentioned that I had Asperger’s and correctly theorized that I had a meltdown. Others discussed the ethics of having autistic people in the workplace, as we were so violent and unpredictable, in the name of diversity. Others simply left out the autistic part and framed myself as a terror to the village, that I should be fired.

Misery. Reporters hounded every second of every day. But they didn’t want my story, they wanted some sort of flaw that they could exploit further. The only good thing in the world was my students. They published what my side of the story was in the local student newspaper, which gained a little wind, but not much. It obviously wasn’t well believed. John, a junior marine science student, held meetings in my favor. My class gave me a good word whenever they were asked by reporters, so it often wasn’t published, but it was the thought that counted. I can proudly say that not a single student said anything rotten about me.

And so, my life was reduced to my apartment and my classes. I taught better, so acutely grateful for the people that made such a dream possible when it was threatened, made more bad jokes “So you’re a turtle judge, and a turtle walks up to you…” I spent extensive time with my students, trying to give them a boost in any way I could. Thom was strapped on cash, here are some scholarships that would be perfect for Thom. Jiji wanted to get into the new painting class, perhaps I ‘accidentally’ show the art teacher some of Jiji’s amazing works. Lisa needed to find an internship at the hospital, so perhaps she may be interested in internship for a doctor friend of mine. Even with the little, dumb things that were so perplexing to me as a young adult I helped with. Finding low-cost rent on Zillow with Matt. Giving Ariel tips on his organization. Helping Joe find the perfect art studio.

My relationship with my colleagues actually had never been better. Scandal in university wasn’t uncommon. While terrible for the scandalized, gave people an acute interest in our university, apparently. Besides, Creon was an asshole, everyone surmised, nobody liked him anyway. Still, it considerably worsened our relationship with the city, which I was wholeheartedly apologetic to Ms. Frost about, who told me not to worry. “This sort of stuff happens,” she told me, “Hansen has a duty to defend its professors.”

I redecorated and rearranged my apartment, reread my paper—is ‘Starfish Wasting Disease an Autoimmune Disorder?’, ate a lot of takeout and played a good bit with Maximus. I was in the process of teaching him to do tricks.

That all lasted until one day during office hours. Freddy knocked on my door. He was a very sweet young man by the age of 23, relatively young in my eyes. I gave my schpeal. “Hello! Please come in, take a seat, have some candy—I don’t bite!”

Freddy smiled. He had large gray-blue eyes and liked to study the social sciences. He did tennis on the regular and his grandmother died when he was 22. He helped himself to some Jolly Ranchers and pulled out his laptop. “What do we have here?” I said, reaching for some gum myself. “Homework? Some assignment three weeks past due? Nobel prize?” He chuckled a bit.

“No, Juster. Just take a good peek at what I found on my dashcam.”

The realization struck me that this event occurred right by a parking lot. Now, this was from a completely different perspective.

The video started as “Hey! Please let me leave.” It had sound. A mass of men in suits surrounded me, eclipsing me entirely. “I’ve got a class to go to. I’ve gotta go.”

And then I saw camera flashes. I didn’t even realize I said: “Please let me go, this is scaring me.”

Occasionally, a scrap of my shirt of the hint of my winter boots appeared, with the men shuffling around. Freddy hasn’t wasted money on his camera, you could see my face as red and splotchy and tearful. Part of me wanted to cry, again—I didn’t realize how scared I looked. The sheer powerlessness on my own face cut me to the core. They could’ve seriously hurt me, and in a way, Creon did.

Now was the part that mattered the most. The gap opened, and I ran for it—and I suddenly realized that this was no terrible accident that Creon assumed was malignant. He purposefully stepped to the side. I gasped, both in the video and reality. In the video, I tried to slow down, but I still crashed into him and then bolted off to the library. The way he fell was funny and I told Freddy so. The way he looked, the way he rag dolled. Freddy just grinned—it was a faker fall, I couldn’t have knocked a man of Creon’s size and shape, he told me.

The police report was serious business. The same cop that I’d met with came and Creon gave his report, that his was viciously assaulted by this mad woman. He wore the face of the brave assignation survivor that had survived only through wit and sheer strength. When the cop left, presumably to follow me to the library, he smiled at his little posse and laughed.

“We should show this to the police,” I said, wide-eyed, “maybe I won’t get fined a thousand bunks that way.”

Freddy shook his head. “Well, no. I mean, you could. But you should show it to the media, Juster. Show it to everyone that’ll listen, that you were set up and forced to tackle that man.”

The idea was appealing enough. I was rather tired of being called the “Crazy Professor” and wanted to go out to the bar with Sherls to watch really boring sports events. I nodded and told him to send me the link. I gave my student a bath bomb, some cookies I stole from the break room and a small jar of Skittles for his hard work (also, between you and me, I let him take his worst graded small assignment off record). I gave him an awkward side hug and thanked him profusely. This was going to turn things all around, I thought.

On Tuesday, I met with Annabel. Her reaction to the video was even worse than mine was. “Oh my God,” she said helplessly, staring at the laptop’s screen, “you really weren’t imagining him stepping in front of you. You got trapped. You were even screaming and he still has the balls to say that he was the one that was attacked?”

“I don’t think he plays fair. You know the business with Adam Lanza? I think he might’ve taken inspiration from that.” At the very least, the news article took it—that I might retaliate and shoot up the university. She looked sick at the thought, but nodded.

Now, Annabel was all business. “Now, Juster. You’ve got quite a few options here. You could very well sue Creon and since it was a business meeting, sue the entire company for the actions of its employees. You could call the police with new evidence and have Creon charged, with what I don’t know. You could get rid of the fine you’re facing with the video. We could give this to the media and let the media do its work. Finally, you can have any combination of these things.”

I mulled this over with a sip of lemon tea and glanced out the window. The leaves the trees had begun to fall, with that concealing all sorts of interesting items. I found a couple of poisonous mushrooms and the odd shrew, but what I found most interesting was broken part of a beehive, covered by the leaves. I took it back to my office to study later.

“What if I gave it to the media?”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to worry about the university’s reputation going down the toilet by this incident—”

“Oh, I’ll do that, then.”

She smiled. “Keep in mind, it might mean some more media hounding for a while.”

“What would it mean for Creon?”

Anabel knitted her eyebrows. “Well, if you pressed charges, you might put him in jail for a while. He might be fired from his job. He might have to shell out money for you. I’m not particularly familiar with the legal system for these kinds of things, but I wouldn’t hold back. Creon has been in the business of bullying these non-profits for years. Shutting things like soup kitchens, refusing to let homeless shelters build, that sort of thing. You should still be careful.”

