Death’s Swift Tick

by: Tyler Bolda and Bailey Ernst

Hickory Dickory dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock,  
The clock struck one  
The mouse ran down,  
Hickory Dickory dock.  
  
Hickory Dickory dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock,  
The clock struck two  
And down he flew,  
Hickory Dickory dock.  
  
Hickory Dickory dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock,  
The clock struck three  
And he did flee,  
Hickory Dickory dock.  
  
Hickory Dickory dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock,  
The clock struck four,  
He hit the floor,  
Hickory Dickory dock.  
  
Hickory Dickory dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock,  
The clock struck five,  
The mouse took a dive,  
Hickory Dickory dock.  
  
Hickory Dickory dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock,  
The clock struck six,  
That mouse, he split,  
Hickory Dickory dock.  
  
Hickory Dickory dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock,  
The clock struck seven,  
8, 9, 10, 11,  
Hickory Dickory dock.  
  
Hickory Dickory dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock,  
As twelve bells rang,  
The mousie sprang,  
Hickory Dickory dock.  
  
Hickory Dickory dock,  
"Why scamper?" asked the clock,  
"You scare me so  
I have to go!  
Hickory Dickory dock."

Chapter 1

I.

Cook and Mary

Sashaying throughout the streets, one can hear the sweet, suckle cries of laughter reverberating from the stone-cold walls of town square. School has finally got out for winter break, footsteps clinking on the concrete slabs and minuscule children screaming for joy as the dainty first snowfall strikes the ground. The sloshed streets resemble the ruins of Angkor Wat as the minds of children across Great Britain prepare for the elation of Boxing Day. An adolescent girl swiftly trails behind a pack of rowdy gentleman, her sanguine bow whipping in the frosty air. “Come on, now, lady,” the young boy she fancies turns around and summons her. She complies like the modest mouse she is. The glistening words fell from her mouth instantly: “Oh, Cook.” It was the natural response to his cheekiness. He smiled and they were off.

It was like the first day of autumn again, when the tube was a harbinger of musicians’ fingertips sticking to the frozen keys of serenity and businessmen clasping their hands together as they warmed. Cook and the youthful girl took off down the steps into the train station, leaving the rest of the herd to fend for themselves in the harsh climate of the busy streets. The station was like the heart of the city, the pulmonary veins pulsing with every human body cramped within.

The almond shaped tunnels and screech of the train tracks greeted the pair. Advertisements for organic honey and biscuits surrounded the numerous side-cafés; dark-rimmed glasses were placed on the heads of several of the inhibitors. Each sip of oolong, earl grey, or chai was that of vigor. Cook glanced at her and grinned as they passed them, “Bohemians are taking over, Mary,” She lightly laughed at the inside joke. The two came upon the designated train landing. Their destination was unknown. At least that is what the papers had said. “Destination Unknown,” for two young lovers bound by innocence.

Quite suddenly – and with robustness – the train station began to swell. It seemed like millions of people were crowding around them. Long coats, large backpacks, funny hats. Men, women, children. Cook and Mary held on tight to each other’s hands. But sadly, not tight enough. She saw something in the corner of her eye. Almost like a Cheshire smile.

With a shrill scream, the first two victims were taken.

II.

Justine and Rory

Snapshots of individuals were pinned to the corkboard in Justine’s office. Her career was filled with travesties and gruesome times, but every time she glanced at the smiling faces of the survivors – the people she has saved – her spirits are instantly lifted. The first time she could not save someone was the worst time of her life. Her hair began to gray and her eyes began to sag. Her whole body became one with the wind; wanting to drift through the air to nowhere in particular. Just away from there. Away from death. If only she could have saved everyone.

“Justine.” She turned to look at the familiar face of Dr. Tennant standing in her open doorway.

“Yes, sir?” She asked with a grin. His slender figure managed to fill the opening of the door.

“I was wondering,” he walked into her room a bit and shut the door behind him. He stealthily made his way to the chair in front of her desk while sliding his hands in the front pockets of his lab coat, “Have you thought about my offer?”

Her grin wavered. “Not recently.”

“Well,” he leaned forward, “I still would love to make you the head nurse for the OB wing. You’re fully capable. You have the skills. Why the hesitation?”

She thought of that night. A shiver shoved its way throughout her weary body.

“I just don’t know about OB,” she glanced at the corkboard for guidance, “I don’t know if I’d like to deliver babies for the rest of my nursing career.” The smiles seemed to taunt her. She looked away.

“We’ve all had tough times,” he leaned back in the chair and crossed his long legs, “Hell, I’ve had more than many doctors can say. But you, Justine, you can always push through it. I’ve seen it. Remember?” His eyes screamed nostalgia.

“I do.”

“Then you can trust me with my decision.”

“Give me a few days.”

“I’ve given you weeks.”

She stifled a harsh laugh, “Barely.”

“You need not to worry,” he beamed with confidence and stood up, “What’s the worst that could happen?”

There was a crash and suddenly, the room was empty. The corkboard was left barely dangling from the wall by a hook, the smiles draining the room of its happiness.

