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# For the King

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*No matter the time or place, rhyme or reason, path you follow or wish you make, the words etched on these pages hold a truth that may not want to be heard, but should. My only hope is that you take the time to read these words as I wish I had taken the time to read the signs.  
That is my only hope.*

## **The King**

*The shrill, infrequent ring of a telephone met my ears. Moments later, Jervis tapped on my office door with an unreadable expression.*

*"You have a phone call, Your Majesty."*

*"Who is it?"*

*"Didn't say. But he says he has information for you."*

*"Information on what?"*

*"I'm afraid he didn't say, Your Majesty. He did say it was important, mentioned the name Henry."*

*My feeble heartbeat grew weaker. Images ran through my brain, images I had rolled over and over again in my mind for the last fourteen years. Jervis stood there, waiting for the explanation I would never give. I had always liked Jervis, even if he was powerless. Useless, some might say, but not to me. Though he didn't have much choice, he always had my best interests at heart, even if I never had his. No, he would never know my plan.*

*No one could.*

*Some things were best left unsaid, and this was most definitely one of those things.*

*I shifted in my chair and ran my hands along its velvet arms as the news settled in. All that had passed didn't matter because now I could finally right all that had been wrong.*

*"Let me speak to this man—alone."*

*"Very well, Your Majesty." Jervis nodded obediently before quietly leaving the room.*

*Something resembling relief coursed through me. My brother, the idiot, had walked right into my hands. I always knew I was smarter than he was, but I never expected him to be so stupid. He was always so admired by those too eager to trust. It was absurd the way people romanticized him. No one saw how he truly was.*

*Except for me.*

*After everything, I deserved this—and now he would get what he deserved. A betrayal like his merited brutality. That was exactly what I was going to give him—pure, brutal revenge.*

*He had single-handedly ruined my life. We'd had a plan...and he had wrecked it all for a useless girl. She had already paid for her poor decisions; now it was his turn. Finally everything would return to how it was meant to be.*

*Many might not understand my obsession, but when someone you love—and love has always been a difficult state of being for me, a state I rarely succumb to—betrays you in an unfathomable fashion, the resulting emotion should be second nature. He broke a contract, a blood oath I simply couldn't forgive him for breaking. A deal that should never be broken and had never been broken before. So, more than anything else, more than even revenge, I needed this to be resolved. I craved to feel the blood pulsing beneath his pale, yellow skin. I hungered to see his weak smile turn into a rictus of pain once he realized I had finally gotten the best of him.*

*No more headaches.*

*No more pain.*

*No more frustration because my body was not behaving the way I wished. Soon, very soon, I was going to get everything I had ever wanted and more.*

*I knew how to control the past, but now I could control the future.*

*With his help, I could control it all.*

*I pressed the phone to my ear and listened to my brother's ragged breathing. My heartbeat quickened.*

*"Hello?" he asked again, this time becoming impatient. "Hello?"*

*"It's great to hear your voice again," I said with a smile in my voice. I could almost feel his body tense. Almost see his sad brown eyes widen as he realized all that was to come. All that could be heard between us was silence, but for me, that said it all. The silence of fourteen years had all led up to this moment, and I couldn't lose it.*

*I always hated when people told me what to do, when they tried to control me.*

*Soon, very soon, no one would be able to.*

## Chapter 1

"It was always this..." I began. "...My pawn then your pawn, your horse then mine, your queen then mine, and then, like always, check-mate."

"You're lying."

"You have never beaten me at chess."

"Not true."

"It's a fact. My father has always said I'm a natural."

"And what does he say about me?"

"That you're the poor boy down the street who can't seem to come up with a good enough strategy to beat me."

Sam threw a stone into the creek. It skipped four times over the water before it sank with a gurgle. "Chess is all you have on me."

"Maybe."

"Definitely." Sam laughed.

I frowned as I picked up a thin, round stone and threw it in. It fell into the water after two measly skips.

"Weak," he scoffed.

"What time do you have to be back?"

"Miss Skein said three, but I'm not going until at least four."

"Sam, you can't keep blowing off families."

"Rori." His dark eyes stared intently into mine. "I am happy where I am."

"I'm just saying." I rubbed my thumb against the coarse stone before I threw it into the water. This time it skipped three times. "Don't complain about not having a family and then when the opportunity—"

"I already have my family," he interrupted.

I didn't say anything. In the silence, Sam drifted to sleep. His head was tucked into a crevice of the tree trunk and his mouth was slightly open. His eyes fluttered quickly beneath his lids, and I wondered what he was dreaming about. Was it the familiar comfort of the creek bed before us with the ever-stagnant water and quiet whispering of leaves in the surrounding trees? Or maybe he dreamt of something more. Maybe his dreams weren't concerned with something, but someone.