Somehow, I didn’t like the thought of putting someone in jail, even if that someone was Creon. Firstly, he was large enough that he wouldn’t fit into any beds (his feet would hang off) and then, all his clothes would be too tight and too small.

With Hansen University’s stance on the current state of affairs on the prison system, it didn’t feel right to put one fellow in jail just because he was rotten.

“Could I talk to him before I do anything?”

Annabell’s eyes widened. Her mouth opened in surprise. “I’m sure you can, but why would you?”

“I’d rather settle this without ruining someone else’s life. Plus, this guy obviously has friends in high places. If we published it right away, he’d gain another reason to shut Hansen down. If I give him a little warning, perhaps there won’t be a lot of need for revenge.”

My boss’s eyes swept the floor and glanced at the picture of her kids. Two cute little Chinese brats, adopted from Beijing. One was learning French, another, she told me proudly, wanted to be in academia like she was. “Creon is not the sort of man who forgives or forgets. He holds long-term grudges, several years down the line when everyone has forgotten the ordeal, he’ll set companies and people and non-profits to fail, that way he can purchase the land. I don’t think meeting with him will do much good.” My boss was probably right. Creon scared me, even before the incident. I’d lived in bad neighborhoods before, but this was a grudge to an entire new level. I’d never tangoed with someone this tricky, nor did I particularly want to.

“Can it do me any bad, though?”

“I’m not sure. He’s really not someone you can negotiate with. I’m not saying ‘no, don’t go’—but if you do, use your caution and judgement. Meet him in a public place if you get in contact. You’ll catch him off guard, hopefully, with the evidence, but I wouldn’t have more than one meeting or he’ll try to scheme. Resolve things quickly, is what I mean. He’s underhanded and doesn’t conform to any rules.”

I suddenly realized what Anabel thought. I’d be taken advantage of, he could somehow wrap his fingers around my neck without my knowing, and *squeeze* before I knew what hit me. With a deep, shaking sigh, I stood and left the plush green couch.

“I’ll be careful.”

“You better be. Call me afterwards and tell me what happens.”

Chapter Four

I re-watched ‘Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix’ that on Thursday, after reviewing some papers on environmental studies. Each had to pick a biome in the nearby area of Hansen and write an extensive essay on the role of water in it—thankfully, these were just biome proposals. How did plants and animals get their sources of water? They had to take pictures, discuss plant life, what happened when the seasons changed, if nearby pollution was a problem, if so, what kind of pollution? How did plants and animals grow according to the variation in water? Was this year a usual year for water? How much rain did we get? How much water was from nearby snowy patches? What about other factors?

Prior to that, I’d dug around in the internet for information on Creon. So far, he was a very rich man who had a terrible reputation, yet companies still hired him because *he was that good* in getting around regulations. He’d constantly fight Section 8 housing. Thanks to him, the poor of Hansen had fled to the suburbs, which screwed them over even more than the city did. Less resources; farther from schools and grocery stores, less visits to grandma and grandpa, harder to access hospitals and couldn’t get jobs due to the commute.

Now, I keep my head down out of politics. It’s bad for the soul, particularly when you’re someone like me who is already worried about my students. Obama generally got things done alright. If I checked the news every day, my hair would fall out. I still couldn’t believe I hadn’t heard of this guy.

I couldn’t get an appointment with Creon. It was ridiculous—first, the secretary said ‘Oh no, he doesn’t do these sorts of things’ and then when I told her it was a *personal* meeting, she straight up huffed in disbelief. ‘He doesn’t do those sorts of things at the office’, Janice told me, ‘But I can give you his address. Say, if you *people* work in a group, can you tell them to stop calling the office?’

‘Uh, sure,’ I’d said, feeling sort of weirded out by the whole thing.

‘Great, grab a pen.’

I did as told and wrote down his address. He lived in one of the most recently built places, complete with shopping malls and fancy restaurants below it. Imagine the Trump Tower, but without any of the general character of New York City.

I would visit his apartment on Saturday, I thought, stroking Maximus. It was the best chance I had to catch this bastard. He seemed like a busy man.

On screen, Dolorius Umbridge toddled up to Trelawny, with the same sickly-sweet grin on her face. “Hogwarts is my home!” she cried, “You can’t do this!”

All of a sudden, I came to the realization that Creon was not Voldemort, as I painted him out to be. Dolorius Umbridge appeared to be a rigid rule follower, yet still served as an absolute villain in the series. Voldemort might kill me, but I would die happily as a professor.

Dolorius was downright insidious.

I quickly paused the VHR.

Chapter Five

I stepped off the bus and faced the gigantic tower before me. It was a large, shining building. According to Zillow, it cost over eight million dollars for a single bedroom condo and I suspected this man had a penthouse. Fancysmachsy.

The tiny doorman stared at unkempt, springy hair, with my hiking shoes and my winter jacket, I must’ve looked quite out of place. “I have personal business with Creon.” I expected to have to show some identification or some proof, in that case I had his business card, but the little fellow merely nodded.

“Thanks.”

Mr. Creon lived on the seventeenth floor, at the very top of the Yorkshire apartments. The elevator lead to a sort of square hallway. I stepped out, feeling confused and lost—surely, a person like Creon wouldn’t just be willing to share a hallway? Suddenly, I was presented with the entire Hansen City Downtown area. The trucks looked like little play-cars, whereas the skyscrapers jutted out. Yorkshire Apartments were apparently willing to spend plenty of money on windows, because that was as far as the eye could see. I could even see the beginning on the farmland, it stretched so far and wide. The hallway surrounded the elevator and both ways to go lead me to the same place a few steps up, a large wooden door.

It was a rather fancy door, the kind you see in churches. Well-polished, not a scratch on it. I half wanted to scratch it—Creon seemed to be the kind of person that would notice if someone breathed on something the wrong way.

Instead, I gave the door a mean knock. Surprisingly, the answer was immediate— “Oh, come in!” It was Creon, but not in the way I knew of him. He sounded different. “I’m just in the shower, why don’t you wait on the couch? You came quite early.”

Well, don’t mind if I do? This was sort of weird, but perhaps he knew I came by his secretary. I shuffled in. His apartment was like you would expect it: practical, minimalistic. Books and papers scattered across the tables and bookshelves, but there really wasn’t anything of interest. His wall color was a modern grey, and the rug was white. I’d tracked mud all over it.

I sat, listening to the shower run. I booted up my laptop in preparation for the video. Everything was jumbo-sized and custom made. It wasn’t simple IKEA furniture, my feet swung at least a half foot about the ground.