III.

Stefan and Vaughn

“More.” The bartender complied and let the vodka pour from the transparent bottle into the small, cube-like shot glass. A lonely looking man grabbed the glass and shakily let it burn the inside of his trachea. A few drops fell onto his stubbled chin. The patheticness couldn’t be any clearer.

“More.”

“Are ya sure, lad?”

“Please.”

With a worried glance, the bartender poured another. And the man drank. Another day at the ‘ol Paddy’s Pub was just a regular day for Vaughn. He never was the socialite, but man, could he drink. The vodka would burn, the Crown Royal would sizzle. Name an alcohol, any drink, and he has had it. Twice, or more.

“What has gotten you so down these days?”

“Oh, ya know,” Vaughn’s thick accent drawled out with the alcohol, “The usual bits and pieces of life that leave one stuck in a bar on a Friday night talking to you, Stefan.” His words dripped with audacious sarcasm.

“Right,” Stefan began wiping the counter off, “Well, ya best be gone now. Bar’s bout to close and you ‘n that guy over there‘re the only lads left. I have a life, too, ya know.”

“I-I,” Vaughn stumbled, “I just don’t know what to do with my life anymore. I know you hear the same old sappy, sad stories every night. But I really need someone to listen. Just listen.” His eyes began to well. Stefan was trying to ignore the tears. But he went along with it.

“Go on.”

“Well,” he searched for the words at the bottom of his empty glass, “I lost my only friend. He’s gone. Forever. And now, my wife’s left me for some Australian lad who doesn’t even have a proper job. I-I mean really, modeling? Is that something that can pay the bills? Raise a family?”

“Vaughn,” Stefan breathed a heavy sigh of slight annoyance, “Maybe you should just forget ‘er.”

“I can’t.”

“Why’s that.”

“I loved her.”

“Loved.”

“Yes.”

“Past tense. Loved. Not love. Loved,” Stefan started to put the dirty pint glasses in the silver sink in the corner of the bar table, “You gotta just move on,” he turned on the water and started scrubbing, “There’re more things, more experiences, more adventures you should be havin’. By yourself, or with a new friend. I dunno. You are the maker of your own dreams, your own destinies.”

“Easy for you to say…”

“For me?” He turned off the water and started to dry the rims of the glass with a semi-clean rag, “Laddy, I’m a bartender. I wipe off the chins of drunken fools and clean after the disgusting waste of sorrow. I never got the chance ta make myself somethin’ any better.”

“Why’s that?”

“Oh, ya know,” a smile crossed his face, “The usual bits and pieces of life that leave one stuck in a bar on a Friday night talking to you, Vaughn.” He chuckled.

“That’s – ”

He wasn’t able to finish-his glass dropped hitting the floor and shattering to pieces.

IV.

Professor H.D.D and Ryan

Some say he was the best professor one could ever obtain the chance of learning from. Some say he needs more practice on the specified skills in his English subject. He was great at literature, his desk proving this. It was piled with a tremendous amount of texts and novels and plays and poems. Poe, Wilde, Christie, you name it.

Professor H.D.D – or “D.D” for short – sat at this mountain of a desk. His class had just let out and only one individual was left sitting in the corner of the classroom, making up for lost time he missed after acquiring the flu a few weeks back. D.D sighed a meager relief when he saw the pile of papers he still has to correct. It was his favorite. Correcting and fixing the mistakes of someone else. It gave him thrill – maybe slight egotistical tendencies – but thrill, nonetheless. He knew he had a dominance over so many other human beings. Who doesn’t like that kind of power?

“Sir.”

He jumped a little out of fright and turned to see the face of his front and center occupier at the door.

“Ryan,” he said slightly off-key, “Please, come in.”

Ryan grinned and walked to his usual seat in front of the professor’s desk. He was older than the rest of the class – a returnee to college life. D.D could tell Ryan was a man of wisdom due to his older age, but man, can this lad be annoying.

“What can I do you for?” D.D asked as he pushed the nose piece of his glasses up with his forefinger.

“Well, I was wondering about what you said in today’s lecture. About the picture.”

“Ah, yes,” D.D sat back a tad in his cushioned chair, “The picture. What about it?”

This week, the class was reading the very vindictive *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, the one where Dorian is a real bastard and leaves his friend to paint a picture of him that ages while Dorian does not. Quite the read.

“You said that the picture represents Dorian’s true self. That he is the one who is responsible for the picture’s aging. Him. Only him,” Ryan pauses, peering at the newly formed wrinkles on the back of his middle-aged hand, “But what if he’s not.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” he pauses again. Peering through the window near D.D’s desk, he could almost see the cheery faces of the kids roaming the streets, trying to catch whatever freedom they have left before they got home to their parents, “Why is he the soul owner of all the blame? There was Basil.”

“Basil, his friend, is the one who painted the picture, yes,” D.D said, “And he painted Dorian when he wasn’t a down-right scoundrel. So when Dorian changed his ways and became a user, a cheater, a murderer…that is when the picture began to change, making his physical form stay the same age. The same wretched fool no one wanted to set eyes on. His fault, obviously.”