My life had already begun before I realized Sam was a permanent part of it. I didn't remember meeting him because he was always just there with his goofy grin. Maybe I met him on the swing-set across the street, or maybe we had just been drawn to each other during recess. I didn't remember and I'd never thought to ask him.

Even though he lived in a different house, he was family.

When we were little kids, we would ride our bikes around the streets of Perry, California. My bike was rusted with the handles duct-taped on. Sam's bike was shiny with all types of gears, a gift from the orphanage. We used to ride around for hours with no destination in mind, but somehow we always ended up at the corner of Shoreview and Finders Way, kissing the thin line between danger and safety.

It was a strange corner. No one ever went there. Legends surrounded it, troubling the minds of Perry's youth with stories of the old lady who took the "No Trespassing" sign way too seriously. Legend had it that the last kid who'd wandered into the old lady's yard never came back, because the old hag enjoyed the occasional rebellious child for dinner.

It was a universal rule: Do Not Go Past That Sign. If you broke it, you were done for.

But one day, when we were both nine, riding in the inevitable direction of doom, a rusty old truck hurled around the corner. Sam immediately dipped into the bushes on the side of the road. I didn't see any problem in the rusty old truck, so I kept on riding.

That's how I always was, way too trusting in the goodness of the world. I guess I just never had a reason to doubt its goodness.

With a squeal of dusty brakes, the truck came to a halt beside me. An old lady's cigarette-stained voice called out, "What the hell are you doing on my property?"

I was so shocked I fell off my bike, onto the searing pavement. Blood trickled down my shin at an alarming rate, so I started crying. And when I saw her, with her wrinkles and bulging veins and crazy bat eyes, I cried even more. She quickly got out of the car and pointed her finger at me, barking about how much trouble she was going to get me in—all while I whimpered helplessly, clutching my gashed shin. Thoughts of the supposed cold dungeon where she stored the remains of trespassing children for her next meal flashed through my mind.

Sam marched towards us with a forced authoritative air. He thrust his chest out and held his head high. "S'cuse me miss, what seems to be the problem?"

He was mimicking his favorite TV show at the time, a cop show Miss Stein didn't let him watch, so he watched it with my father.

She snarled at him. "The both of you! Get off my property."

"There's no need to get so angry," Sam said forcibly. "We were just explorin'. You should be flattered, your property is the best explorin' we ever seen."

He had switched to the voice of his favorite Saturday morning cowboy. He was proud of his imitations, but I couldn't help but laugh at how ridiculous he sounded with a twang.

She did not seem to find his little act amusing because she got back in her car and shouted from the driver's seat, "Ya'll have five seconds to get off my property or else."

She revved the engine.

Sam looked at me, his eyes wide with panic. "Rori, lets go!" he screamed.

We jumped on our bikes and pedaled; as fast as our legs could go—but it wasn't enough. She floored the gas pedal on her truck and it surged forward with a roar, nearly bumping into my back wheel. I screamed.

"Keep going, Rori!" Sam yelled.

The "No Trespassing" sign was just ahead. My legs burned, but I didn't care. I refused to be someone's dinner that night. The moment we passed the sign, we swerved onto another street, leaving the truck and the crazy old lady's hollering behind.

We rode in shock all the way to the creek bed and stopped, I resumed crying. Sam let me ride his bike around for a little while to cheer me up. His was much smoother than mine.

Our racing hearts and shocked silence eventually subsided into reminiscing about our near death adventure. And with our retelling, the old lady grew more monstrous and her truck more enormous. Shivers struck me as our story turned into a nightmare.

With every troubling thought or trying time I had, Sam would take my hand and lead me to the waters edge where we would skip stones or dip our toes in the water or run our fingertips along the surface. And I would forget.

That was how it always was and always would be with us. With Sam, I never had to ask, I just knew. You may grow apart in time, but a childhood friend is irreplaceable. To me, Sam was another limb, another heart.

The scar on my right shin would remind me forever that I was indebted to Sam for saving my life. Whenever he noticed it, he would jokingly touch my shin and tell me it was his favorite thing about me.

"It's just an ugly scar," I would always say.

"If you smile at the memory of the scar, then you can't really call it a scar, right?"

Sam was still asleep beside me; his head nestled into a crevice in the tree trunk. His dark hair was tousled and his jawbone stuck out from the dark scruff of his first beard, shadowing his face. His shirt was torn and covered in dirt and his jeans were a bit too tight, with the legs barely reaching the tops of his mud-splattered shoes. Duct tape covered the toes of his shoes, holding down the fringe of the broken fabric.

I sat beside him, thinking through all the things I had to do. Groceries, feed my father, work, homework, sleep, repeat. Every day it was the same. This was the only time of day when I didn't have responsibilities.

A bird chirped above us and Sam jumped. He yawned, rubbed his eyes, then lay his head back down. His eyes scanned his surroundings, darting from place to place, searching. His pupils dilated in anxiety, but when his eyes met mine, he breathed deeply and relaxed.