It’d hardly been five minutes when an old woman quietly opened the door, heard the shower, and made her way to the large table.

She was a tiny woman who walked with a cane. She wore a grey sweater, and large bottle spectacles. She was maybe seventy-five or so, with the same dark hair that Creon had. This was his mother, I realized. Creon hadn’t been expecting me.

I wanted to run right out of the room, right out of the tower. Instead, I coughed. “Hi, Ma’am?”

The blind woman jumped and then looked very interested. “Why, who are you?”

“Oh, well, in relation to your son, Creon, sort of a very long story, but my name is Juster Sluggle and I’m the professor that got in trouble with your son.”

The mayor titled her head and laughed a bit to herself. “You, my dear, got my hopes up that my son would finally get a girlfriend, or a boyfriend, or somebody that would take care of him. Now I’m curious to hear your side of the story: why’d you football-tackle him?”

“Well, Ma’am, I actually came over to discuss that very thing—” Now I was getting nervous. Telling his mother about what had happened didn’t seem particularly productive, but I was essentially trapped.

“Oh, Cindy is fine.”

“Well, Cindy, you’re aware I have Asperger’s syndrome, which is a form of generally high functioning autism that effects the way I process information?”

“Oh, yes. You know, Creon was diagnosed with a behavioral disorder at the age of four. We knew there was something wrong with him.”

“I didn’t realize that, Ma’am. I thought he, um, just did not like many people.” I kept my voice down and desperately listened for the shower to stop.

Cindy clapped her hands and roared with laughter. “It’s not the disorder that makes him an asshole. I can say that because he’s my son. He even went to therapy for it. I was wondering if there was a reason my son got punched.”

“We met earlier. He wants to halt the prison program, but the university has spent a lot of time and resources getting ready to open the prison program. Additionally, grants and awards are being given to the university specially because of this program. He works in essentially real-estate, so our theory was confirmed when I saw him with a group of men taking very close, very methodical pictures of the university. If Hansen University closes, it will open up as a senior living home—one of the companies Creon has ties under.”

Cindy suddenly looked very grave and very pale. “Keep going, what happened?”

“Well, the video that you saw was only seven or so seconds long, and at a specific angle. I have a five-minute dashcam that showed the whole picture on my laptop that one of my students recorded, but um, I don’t know how effective it would be if I showed it to you.”

“Where are you? I can see laptops with maximum brightness on and if I press my face to them.”

“The couch, right side.”

She made her way over. The good humor that had appeared was gone. I turned the video on and pointed her to the laptop.

Like her son she turned bright red. I wasn’t sure how much she could really see, but the dialogue at the very least came across. She put her hand across her mouth, clearly upset and then the moment hit—I ran into him.

“WELLSBROOK CREON! Come here this instant!” The sheer force of the sound rattled me. The shower turned off, and the sheer sense of dread struck me. I was not supposed to be here.

“What?”

“Come here! I don’t care if you have shampoo in your hair. Get your ass out here and explain yourself to this young woman.” Cindy crossed her arms and turned to me: “I’m so sorry. He was always such a bully. I thought he grew out of it.”

Creon entered, with a towel wrapped around his waist. “What—” we stared at each other. I sunk deeper into the couch, horribly weirded-out. I wondered if I could be tried for breaking and entering. He was very hairy—a trail of hairs led down to his pubic area and back up to his chest. Reader, I can’t emphasize how gargantuan this man was. Every time I thought about Creon, his size and height was fantastically surreal. Again, with the red-faced nose. He’d been in the middle of shaving.

“Mother,” he cried, “This is the woman who assaulted me! She broke into my apartment, apparently.”

He tried to move towards me, but then I said,

“No, you let me in. You said to wait on the couch and that you were expecting me. I didn’t mean to talk with your mother, I meant to talk to you. I need to show you a video that was captured on my student’s dashcam of the incident. Your mother came right after I did.”

His mouth hung open. He turned bright white and then the tips of Creon’s ears flushed, when he opened his mouth to argue— “Creon, sit down and do as your told.”

He sat, towel and everything. The traffic below the building looked more and more appealing to land on, this situation couldn’t have gotten more embarrassing. Creon was squished in between his mother and I, and dripping wet on the couch. Water rolled of off him and onto my sweater. For another, having a man practically naked that you don’t know very well is rather strange, particularly when his mother is in the room and furious. The video was already loaded.

I saw him tense as he heard my yelling. He realized what was coming, but couldn’t stop it.

“How could you?” Cindy didn’t hold anything back. “You essentially trapped this poor woman, then accused her of assault when she tried to get away and you backed into her, purposefully.”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. Creon knew he was in the foxholes, now. He regarded me much more wearily, two large orbs falling onto the laptop, then to his mother, then back to me. “So, what do you plan to do with this information?”

Now this is where my readers will roll their eyes. I felt a deep and miserable pity for my accuser, for I really wasn’t out for revenge. “I am going to show this to the police and then to the media to clear my and my university’s name. I don’t plan to sue or press charges, but I don’t know how these things work.”

He swayed a bit. “Please don’t show anyone this video. I’ll get fired. I can pay you for your troubles.” Now, I was curious about the number amount that he meant, he was the sort of person that looked like he had money, but I withheld my curiosity.

“I’m sorry, but I have to show it. This story—the one you wanted to show to the world, has been all over the internet and back. You’ve purposefully damaged my institution’s record, while I’m still not able to leave my apartment without being hounded by the media.” This was the same tone of voice I used when I caught a student plagiarizing—Toby Jones had copy and pasted an article and turned it in as his final project. I was deeply disappointed and had expressed so. He would have to take the class again next semester.

Creon looked as though he’d been tossed out of a window at three AM in a New York winter, stunned, cold and feeling quite bewildered by the entire affair. I grabbed a bright white throw blanket and tossed it over him, patting his hairy back.

 His eyes pleaded for help from his mother, who pointedly looked away and said, “You deserve this. I would honestly encourage Juster to press chargers. When you were diagnosed at four years old, I worried the same fate that she’s suffering—that you would be exploited or entrapped. But I suppose that was my mistake, I always thought this made you an inherent victim. Now, I see.” Her mouth was set on a tight straight line.

People underestimate and overestimate the disabled all the time. A parent may believe that a baby ‘may catch up’ someday, and will beat the odds, but is met with lifelong disappointment. A mother who has a child with down-syndrome may not be fully prepared for the heart defects, swallowing difficulties and behavioral problems he may have. That’s not the truth—they’re people, and those that are significantly worse off, the general population will see less and less of (whether they be in group homes, institutions, or just at home with mom and dad all the time, due to the struggle of taking them out). On the other hand, many disabled people have sexualities, television preferences, and are sometimes quite clever in getting what they want.