“But there were other factors, of course,” Ryan stood up and went towards the window. He stared out into the open city. Cars flooded every corner, women walked the side streets alone, children played in traffic. Why is this world so full of danger? Why can’t everything be okay and safe? Filled with zero tragedy? Ryan wondered, “That guy. The one who wanted Dorian to be like him. What was his name?”

“Lord Henry.”

“Yes, him. He was a huge, detrimental factor. He pushed,” Ryan’s eyes squinted as he spoke, “And pushed and pushed,” he tore his eyes away from the window and looked at D.D, speaking a bit fervently with a rushed undertone, “Dorian was under the influence of friendship, ignoring right and wrong. He was too afraid to say no, too afraid of seeing someone else in the mirror. Why does everyone automatically blame him? Yes, he was a coward, yes he was a nasty person. But that Lord Henry was under his skin, controlling him like a puppeteer. Strings,” He paused, looking down at his hands once again, “We’re all attached to strings. Forced to play house.” Silence.

No sound was made in the room until the boy in the corner got up and shuffled his papers awkwardly, trying not to disturb the one-sided heated conversation in the front of the room.

“Can I leave now, professor?” The boy asked sweetly.

“Oh, um,” D.D wiped his hands on his trousers. Apparently he had clung to the arms of the chair too tightly. He could feel the knots forming in his palms, “Yes. Have a wonderful winter holiday break.” The boy nodded and was off.

“I can’t talk to you anymore about this,” Ryan stated, “Because I know you’ll just disagree…”

“Are you sure you’re not speaking…”

“…as you always do.”

“…from personal experience?”

Ryan looked at him with a bit of a shock.

“It’s okay to say yes, Ryan.”

“You have no idea.” He went to turn and leave, but something got in his way.

The door was barely on its hinges by the time the janitor came by to see what the ruckus was about.

V.

Travis and Lucas

“I can’t look anymore.”

“You can do this.”

“I don’t know which one. He was so fast, I can’t…I can’t…”

Sheriff Travis was interviewing an eleven-year-old girl, victim of kidnapping a few weeks back. She was taken at a bus stop in her friendly neighborhood. When she did not come home that day, her mother was automatically worried and called the police. Finally, the young girl showed up on a doorstep of a neighbor’s, disheveled and half starved two days later.

“Hun,” Travis pushed the three pictures of possible suspects further towards her, “Just take a little closer look. Did he have blonde or black hair?”

“Uhm,” she hesitated and closed her eyes, “I think black.” She didn’t open her eyes.

“Okay,” he got rid of one of the pictures, “So now there are only two remaining. Can you look again?”

She squeezed her eyes shut still, “I-I can’t.”

“It’s okay. Just…look.” His sympathy seemed a bit forced now. He was becoming impatient.

“She said she can’t,” her Southern-belle mother piped up from the chair next to the girl, “And she won’t,” she suddenly got up and grabbed the girl’s arm, “We’ve had enough of this. Let’s go, Clara.”

“Please,” Travis started to stand, but the woman and her traumatized child were already halfway out the door, “Damnit.” He sat down with a thud. The thud was large enough to shake his table, forcing the pictures to un-align once again. One of the pictures was of a little girl with a bright red bow in her hair, and another with his favorite English professor named Professor H.D.D the day Travis graduated from college. That professor was a huge influence.

“Rough day?”

He looked up at the village’s news-casting idiot. He was wearing a pinstriped gray suit with a messy tie hanging from his neck.

“Leave me be, Luke.”

“It’s Lucas, sheriff,” the newscaster smiled, “And I believe you have something for me?”

“No, I don’t,” Travis wiped his hand across his face in exhaustion, “The girl couldn’t name her attacker. She’s under so much stress with the media – especially you – and has so much more things to worry about. Like school, and her post traumatic stress.”

“I see, I see,” Lucas walked further into the sheriff’s office, “So I guess I’ll have to do this my way.”

“No, please.”

“No, no, no,” he mocked, “Is that all you say? No? I can’t work with you if you’re just going to be a grump. And if I can’t work with you and you can’t work with me, who will solve any cases around here?” He put his hands on his feminine hips.

“You don’t solve the cases,” Travis leaned forward and pointed his index finger towards himself, “I do. You merely report them and make money off them. You take what I have and smashed it down viewers’ throats until you rack up enough viewings to keep your precious Bentley,” his tone was growing in volume, “And lately, you’ve been under my skin with this kidnapping case, making the girl anxious, and clouding her judgment. So I suggest you take your sorry ass out of my office before I rip your thousand dollar suit to shreds.” His face was growing a steam-boat red.

Lucas swallowed hard, “Well, Trav – I mean, sheriff. If that’s how you truly feel…”

“You betcha.”

“…then I best be going.”

“Hallelujah.”

“Okay,” Lucas turned shyly towards the door, “But just know that you’ll need me. When I am gone, you’ll wish I was here with you.”

And with that, the door crashed open, leaving only the unaligned picture frames to witness the empty room.