"What time do you have to go home?" His voice was slow and tired.

I looked at my watch. "He went to sleep almost an hour and a half ago, so I should be back pretty soon to be there before he wakes up."

"Need me to help with anything?"

Yes, I wanted to say, but there were dark circles under his eyes. I could do it all on my own, I just liked having Sam there. It cheered my father up, too. "No, I got it."

He stood up and held his hand out to me to pull me up. I laughed, feeling as light as a child as he easily launched me to my feet. He was well past six feet tall and much stronger than any other boy in our class. The football coach at Perry High School had started recruiting Sam in seventh grade, but Sam refused to join a team comprised of kids who'd spent so much of our childhood stealing our lunches.

He'd held firm to that opposition, though the coach never ceased to stop at his locker to discuss the benefits of the gridiron life.

Sam turned down the street to the orphanage and threw me a half-hearted wave. "See ya' tomorrow."

I nodded and turned down my own street.

A dark SUV was parked across from our house. This seemed strange since few cars ever ventured down our secluded street. I walked past the SUV, squinting to see if I could catch a glimpse of who or what was inside, but I only saw my reflection in the tinted windows.

Peeling gray shingles covered the walls of our house. Weeds plagued our tiny yard and crawled over the cracked concrete sidewalk. The front door was a dull ocean blue with chipped edges that showed the splintered wood beneath. The door creaked as I hurriedly pushed it open.

Something inside banged against the flimsy walls.

"Dad?" I called out. There was a strange rhythm to the concussions.

"Dad?"

No answer.

“Dad?”

The fragile house shook.

I rushed to my father’s bedroom and found him on the floor, hugging his knees to his chest and repeatedly hitting his head against the wall. Tears streamed down his face, and he was panting. “Dad?” I managed weakly.

When he saw me, he burst into another fit of tears. I sat beside him and hugged him tightly as he stammered, his chest heaving, “You—you weren’t h-h-ere when I woke up.”

I grabbed the glass of water on his bedside table.

“I’m sorry I was late, Dad. It won’t happen again.” I handed him the glass. “Drink.”

He took a feeble sip.

“I was just with Sam. I’m okay, I promise.”

Something about this news set him off into another fit of tears, another bout of screaming at the horrors of his past, the horrors he refused to explain.

I ran to the phone and dialed a number I had known by heart since before I could remember anything else. After one ring, someone answered. “Hello, Miss Skein’s orphanage. Jimmy speaking.”

“Jimmy, It’s Rori. Can you get Sam?”

At the mention of Sam’s name, my father croaked, “Not Sam.”

I ignored him.

“Hiya. Rori.” He let his voice drag. “Well, he’s all the way upstairs in his room and he says if we bother him that—“

“Jimmy, please.”

“Well, all right.” I heard him shout. “Saaaaaaammmmm.”

Someone in the background, who I assumed was Miss Skein, snapped, “Be quiet, boy. You’ll wake the baby.”

Jimmy muttered a muffled sorry.

An endless minute later, Sam spoke into the phone. “Hello?”

I didn’t want to say anything, because I knew my voice would break.

“Hello?”

I bit my lip. Tears formed in my eyes.

“Rori? Is that you?”

The sound of my uneven breath poured into the phone. “This is the worst I’ve ever seen him.”

“I’m coming over.” He hung up.

Relief surged through me. I turned back to my father, who had resumed his rocking with his head tucked in between his knees. His skin felt cold against mine. “Dad, Sam’s on his way. Do you want to get in bed?”

He shook his head furiously, so I sat beside him again. His eyes were squeezed shut. Migraines.

They weren’t from me being late. It was much more. Every pain my father felt had a deeper meaning, but he’d never let me in his head enough to know what that meaning was.

I could only guess.

Deep down, I knew it all stemmed from; the woman who had left my father alone with a constant terror over losing someone who was already gone. The woman who died before I’d had a chance to call her mine. My mother.

Keys clicked in the front door and Sam rushed in, out of breath. "Hey, Mr. Rhodes. You okay?"

He sat beside my father and started rubbing his back, up and down. He spoke softly. Sam had always been able to calm the invisible storm raging in my father's head.

My father didn't respond.

"Mr. Rhodes, you know I'd never let anything happen to Rori. That's our deal, right? You protect her when she's home. I protect her when she's out. No one is ever going to get past you or me. You know that, right?"

My father's breathing slowed and finally he looked at us with clear eyes. The only remnants of his panic attack were the stale tears still clinging to his sallow face. He took another deep breath before he spoke. "I got so worried. Rori wasn't here, and I thought maybe something had happened to her."

Whenever I was late, like clockwork, my father would get this way. He always assumed the worst.

"Dad, I promise you that I will always be okay. I'll always come home."

"And she'll always have me to take care of her," added Sam.

"We'll always be okay. I promise."