She left without another word.

I sat there, with Creon, not quite knowing what to do. His world had tumbled out from under him and lay teetering at the edge of a cliff. I had the power to ruin this man’s life, and probably needed to, but it didn’t mean I took any real pleasure in it. If I was someone who set up people I didn’t like to fail, I wouldn’t have wanted to work in a university.

You might be under the impression, reader, that I like all my students. No, I have an academic and professional duty to care about all my students deeply and truly, and to put their best interests at heart—but I do not like all of my students.

I tried very hard to care about the world in general. Unfortunately, Creon ended up in that category, so I had a personal duty to care about him, even just a little bit. He stared at his shoes blankly and then turned to me.

I wondered if I was about to be strangled, just then. Or thrown seventeen stories down. Or attacked. He swallowed again. He looked like a bald owl caught in a wind tunnel, then in a net. Eyes wide, quite indignant with a big ‘beak’ and generally quite unhappy looking.

“Would you like something to drink while you’re here?”

I knew it was rude to refuse drinks when you’re a guest in someone’s house, particularly after you’ve ruined the host’s life, so I decided I could at least indulge. “Oh, okay. Do you have any tea?” Perhaps I should’ve feared poison, but this wasn’t a 18th century mystery novel.

Creon got up, stiffly. He was, in general, a very stiff man. Everywhere he went, there was a tension. “I’ll go boil some water.”

I twiddled my thumbs a bit, then went on Facebook and checked my email. It was a good reminder why I was here: my email had been flooded with thousands upon thousands of emails, from reporters, to other professors at universities, to just common people on the internet that were curious about what had happened. I’d responded to none of them. The kettle screamed and in about fifteen seconds, he handed me a mint-smelling mug.

“I think I just got disowned.” Creon put down his own mug without tasting it on the coffee table.

“I think she just wants you to be better.” The apartment was startlingly silent, not even a wall clock to break it. “I think she thinks you can do better. She doesn’t want you to hurt people.” I didn’t really know if he was even capable of being a good person. Horribleness, like goodness and everything else, was a practiced habit. And habits are hard to break. I broke Samuel out of a pill addiction—I’d gotten the junior the help he needed, I broke George of his messiness by showing him how to clean (his parents were hoarders) and I broke Lily out of a domestic violence relationship, but I’d never broken anyone out of what was essentially a psychopathic tendency.

I wrapped my hand around the mug and thought back to my childhood of bullies and apathetic bystanders. I always wondered what those sorts of people were up to: surely, some of them had grown out of it, but perhaps this was the result of someone who never grew up.

“My job is hurting people.” Creon sighed.

I couldn’t disagree with him. He was right. It was paycheck bullying.

“Quit your job, then. You can even be the one to announce that you did what you did: people won’t think that you’re such a monster if you post the video. You can essentially take a plea-deal. And you can protect my university.”

He looked at the city mournfully. Can I mention he was still wearing a towel? He sort of looked like a baby bird—angry, naked, sort of hairy, and with a deep scowl. “I like my job.”

“You’re going to lose it anyway.” It wasn’t particularly kind to say, but it was the truth. Another deep sigh. “Sorry.”

“No, you’re right. My job’s nature is inherently predatory. I’ll never be hired again.”

“But you’ve made plenty of money. Why not retire early?”

“Now, listen to me, Professor Sluggle who goes by her first name. I don’t understand that practice. If you woke up tomorrow morning, bought a lottery ticket and won a billion-dollar lottery ticket, would you retire?”

I saw his point immediately. “No, I suppose not. But it makes the world better, not worse.”

“You’re a large-picture person. I’m a small picture person. It makes my world better, not someone else’s. With my work at Hansen, crime rights have dropped. The streets are cleaner. It’s one of the most appealing places to live in the country.”

“Not for the poor.”

“Do I sound like someone who cares about the poor? We essentially got rid of any poor, small-time drug-dealers by mass arresting them and putting them in town a hundred miles across the state, while cutting off bus services to that town. Lentel’s crime rate has shot up. But that’s not my business.”

“That’s… that’s cruel.” That was my only response to it, really.

“Really? Would you like a drug-dealer hooking kids on your street? What about sex offenders? A needle exchange across the way from your university would surely piss the university off, but they’re still generally for needle-exchanges because it supposedly brings down rates of overdose. You want to do good for the poor—live in their neighborhoods. Bring some tax income for their schools. But you won’t, because it’s ‘Ghetto’. There’s no resources for you there, you will say. Or its dangerous. Better yet: teach at a school that doesn’t cost forty-thousand a year to attend, not even including meal plans.”

I wanted to say a million things: I wanted to say, how dare you, of course I care. I wanted to say, I work with some very poor kids every day. We gave good scholarships. But the truth was, my students were often rich—and while that didn’t mean they didn’t have problems, they had less monetary problems. They didn’t need to work, or worry about what sort of jobs they were going to get. A large portion partied, because college was just a rite-of-passage for trust fund babies. The poor kids had no problem with motivation: often being the first kids to go to college in their family was enough, being ‘dreamers’ was enough, wanting well-paying jobs was enough.

“We talk different talk, but walk almost the same walk. You get the same benefits that I do—a better, cleaner world. I’ll quit my job. But it’s not because I want the same thing you do: I won’t become a ‘good person’. I’m not a good man and I’ve never been.” He’d been regaining himself, more and more. But that is what caught my interest: a psychopath or a narracist would probably say that they *could be better* at all cost, then would immediately turn tail the second they thought I went out of sight. Narracists don’t worry about being bad people—because of course, they aren’t one. Everyone else is the bad one. As my grandmother would say, “Smell shit—check your shoes.”

“You can show yourself out, without worrying about being mugged or robbed.”

“Wait,” I said, “I’m enjoying this conversation and would like to discuss this further.”

Now, something seemed to pass though Creon at this moment. He sort of froze up, grinded his jaw and eyed me. “That’s an unusual thing to say, considering I’ve been insulting your line of work for a large portion of time.”

“It’s not particularly insulting if it’s true.” I mean, it stung, but it was only a mere reiteration of what I suspected for a while.

Creon looked surprised. “Alright,” he said, with an air of supreme suspicion, “Let me get dressed.”

Chapter Six

We chatted until the sun streamed through the glass windows. Creon pulled the gray curtains, scowling at the sunrise. He was obviously a creature of the night; but I was not and would be “sleep-hungover” for days to come.