VI.

Effy and Damon

As he entered the hallway, the smell of thievery could be tasted. He bathed in it, talked about it, lived it. Everything he enjoyed in life revolved around the snatching of items that weren’t originally his. The hallway ended and he came upon open living quarters. Rows and rows of jumbled bunk beds were within the room, small freckled and wide eyed kids occupying almost all of them.

“Oi!”

He jumped and looked in the direction of the exclamation.

“You really do never come up empty handed to this godforsaken place.”

“Well,” he walked towards the voice and recognized Effy, the orphanage’s warden, “it is my job, eh?” She beamed and gave him a short hug.

“It’s nice to see you again, Damon,” she spoke softly because it was the middle of the night and the children had a rough enough time trying to sleep due to the spiteful snow hitting the shaky roof, “I do wonder how you do it, though.”

“Do what?”

“Get all this food and such! You always come here, giving us stuff, like socks and jackets and new watches, and you never tell me how you even buy all the stuff.”

“I have my ways, Ef,” he said semi-curtly, “I am just grateful to have a place to stay once in a while.”

“This is an orphanage for young kids,” she cocked her head, “And you look about twice their age, I’m assuming.”

“Touché,” he sat down on a rusted seat bench, and she joined him, “But I keep this place fed and full of life. I dislike seeing the kids on the streets going hungry or hating their lives. I don’t want these bunch of rascals going through the same thing. Going through what I had to do. Life is too precious to waste it living on the dirty, disgustin’ streets.” There was a shuffling sound as one of the children shifted their weight in bed. They made sure to lower their voices.

“I understand,” she got up and went towards the kitchen, beckoning him to join her.”

The wooden tables in the dining area were almost falling apart from years and years of use. Damon could remember when he was a kid, losing both his parents and having to live here until he was eighteen. He sat in the corner, originally saying nothing to no one until he cracked his comfort shell and bloomed. Bloomed into a thief. But no one needs to know that.

Effy closed the door and automatically crossed her skinny arms. He knew where this was going.

“No more lies,” she said assertively.

“What do you mean.” It wasn’t a question.

“I want to know where all of that stuff comes from. The first few times you did it, I wasn’t skeptical. But, then you started bringin’ in hefty, expensive things that my mother couldn’t even afford when she was alive,” she paused and looked him straight in the eye, “Are you stealin’?”

“What?” he faked surprise, “Why would you think I, me, Damon, the person you’ve gotten to know over the last few years, would be a thief?”

“Because! I see those sappy grins on the faces of those damn children, but I know the truth, Damon,” she gulped, “And happiness comes with a price.”

With a hefty shriek, those last five words may have been her closing statement, for the two were the last to be taken.

Chapter 2

I.

The cold touch of metallic shackles grazes the wrists of Professor H.D.D. It was a welcoming feeling, but once he opened his eyes he realized what he had awakened to. A syringe slowly slides its way out of his neck and a shrill quiet squeak uttered across his lips.

“Gack, what in the blazes…what is this? Travis is that you?”

“Yes Professor, I thought that was you.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to tell down here, or up here, not sure exactly where we are.”

“How long have you been awake?”

“Maybe an hour or so.”

Just then, the gears moved the syringe into Mary. Without even a breath, she opens her eyes and notices the other two.

“Hello.”

“Hello young lady, did you sleep well?” asks D.D.

“Did you sleep well;” interrupts Travis, “Ha is that your idea of…

“I’m just creating conversation. Now if you don’t mind. Are you alright little girl?”

“For now,” Mary said. She looked about her surroundings, contorting her face in confusion.

“Blast, that stung! Now I see why patients are afraid of needles,” said Rory.

“Ah, now we’re all awake,” said Sherriff Travis, peering at the thin shape of the doctor, “we should work on getting out of here.”

As his remark reverberated along the dreary walls of the circular room, a light lit upon a door in front of them. Without realizing, the four continue to scorn and wiggle for a way to be rid of the shackles that pin them to the floor. The light flickers. Like children, their eyes attend to the lights beckoning. Upon the door was a message.

“Look,” said Mary “there’s something there.”

The inscribing on the door was a riddle. Puzzled they all were. The clock struck one. The Professor’s shackles unlocked and he immediately ran to the others and tried to free them as well. The shackles didn’t budge. Confused, he stood until another light shone upon a desk with a sealed note attached. As he ran down to the table, with the hope for salvation, he urgently tore the letter open and read it. He takes a deep breath and looks to the others.

“We must solve the riddle upon this door. Only then can we be free.”

“What? That is outrageous. That is why we are here, chained? To answer a childish riddle?” exclaimed Rory. He still wore his lab coat, but it was terribly wrinkled and showed traces of dirt from the unclean floor.

“No, there is a greater purpose. You will find out soon.”

“I’m in a mad house, I have worked too hard in my life to waste my time here and fool around with some bloody door!”

“Oh, suck it up, you uptight lollygagger,” said Travis, “we are all here too and are all...”

“Don’t lecture me, you...”

*What can run out...*

*But last forever?*

“What? How dare you even…”

*What passes…*

*But does not move?*

“I did and I’ll have you know scum that I’ve…”

*What can fly…*

*But has no wings?*

“What? You’ve what? Managed nothing but…”

*What can heal…*

*But also kill?*

“Quiet,” said Mary as calmly as she could, “gentlemen, I am trying to read.”

Altogether, Mary reads the riddle aloud for all to hear. D.D follows along while the two scowl at each other through the darkness. Once the tension died out over time, the mutual friendship rekindled. D.D exerts all his energy into solving this enigma. The other two stay silent, which helps him think and stay calm. He sits on the ground to ponder further and Mary reads the riddle again. It seems fairly simple to answer yet the thought of conjuring the answer is so complex. Rory and Travis start to impatiently pace around the room, contemplating how their lives have come to this insanity. They have families, tasteful jobs, and success in their eyes. Why them? What have they done wrong?

“Excuse me sir,” said Mary after a half hour of thinking and waiting and hoping.

“Yes? What is it?” D.D snapped unnecessarily.

“I think I know the answer.”

Suddenly, as almost on command with Mary’s words, everyone’s shackles released the captives. D.D stood and watched them stand. He turned back and ran his mind to quickly solve the riddle before Mary could pipe up with the answer.

“It might be…”

“Quiet, don’t say it,” D.D tried to shush her.

“But, sir, please…”

“No more I say. Keep your trap shut.”

“But, it’s all very simple, can’t I just…”

“No! Speak not another word young lady.”

“Sir you must understand that…”

“Shut up, I say please just shut up!”

“Why can’t you simply…”

“I said, shut up, you insolent little girl!”

As his hand struck her without second thought, sending her to the floor. He gasps as he struggles with receiving air. Travis and Rory assail him in an outrage to protect Mary. The struggle left all three in a violent cesspool of rage. As Mary continues to watch them fight, she ignorantly blurts with hidden ferocity - “The answer is, Time!”

A swift darkness takes the room. The three are continually struggling and Mary stands with wrath. A final breath is taken - a wheezing gulp. Something dripped. A warm soothing feeling flooded the palms of the two men. When the lights returned, the men were holding the freshly slewed carcass Professor D.D, their hands painted with blood. Terrified, they both shot back. Mary wept at the sight.

“What have you done?” spoke Rory.

“Me? I have done nothing!” said Travis.

“It was obviously you. You are the one who witnesses crime first hand.”

“That doesn’t mean a thing.”

“Are you sure? Perhaps you adapted some criminal habits from your convicts.”

“Really? Perhaps it was you! You are the one cutting people every day for a living. Possibly enjoying death! You welcome Death!”

“I only cut those who need it - for surgery of course. Death is only an outcome of imprecise Science and the nature of life.”

“Is that so? Then what is that dripping from your coat pocket?”

Steadily, D.D.’s blood dripped down from Rory’s pocket. The doctor’s face pondered the thought. He denied it being there as anyone would. The two went back and forth, placing blame of setting one another up and convicting the other as the culprit. In the meantime, Mary looked up and saw the note that the professor had grabbed before he died and crawled to it. As she picked up the blood stained letter, it read:

*Keep quiet and still. Let not another soul in the room speak of the answer. You must answer the riddle on your own. Time is of the essence.*

At that point of in message, the sheriff violently snatches the paper from Mary’s hands and acquires it as evidence. The door creaked open and the two ran towards it to open it. Upon exiting, he turns and sees Mary standing over the professor’s body. He grips her wrist, motions to Rory, and rushes her out of there. As she stares back, Mary runs away from it - knowing why he is truly dead.

II.

The three traveled to the end of the hallway, hysterical at what they had just endured. The sheriff brewed in his self-loathing. The doctor, he could care less. Death is an everyday occurrence in his field. Mary, she cared too much.

“What the bloody ‘ell was that all about?” said Rory, “What sick trickery is this? Who would spend their time into devising all of this - trapping innocent civilians?”

“Your cavil nonsense is getting us nowhere,” exclaimed Travis, “and you’re upsetting the girl.”

Mary bundled her head between her knees and sobbed on the floor. She could not bear the thought of being the cause of someone’s death. After all, she knew better. She saw it for herself and did not caution the warning.

“Hey, chin up child why do you weep?” spoke the sheriff. They were reaching the end of the hallway.

“Read the note…because surely I did not fully.”

The note read:

*Keep quiet and still. Let not another soul in the room speak of the answer. You must answer the riddle on your own. Time is of the essence. If another speaks of the riddle’s answer, you will pay dearly. After all, you have wasted so many others’ time before you. It is time to feel the stress and pain that you have given all these years.*

*Sincerely,*

*Resent*

*PS. I hope we can talk soon. Please survive.*

The look upon the Travis’s face was comprised of shock. He shoved the note into his pocket. He went down to eye level with Mary and noticed her arm was bleeding. Something was cut into it.

“Let me see your arm, sweetheart,” said Travis, “I just want to see why you are bleeding.”