Now, I did not exactly lose track of time: I merely disregarded the concept entirely, ignoring the fact that I had a class to teach at ten that morning. It was true that he had trapped me, threatened my university, my lifestyle, my reputation and my job, but Creon was very much like Ebola or a deadly fungus: fascinating to study, horrible to experience his effects.

It felt good to have a talk with someone without feeling as though I was insulting both our lines of work. I mentioned how I watched my environmental students throw cigarette butts onto the wet grass, while there was ashtray a full five feet away. I once put out a cigarette fire with a bucket of water, watching the ground smolder and blacken. My students protested the tobacco industry for targeting minorities and poor people, then taking a break to smoke. They agreed that it was a fearsome habit, but there they were. I could hardly open a window without the smell wafting through my shitty office.

I ranted and raved unhappily. About how my students refused to pick after anyone but themselves, despite complaining about the litter on the ground. There was a great solution for that they never considered: picking it up, a little bit each time they passed, by themselves. About how the university’s investors unknowingly invested in the private prison industry—how we used the same meal service as the prison industry that we so very much hated, but they served quality food and the rich students wouldn’t settle for anything less.

Some of my students prepared PowerPoints and projects about how terrible grass was for the environment, yet there was a great big grassy lawn that was never allowed to grow more than two days without a trim.

Despite all those things, I felt we were doing some good in the world, more than outpowered the bad. It was just… frustrating. And that was the real problem of academia at its core—we could talk be as progressive as we wanted to be, but until we changed our ways first: how were we supposed to implement anything onto the greater community? Change needs to come from the changer first.

Surprisingly, Creon tolerated this long winded, looping conversation well. He seemed interested enough, which was nice of him. He didn’t try to kick me out of his apartment any further or grumble insults.

“Science isn’t very good at reaching people, nor is academia. Art might have a little talent there, but then you have “modern” art—a big red square of paint being sold for thousands of dollars or millions of dollars have effectively turned the public off, because then you’re not paying for art or talent or skill, you’re essentially paying for brand,” Creon said.

“I’m speaking as an educated guess, but I suppose it’s a rebellion against what the public perseveres as art. Whatever shocks and outrages, the better.”

“Then supposedly poorly-drawn DeviantArt gore porn would be the highest pinnacle?”

“You have a point. A horrible point, but a point. You could then argue that because it is understandable, it uses its value in modern art.”

Creon huffed a little. “IF only a select amount of people can understand the meaning of the artist, isn’t that inherently elitist, which is what the art world tends to be against?”

“However, if you hate modern art,” and at this I pointed to the large black splotch on a frame, “why do you even bother to have such a thing?”

“I have a hidden suspicion that the reason why post-modern art scene is still thriving and being purchased is so that the rich can use it on their tax returns. Essentially, is what I do is purchase a piece, wait for a time while the painting generally gets more valuable and then donate it to the gallery. That one cost me a million dollars and it’ll save me three million on my tax returns.”

I nearly choked. “Sweet Jesus, is that what most people do?”

“People in my area of the woods, anyway.”

“*Jeezsus.*”

I’d always wondered if I was the dumb one when it came to modern art. Neo-Expressionism gave me nightmares, but I figured there must be something I wasn’t seeing that made it beautiful.

“How on Earth did you learn that?”

“Oh, Harvard.”

Harvard! But it made sense: he obviously came from money, and Harvard was filthy rich. Only the best for the smartest students of America and generally, the very wealthy ones: the ones that had tutors, the time to do extracurriculars and the general absence of worries. That was a ‘you are going places’ university. It shouldn’t have surprised me so much that he would learn a few tricks from the super wealthy. He said something, but I wasn’t listening. “Sorry?”

“Didn’t like it there much.”

Now that surprised me—who on Earth wouldn’t like Harvard? I didn’t have the grades to go to Harvard, I’d spent quite a portion of my childhood in foster care until I was adopted and had trouble catching up. Harvard was one of the schools that I knew I was honestly not smart enough to get into, and didn’t really need to be.

Intelligence is valued above all in American schools. Many can breeze by without a care, right up until the college. That’s when they hit problems—I helped many students, Janice, Roger, Logan, develop a work ethic and a balanced life style. They had problems with addiction and time management, wouldn’t eat good food, for their parents had planned most everything for them. If I was a college admissions board—I would have generally chosen a 3.7 kid who was from a notably worse place, than one who was a 4.1.

“How come?”

“I like to feel like the smartest person in the room.” There was a hint of something that I could barely detect. The way he said them, there was a lot of misery and upset.

“I’m the opposite. When I’m the smartest person in the room, there’s a heck of a problem happening.” I grinned at him. It was a joke, but it was true—I’d long accepted that there were always going to be someone who was a better scientist, more exacting and could teach better, but it never stopped me from taking notes from them. I looked up to my colleagues.

Creon looked distressed. “I don’t know how you can just accept that.”

“Easy,” I said. “I have tenure.”

He smiled. Now that the sun was coming up and replaced the cold, automatic lighting of his apartment, Creon didn’t seem quite so terrible. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do about my mother, but I’ll take your suggestion and quit my job today. This evening I’ll show the video to the masses and let them decide what my verdict is—boiling in oil, scalping or the traditional beheading.”

I wanted to say that I would put in a good word for him, but Anabel’s words echoed in my mind: ‘He’s a schemer.’ Instead, “What are your career plans?”

Creon shoved his hands in his pockets. His clothes fit him remarkably well. “I have enough for retirement at thirty-seven.” More than enough, I was certain, but he didn’t elaborate on that.

“Why not retire with a cute girl on a beach?” As soon as I said that, I turned pink. I may have not been my place to suggest such a thing.

Creon lifted the couch cushion next to him and pretended to look. “Do you see any potential partners? Any friends? I’m certainly not seeing any. I’m at least temporary estranged from my only living family member.”

Now, it was true that being a professor was mostly being married to his work. But I was certain that if I was suddenly teleported to say, Spain, I’d have an entire crowd of millennials conducting an amateur missing persons investigation within three days, and then a group of academics sitting around and theorizing as to where I went. Job or not, they cared about me.

“They won’t visit you?” I asked.

“Who is ‘they’?”

“Your work friends. The ones who bullied me.” Mind you, I didn’t have a particularly high opinion of these individuals, but sometimes a few crappy friends are better than none.