Without looking up, she lifelessly extends her arm into his hands. Her arm read in torn flesh: *TIME*. Confused, the sheriff begins to speak to her, questioning how she got this mark. Her only reply was, “I don’t know it was just there.” Travis calls over to Rory to analyze it. He verified that this was cut with a blade no doubt, but by whom? The professor was the only one free.

Finally, Mary raises her head and looks deep into her father’s eyes. She had kept her head down the whole time she was in the room. Scared, feeling lifeless, hopeless. She hadn’t recognized the voice.

“Daddy. Is that you?” A grin was plastered on her face as she stood up and hugged her father.

“Yes. Yes, sweetheart it is. I didn’t want to say anything because a family member can be used as leverage with a kidnapping case like this one.”

As Mary and Travis embrace, Rory continues down the hallway where another door awaits them - an elevator. The doctor hurries back and tells the others. They rise from their broken ashes to continue onwards.

“Why did I say anything father? Why could I not keep my mouth shut? Why couldn’t I…”

“It was not your fault, you did not know what was going to happen.”

“But why? If I would have read the note sooner, he’d still be alive.”

“We were trapped, you couldn’t have read it. Anyhow, let’s keep an eye out for that doctor. His job may be to save the lives of innocents, but in this case, I don’t believe that applies.”

Once they arrived at the elevator door, there was a poorly written note tapped to it.

*Sorry for the inconvineince sir or madamn.*

*This is temporaorley unavailable. Wait until*

*The clock strikes six to further continu.*

*- Resent*

“Ha, listen to that fool; I will not sit idly by. I will…”

“You have a better idea, Rory? After all, you did get a Ph.D., that must mean you can solve this problem,” spoke the sheriff.

“Shut your flee-bitten trap. You know very well that you want to solve this as well. This is not place for men like us”

“Perhaps Rory, it is the perfect habitat.”

Chapter 3

I.

The incubation chambers have kept them nice and relaxed, free from any physical wear or tear. With breathing tubes attached to their mouths and a gas keeping them asleep, the next trail was about to begin. Above, the original guinea pigs had endured solving a riddle. These four will endure much worse. The chambers opened and naked wet bodies hit the floor. They scurried and hid their shameful belongings.

“Keep your eyes to yourself, young man!” yelped Effy.

“My apologies, ma’am,” said Ryan, “in my defense, I was not even looking in your direction.”

“Don’t let it happen again.”

“Believe me, I won’t.”

As Ryan rose to find clothing, he kept his distance from the warden, Effy. She scowled at him and raised her head high as she proceeded to grab the neatly stacked and perfectly fitted and named clothing conveniently placed on a bench near a lamp.

“Huh? What, where am I? Ah! Where have my garments gone?” exclaimed Justine.

“I believe it was this hoodlum here. He was peeking at me just a moment ago,” said Effy.

“I wasn’t peeking, okay,” said Ryan, “in fact I saw you gaze as well, miss. You are as guilty as I.”

“You got that right,” said Cook as he stumbled to the bench, “she’s a feisty one, aha, ya better watch her son, she’ll get ya.”

“Ah! How dare you! You better watch yourself,” said Effy. They slowly and shyly collect their clothing and scamper to different corners of the room, awkwardly dressing.

With Justine still on the floor, Cook races to her rescue and helps her up. She gladly accepts the help while remaining timid. Everyone has dressed him or herself and are continuing in useless banter of the classic, “where are we?” and “why are we here?” bit. Once all useless sayings are over, Cook sees a latch on the ground and heads towards it. He grabs it and the latch budges and creaks open, revealing a ladder into another room. Setting all confusion aside, the four continue down the ladder with comments regarding who will go first and repeatedly saying, “excuse me,” and, “watch it.”

“Geez, where can a man get some light?” said Cook.

Justine spots a switch on the wall. “Hey, I found it.”

“Ah, there ya go. Man, are you useful. So pretty, too.”

“Oh well, heh, I wouldn’t say that.”

“Nah I mean it, you have this…”

Interrupting Ryan says, “Hey, uh, Cook is it?”

“In the flesh.”

“Of course, I think this is for you.” He hands a note addressed to him. There were several notes under Cook addressed to each of them. The notes had a number on it. Effy’s number was two. Cook’s, three. Ryan’s number was four. And Justine’s number: five.

“Well, since I’m the lowest number, I guess I’ll open first,” Effy nonchalantly rips the letter open.

*Warden Effy…you have been a thorn in my side for some time now. You know what you have done in the past, needless to say. The real challenge was not how to tolerate you, it was how to kill the weed where it grows. Now it is time to reap what you have sewn.*

*Sincerely,*

- Resent

“This is mad,” Effy was frustrated, “Who is this cowardice person who is mocking my very life?”

“I don’t know,” Cook said, “Why don’t you ask them?”

“Very hilarious,” Ryan was pacing back and forth. He stopped short, “You, boy, open yours next.”

Cook smirked, “With pleasure.”

*Sweet, boy, how you have surely changed lives. Especially one in particular. Your fleeting ways will precisely be that.*

- Resent

“Wait, that’s it?” Effy was deranged with strange envy, “Yours was so short.”

“Must mean something,” Cook shrugged and sat down with empty defiance.

Ryan continued to pace. He worried. Worried so much, it almost hurt. This wasn’t like *Dorian Gray*, where the words were simply there, non-negotiable. This was real-life. He wished he had a painting to jump into and age his normal life. He glanced at his number four, “I guess I’m next, then.”

*Your life is not one of valor. You are boring. Useless. You sit in classrooms, questioning those dumb words. But no one really cares or pays attention. Until you do something against yourself…*

- Resent

“That is strange…so strange…” Ryan was beyond puzzled. He wished for the professor.

“Yours was so dull,” Effy tastelessly mentioned.

“We’re not voting on the Pulitzer prize award,” Justine shyly inserted.

“And who are you?” Effy was sarcastic as ever.

“…Justine.”

“Well, *Justine*, you can shove – ”

“Ladies!” Ryan had enough, “You can pick fights some other time when we are out of this terrible mess.”

“The old man’s right,” Cook stood up, “Justine, you still gotta open yours.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

*You have taken something from me. Something I held dear. You could have saved it. Only if you were quicker. Now that your life is on the line, maybe you will finally act in haste.*

- Resent

There was were clicking and sliding sounds. The four individuals turned at once and saw four opening doors, all with coinciding numbers above them.

“You know what this means, lads,” Cook said, “Seems like our time has come.”

“Hmph,” Effy trotted towards door number two, “I’ll be the judge of that.” And with that, she was gone.

“What…” Justine whimpered.

“Let’s just see where these lead us, okay?” He escorted her to door number five.

“Okay…” she glanced back at him before she entered. The door closed behind her and sealed shut. The last thing he saw of her were her tear-filled eyes.

“Oi, lad,” Cook exclaimed, “See ya on the flip side.” His door shut.

Ryan was left, all alone. He glared at the shut doors and sighed. With blind confidence, he walked through his door.

II.

Her eyes fought against her as the bright lights lit up. Panels were upon the floor and there was a door at the end of an oblong hall in front of her. Seemed easy enough. Just walking forward, right? Effy stepped and noticed something odd. She took a few more steps, anticipating the worst. Still, utter silence and solitary. Now, she began to walk. Her left foot gave out as the panel beneath her foot fell beneath the floor. Behind her, a sea of fallen panels fell to an empty abyss. Her stomach fell as quick as the panels, and she began to sprint. Nothing mattered more to her than grasping the door handle at the end of the tunnel. She dodged left and shifted right. Repetitively, almost - mechanically going through the motions. But the simulation got the best of her. It broke her pattern, leaving her life to crumble before her as she swiftly was engulfed by what was underneath. The clock struck two.

III.

The door shut behind him. He placed his feet firmly into the ground and took a deep breath. Cook embraced his challenge, he took it all as a joke. He had not realized what was at stake. As he begun to walk down the hall, he heard a sound of a thunking nature. He looked down, for he had stepped on a tile. But something had wooshed passed his head when he did it. A dart coated in toxins was stuck to the wall.

“Ha, gotta be quicker than that to get me,” Cook boasted.

Within the next few steps, more tiles were tripped and more darts were shot. He ducked and turned and tripped and jumped and dove and fled and rolled and dodged. Then the darts stopped and he cheered with arrogant victory. He then strutted down the hallway only to see a nightmare stand before him. His worst fear. He felt his throat start to close and his head begin to pound. He began to head back the way he came. By then, oil had been dowsed upon the floor. A match was lit. The match fell.

The clock struck three.

IV.

With a narrow minded smile, Ryan scowls at the tiny passage way that was upon the ground. It looked like a doorway that belonged to a midget. He gets down on his knees and looks down the ominously lit orifice. He pondered upon entering. Once crammed in the small space, he shimmied his way across the floor. The feeling of isolation hit him, making his nerves weak. His body began to spaz and paranoia set in - at the right time as well. The sections above him began to slam down. One by one, they fell and at a monotonously terrifying pace. The pace sped up and so did he. Writhing like a worm through the hole, he saw a light, touched it and then it hit the floor.

The clock struck four.

V.

The wee little cries of Justine eventually subsided. Her red tear ridden face looked for a way across a pool that reflected her image. A door was across the pool. She timidly dips her toe in. It gave her a slight chill. She wiggled in and swam to the other side.

“Odd - that was fairly simple.” She muttered while hoisting herself up onto the platform hosting the door.

Once she beheld the door and turned the handle, she found that it was locked. Disappointment and worry shuttered her sense of humanity. Being locked and trapped with the fear of the unknown lurking about filled the atmosphere. Then a slight shimmer came from the pool. It looked like a key. Relief set in and she dove for the key.

She eventually came back up because it was too deep for her. She sees a shimmer in her peripheral vision. Boots. Metal boots were placed at the far end edge of the pool. This was the perfect way to get down to the bottom quick enough and still have the energy to swim to the surface. She slipped the boots on, feeling something strange within, but it must have been her wet feet sloshing about in the boot. She tightened them and dove into the pool. The boots did the job and got her to the bottom. Delighted, she untied them and awaited for her ascension. She didn’t budge. She tries to pick her feet up, but her feet did not remove themselves from the boots. An air bubble hit the surface.