Creon snorted and set the couch cushion back down. “They aren’t friends. My business is full of sharks who are looking for the opportunity to get bigger—and that doesn’t involve vegetarianism. Competitive. Cut-throat. They may make alliances and occasionally be invited to the bar to dance around the issue of work, but no one in my line of business has friends in the workplace. You don’t make it to the top having friends.”

I suddenly got a disturbing look into Creon’s life. Waking up alone, working to professionally defeat everyone around you and then going home, probably late at night, without any hope of hanging out with friends. It was worse than exile.

What a miserable excuse for a life.

Now, this is not what I meant to say. I meant to say, ‘Well, very sorry to hear about that. It’s very much a pity. If you want, I can show you Tinder so you can find someone equally as desperate and then get you a profile started on LinkedIn, to perhaps find you a career that would be suitable to your attitude, like a lawyer or a paid serial killer.’

Instead, what popped out of my mouth was: “How about you help me collect some frogs in the university creek on Sunday?”

Creon’s face shifted from the following emotions: surprise, embarrassment, disgust and finally, curiosity. “Are you a witch? What are you doing with these poor frogs?”

“It’s one of the other professor’s project, not mine. It’s not even official. We’re just trying to weigh them—there may be a variation in the local area of frog size vs. other parts of the United States.”

“I’m a billionaire, and billionaires don’t collect frogs. Absolutely not.”

“You aren’t any more!”

Creon turned pink. “I’m sure you’ll be able to find someone else. Now, if you’ll leave me, I have a *real* profession to quit.”

Now I was hopping mad, frogs excluded. I stormed out the door, realized I left my laptop and hurriedly slammed it shut without looking at him and hurried into the elevator.

Chapter Six

Twitter exploded. The public is extraordinarily fickle, and luckily my ‘framing’ wasn’t completely forgotten by the media by this point and the media projected Creon’s and his company’s, which I learned was called the Umea Corporation. The reporters who finally began to quell returned.

I suppose it should’ve given me a sense of satisfaction to see Creon being even more vilified as I was, but this development shocked and angered the internet even more. The full story was out—that Umea Corporations had been conducting shady business deals, that entrapment wasn’t unusual for them, how they fought non-profits like Habitat for Humanity and drug addiction centers. Disability rights groups kept my work phone eternally ringing.

The City of Hansen was pissed. They were beyond embarrassed to have been caught hounding a “For the Good” institution like Hansen University was, who had a reputation for giving out thousands of dollars to students who had obviously been through exceptional circumstances, and provided them the tools to move forward. They played ignorance—that they would never, of course, work with such a shady company knowingly. The New Yorker called them on their bullshit.

The Washington Post wrote an article called “Hansen is What Gentrification Looks Like”, which judging by the Whole Foods, acupuncture and Kombucha shops, was true enough. Others were more suspicious of Creon’s sudden change of heart. Twitter users hounded Creon, starting hashtags and writing death threats. #FuckCreonWellsbrook and #CreonisCryin’ (admittedly, that made me chuckle a little). To my horror, his email, phone number and private address was posted to the internet.

I watched these proceeds miserably. When I’d been hounded, there was at least a little sympathy, a little doubt. My coworkers at least still loved me, as did my students. But Creon had nothing. People saw his billionaire status and declared him the enemy, the privileged, the perfect. It came out later that I was not only autistic, but a foster child… I had people writing letters, sending sweets and books and flowers in apologies. I got four ‘Edible Arrangements’. Now I was the equivalent of little Orphan Annie, only this time in a wheelchair and infected with a terrible disease—a tragic figure, really. The spectators did their fair share of pondering as to how I got up every day after what happened, me being so broken and ridiculed.

We can say we know someone’s story by a news report or a web article. Wikipedia can tell someone’s achievements, but the lack of emotional connection will never tell the full story: that’s not how life works. No statistic can fully tell the suffering of millions of people—it can only *tell of* the suffering. Good journalism tries to keep the emotion out of it, because bad journalism tries to use emotions to manipulate. But emotions can be used to understand, which is where journalism fails and satire wins.

I never replied to any of these letters. I never accepted any apologies or told the media about what happened. In my mind, it was better to let people think what they needed to: they didn’t need a dusty professor to direct the conversation. And as desperately as I wanted to help Creon, this was mostly his own fault

That Wednesday, my grant proposal had been approved. It was about 44 pages of filling out what paperwork that shared the excitement of tax forms and the bubonic plague. I crushed Maximus to my chest when I got the email. Sherls and I went to a bar to celebrate.

He’d apparently attended a seminar in France. He didn’t have to talk (thank God), but there were plenty of people running around.

Sherls briefly questioned me about “you know, um, what happened?” and I gave him a censored retelling of our meeting. I mentioned how he got disowned by his mother, and how we devised a plan with the video, but didn’t mention how long we talked, or what we talked about. Saying that I enjoyed Creon’s company after what had transpired felt weird.

My colleagues understandably hated Creon. He might as well have blended poor, one-legged orphans to his banana smoothies every morning. Even Luna, the bleeding hearted professor, didn’t have a good word to say about the man. I tried expressing that I really didn’t hate him, the general answer was ‘Why? You don’t owe him anything’. They would’ve let me Molotov his apartment, destroy all lawn gnomes and pee on the rug. He deserved what he’d wrought, they said.

My problem with this general line of thinking is that we’d already agreed upon, essentially, his punishment—to quit his job and air the truth. But this whole internet-hating-him thing seemed like too much. This is the same problem that I had with the prison system: spending time in prison, out of society was supposedly the punishment. Why deprive them of bare essentials, like tampons and underwear? To save money was the given explaination, but it was really to make them suffer. If they wanted to effectively save money, they very well would stop arresting people for public urination and pot.

I didn’t hear anything back from Creon. Instead, I worked on grading papers. The fall term was nearly up. I would only teach my Environmental Class and instead would focus on experiments (further research into my Starfish), research papers and begging my colleagues to let me use their saltwater tank.

After this conversation, I found myself on the subway in Hansen city. All the moisture came tumbling down, violently splattering on the pavement and rushing down the city drains. Lightening reached across the sky, in which its partner, thunder, soon followed. The lucky part about these sorts of weather in the region, though, is that they don’t happen very long. The storm petered out to a drizzle.

I decided to walk the streets. While the sky still threatened rain, the evening had given way to nightfall. No sun hung in the sky, yet I felt perfectly safe. As far as safety, it might’ve still been day: the street lights lit the way, passerby chatted contently after coming back from three-course dinners. The sidewalks were clean and untracked, with green trees lining them. They were well-trimmed.

I’d never felt this safe before I’d come to Hansen. It was quite relaxing. My best possible comparison is to the Nintendo Game, Animal Crossing. There was never any real danger or threats, even at night. Perhaps something would set you back, but nothing could hurt you in Hansen.

I’d grown up in my fair share of scary areas. At one point, I briefly lived in Camden, New Jersey—let me tell you, don’t go to Camden, New Jersey, even out in the daytime. The only thing the city offers is a kickass aquarium and the opportunity to get shot.

With a passing warm, wet breeze, city seemed to sigh and turn over in its sleep. BMWs and Smart Cars passed. I glanced at the shops, somewhere still open, but few I had any interest in. Even if I did, I couldn’t have bought anything—most required a membership or were straight-up excited to sell you a fifteen-dollar, non-GMO, vegan, organic, hand-ground bottle of table salt.

I headed over to the park. Now, growing up you would have seen at least seventeen homeless people per block and thought it a travesty, how could the city allow such a thing—but what was worse was when there was an absence homeless people: panhandling had been made illegal, you couldn’t camp out in public places and it was strictly enforced. And if you were caught, you were sent to the jail outside of the city, where all the homeless people could be. Essentially, a ghetto.

Now, did all these very nice hipsters have bad intentions? No—in fact, many of them wanted the city to keep the longtime residents, but they also demanded that the city of Hansen continually improve itself, thus attracting a group of people that were a higher income. And without any protections from the city, most people were outpriced or no longer belonged.

That’s a big part of it. Hansen was once on the gritty side of things, like a miniature Chicago. It had culture—swing dance was incredibly popular in the 1920s, while in the fifties it was paper from the surrounding forests, and in the eighties Hansen was known for its art scene. It had strength and most importantly, there was pride.

Nowadays there was no affordable art or culture in the city. Everything was expensive—doggy boutiques, hoity-toity vegan restaurants and religious organizations, like the Pagans and the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist Temples. Historically black organizations were thrown to rot and were practically deserted. The same happened with tiny community churches.

Has Hansen got any less diverse over time? The answer would be ‘no’, and arguably has been more diverse—Hansen had been 69% black, 17% white and 14% other.

Now it was 32% Asian, 45% White, 14% Hispanic and 5% black. We got a whole bunch of rich people coming in from across the globe; China, France, Mexico, some parts of Africa and Arabic countries. Hansen was incredibly diverse in that aspect.

Even if they were to stay, the ‘originals’ found themselves in a place that was so different than the city that they recognized. It might as well have been a completely different place. Their favorite bars were gone, replaced with sushi and wellness centers. Their friends had all moved away. Additionally, the city of Hansen was once a manufacturing town—many people hadn’t needed to complete high school or college: they made a good income that way. When standards on education began to change, people needed to leave.

Furthermore, the hipsters acted like they saved the city. The police department celebrated that not only did they have more income than ever, they didn’t need to use it. They celebrated diversity and tried to ignore that fact that a startling amount of its population in the eighties were straight-up gone. The narrative was that everyone in Hansen had struck gold, not it was just the current population in Hansen had already had plenty of gold to start with.

I watched a mother and a little boy on the swings, at eleven-thirty at night. He wore his pajamas—clearly, they’d just decided to go on an evening walk, just as I had. A police car passed by, just patrolling the neighborhood and waved to the little boy. He smiled.

The moon stepped out from behind a curtain of clouds, casting a pleasant glow against the freshly-trimmed grass, as green as ever. Drops from pine trees hung like coats, clutching the wet needles.

I sat in the Japanese memorial garden, against the stone bench. The ducks had gone to bed, one green male curled against a brown female.

I watched the lady duck inhale, content and warm against its partner. Now, perhaps the duck was a brother, or a best friend, or was just staying the night. Might’ve just been a duck hook-up. Or a sugar mallard. But this evening I felt rather romantic and anthropomorphized the ducks.

I was slightly jealous of the lady duck. The male, ever so slightly, stirred in its sleep and glanced up at me. Upon realizing that I was not a threat, went back to sleep. That’s what the gesture was, deeply ingrained and protective. Had the Mr. Duck decided I was a threat, he no doubt would’ve awoken the Mrs. Duck and ran off with her.

Pretending that I wasn’t sometimes hoping for the right person to come along wasn’t truthful—I very much did look for that. I wanted someone to fly kites with, to read to, to curl up with. It didn’t have to be very romantic. I didn’t need roses or wine or fancy clothes, although a cactus or some free agar would help speed things along.

No one came around, though. I’d had boyfriends throughout the years, and we even had long-term relationships, but there was no one I felt particularly inclined to. By the end of my university education, I’d eventually given up and focused on my work. The life of a professor was ridiculously busy, but also many times ridiculously boring, which is why I’m sparing you the details, reader. It may not seem realistic to the professors reading this, but a lot of my work was just paperwork and grading. I wouldn’t, I reasoned back then, be even capable of having a relationship—I was just too busy.

Nowadays, I went home and sat with my cat while grading papers. Wouldn’t it be nice if I had someone to chat with about my projects and papers? Or complain to?

The ducks snoozed. Pretty soon they would be skating around the November ice, but it was an unusually warm night.

I stood up. Now the lady duck lifted its head and softly honked, then returned to her slumber.

The mom and the little boy were gone. I decided to take the subway home.

Chapter Seven

I was extraordinary excited to collect frogs. I donned weighters, a warm sweater and a five-gallon Home Depot bucket, so with a song in my heart and some heavy gloves, I headed off into to the chilly fall day. Halloween loomed above me, with the increasing presence of oranges and reds being its opening act. The water would obviously be cold, but not frozen. It hadn’t gone below thirty yet. That morning, I tried to see if my black curly hair would succumb to a hat. I tried a beanie, a formal hat, a winter hat, even one of my knitted hats wouldn’t stay on. Too much springy hair. Jew hair.

I wasn’t Jewish religiously and with my origins being mostly unknown, I didn’t know if I was ethnically Jewish. But it certainly looked like it, as I had the breast cancer gene that many asganzi Jews have. When I went to the doctors and they asked about family history, I always shrugged. They could probably guess better than I did.

I stared at my hair, frustrated, in the mirror. A little ape, nearly middle-aged, stared right back at me. She had crinkles and smile lines and all of the strange things which she swore she lacked a year ago.

My eyes were the only part that were left untouched by time. Large, dark cow-eyes, making up a good portion of my face. The cheeks, which had been soft when I was a little girl, had become tougher. And finally, a streak of gray ran through my hair.

Now, this wasn’t so bad. At age twelve, preteen Juster was a very ugly. Ill-proportioned child who didn’t know how to take care of her hair, so it bundled up in knots like one big dread lock. She would only eat extremely bland or fattening things, like butter, rice and ice cream, because she hated the texture of solid foods. Additionally, she couldn’t wear anything but pajamas, because she hated the way tight clothes were. Until I’d been adopted, no one ever took the time or noticed that I’d never been properly taught these life skills or been to therapy for these eating habits. It was always a wonder how I made such good progress.

Many of the homes that I was sent to were for kids with autism, but the problem with autism is that we set each other off, plus since there’s a great difference in between being a computer nerd and being non-verbal, it made life much harder. Finally, I made my last stop at age twelve.

My (adopted) mother, a schoolteacher named Lauren, desperately wanted to have children, but couldn’t convieve. I arrived at her house after being cycled around at group homes, halfway houses, and foster homes, extremely unhappy with the current situation. It was the first (and the last) time she’d ever foster anyone. That very first night, I threw up my food because I tried to impress Lauren with choking down her dinner that she lovingly made me. The food was spaghetti with meatballs, I think, and she noticed that I was shockingly underweight. I was used to being in a household of seven plus, so just having her around was a wonderful thing. Trying to explain that it wasn’t the meal that was bad, but I was the bad one that couldn’t eat anything, was impossible for a twelve-year-old. But I desperately didn’t want to go to therapy, because therapy equaled a residental center for me, and so far, Lauren really seemed to be the best possible choice. We played Yahtzee that evening, there were no other kids to beat me up and best of all, she let me look at her library. Later, she tried to sort out my ahir, but unfortunately all the hair cream in Chicago wouldn’t have fixed it, so we cut it off. It should’ve been more demeaning, but losing a lice-infested rats’ nest of a hairdo was not much of a loss.

I came without a suitcase—only with a plastic bag full of old dollar-store toothbrushes and spare underwear. I had one other outfit than what I was wearing. Now, as an adult, I suspect that the pajamas-only thing was not just a sensory issue, but a way of survival: it meant that I would have to bring two less pieces of luggage, and it kept me looking unattractive. Sexual abuse was not uncommon in foster care, particularly if you’re disabled and may not report such things.

With those things in mind, I certainly wasn’t the easiest child. I cried a good bit when I got overwhelmed. But there was never the ‘I-hate-you’ of being a teenager (never meant it, still) not that I occasionally didn’t think it. But there was something holding me desperately back from saying such things. There was the constant fear of being given back to the state, where I would hop around in foster care for the rest of my childhood, even after adoption. I was a very villglant rule follower. If I broke any rules, I would think about it for weeks—three minutes after curefew, but Karen says it’s fine? No, she’s just saying that and surely called my social worker and am being given back to the system. My paranoia followed me up until I turned eighteen.

But anyway, frogs. I gave up on the whole hat thing and decided to cut my hair in preparation for winter.

Leaves littered the ground. Clouds covered the sky like a crappy, uneven wool blanket. Sherls would be out there and it would be entertaining to watch him struggle with toads. Now, they would most likely be hibernating for the winter, which was a good idea, as they’d probably be relatively sluggish and might not even wake up if we were careful. Peggy wanted to see if there was any variation in frog weight that helped frogs survive winter.

It really wasn’t a real experiment. This was my favorite sort of project. Quiet, unpressured, unofficial. Peggy apparently needed some assistance doing so, and I was hopping to help with the project.

Peggy already waded around in her gray fishing boots. Frogs hibernate in shallow water or moist dirt (on the surface, not buried). They essentially just sort of sit there for the winter using self-produced anti-freeze and sleep. Ocassionally, they’ll twitch or swim around a bit, but there’s not really much point: all the bugs are gone, so why use the energy?

The university creek sat to the south side of campus. The creek was a nice enough place to take your cute date: as evidenced by the condoms that I saw on the riverside under the big tree. Used. Ewwwwww.

I’d have to make Buildings and Grounds post flyers not to litter and maybe have security cameras. Listen, have all the gross creek sex you want, but don’t scatter your leftovers after you’re done. Other people like to have gross creek sex and want to keep the area clean.

Anyway, I picked them up with my gloves and tossed them in a bag that Peggy brought. Peggy was a baby professor, always stressed and always desperately trying to publish in order to desperately to secure tenure. It reminded me of my early days. She wore cat-themed mittens and a fuzzy green scarf.

“Thanks for the help, Juster.”

I ‘hmm’-ed in response. “Anytime, frogs are one of my passions.”

She blinked a bit, but said, “Oh. Um, I’m glad. Well, the scale is over there.” Pointing a mitten to the rocky bed, the tiny scale was made for measuring live animals. It was essentially a jar made out of plastic.

I donned a wetsuit. It was too cold to go without, even with the weighters. Now, where were those frogs? The first one was located at the very bottom of the creek, me stirring up silt and nearly losing my glasses in the process. I grabbed at him uselessly, but the little bastard slipped away.

The water rushed against my legs as I positioned myself for another one. The trick was, I realized, was just to slowly sneak up on the critter, instead of rushing it. It detected movement, but as long as I gently pushed my gloves under its little bottom, there wouldn’t be any trouble until I got it out of the water. It tried to hop, but he was firmly placed into the jar. 212 grams. Released, unhappily going back for its long winters nap.

Again. And again. 217 grams. 201 grams. Big frogs. I never managed to enquire about the species, but they were pretty generic looking. You know, causal frogs.

They brought back good memories. In between foster homes, I’d lived at a group home with a gigantic field next to it, which I often explored (against the rules), with a ‘friend’. This particular boy’s behavior problems were a constant struggle for the staff members, but he never bothered me, therefore we were friends. Foster care makes most relationships hazy, surface-level and fleeting—only for a week or at best, a few months. I never had a best friend or a close friend until late high school. We found a particularly damp spot and we found a hole that happened to have a toad in it. It was a lumpy, fat thing that we desperately wanted to show the other kids, so Timmy brought it along. As fast as he could, he ran to the kids sitting on a nearby bench.

“Slimy,” he cried as he ran up to him, like a warning.

“What?” cried the foster kids. “What’s up?” a blind kid asked.

All of a sudden, “Slimy!” And desperately tried to contain the struggling toad, until it lept out of his dark hands—“SLIMY!”

That toad might’ve been a saber-tooth tiger, the way they darted away screeching bloody murder. We weren’t the most educated bunch. Even the blind kid ran away from the threat unseen. I suppose it was basic survival.

That made even me, a quiet, miserable girl chuckle a little as I grabbed the amphibian and took it back to the field.