The clock struck five.

Chapter 4

I.

They each woke up to the sound of their own flesh being burned by the electrical shock flowing from the attached wires inserted into the vein closest to their radial artery. Numerous shouts and grumbles were heard from each of them and clinked off of the stone walls, making it seem like they were in a crowd made up of emptiness. After a while, silence was heard. One of the men managed to form words after looking around him.

There were four of them, each hooked up to an electrical outlet. So that explains the shock. They were not chained up, nor were they unclothed. They were simply…there.

“How could this be…”

“Hello?”

“Who is here, where is here?”

“What has my life come to…”

“Hold on, let us start by stating our names, men.” Their eyes have all adjusted and can now see clearly who is who.

“Stefan!”

“Vaughn? Why’re we…”

“I dunno. This is a mystery to me as much as it is to you. At one moment, you’re pouring me a drink, and then the next…” he paused, “And you lads are?”

“Lucas,” he outstretched his hand with a sly smile, “London’s most watched newscaster of the new decade.”

“Ah, right,” Vaughn rolled his eyes, ignoring his welcoming hand, “And you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know…”

“Well,” Stefan scooted a bit so he was in the middle of the semi-circle; taking his wire with him and making sure it didn’t pinch, “This is a strange situation we all are in here. It would help if we got to know each other.”

“He’s not going to cooperate, Stefan, so might as well leave him alone. Some people have trust issues, and that’s their business,” Vaughn stood up. He wasn’t usually brave, but he had a sudden mist of courage. He pulled the wire out. The men all flinched. Seconds ticked by.

“Nothing,” he said softly, “How ‘bout that.”

With a bellowing burst, the electrical outlets started to smoke.

“Boys, boys!” Stefan yelled and pulled his wire out like Vaughn had done. They all followed suit.

“This is terrifying,” Lucas murmured.

The electrical outlets continued to smoke. The room kept filling and filling and filling. They felt their eyes water and their bellies feel sick.

“This is terrifying!” Lucas repeatedly shouted.

“No, really?!” The unnamed man yelled sarcastically while gripping his eyes.

Within seconds, all four men were hunched in different corners, attempting to shield their eyes.

“This is all your fault!” Stefan shouted at Vaughn across the room, “You wouldn’t shut ya trap to me, and now I’m in this dumb mess with ya!”

“I don’t even know…”

“Your fault, your fault!”

“…what’s going on!”

The room fell silent. The smoke became less thick. As the foggy air seized, the men trudged towards the center. It took them each only three seconds to notice what was around their necks. They trudged towards the center of the room once again and touched the metal rings trying to suffocate their esophagus’s.

“Are we dogs now?” Stefan almost started tearing up.

“These are shock collars. Literal shock collars! We’re like animals!”

“Hold on,” the unnamed man reached into his pocket, “I have a letter apparently.”

“How’d you get that?”

“I dunno…”

“Yeah, right. First he doesn’t tell us his name, now he has some “mysterious” letter in his pocket. Isn’t that downright suspicious…” Stefan said with raised brows.

“Oh, stop it, my name’s Damon.”

“Sounds like demon, to me…”

“Just read the letter.”

“I’m trying.”

*Men will be men. But when their morals are tested, do we discover their weakest sides? Will they push their testosterone filled egos aside? We’ll find out. By the time you read this letter, you all will have noticed the nice accessories around your necks. Each one is connected to one other. Look into your pockets –*

At this moment, each man reached into their pockets and revealed a tiny box with a red button on top.

*- This is your life line. If you decide to press the button, your collar will unlock and you will be free, killing the person who was connected to yours. If after one hour, no one presses the button, you all will die an extremely painful death. At least one person needs to be killed.*

*Time’s ticking,*

*Resent*

II.

All the men froze. Each looked at each other with cautious eyes. At any moment, one of them could hit their button. And who’s to say which one is connected to which? It’s a mystery.

“You know what this means, boys…” Lucas started.

“No,” Vaughn fell to the floor, hands and knees and head hanging low, “This is not happening. Lucas, was it? Don’t joke about this. A man could die today, right here, in front of our eyes.”

“I’m not gonna let it be me,” Lucas grumbled and stared at his palm holding the death button.

“Let’s be rational here.”

“We’ve got families! People who love us!”

“Yeah?” Lucas walked angrily towards Vaughn who was still on his knees, “Well I’ve got a career that loves me and money that loves me. Things that make me so happy, even your wife and children can’t fulfill such a space in your heart. I’m going to be the last alive and the first to get outta here, you got that?”

Vaughn looked up into Lucas’s eyes and softly spoke, “Please – ”

Lucas pressed his button.

Pause. Silence. Nothing.

“That lying bastard – ”

“Stefan!”

The bartender was down, his face trembling from the shock. The wattage was so strong, the men could smell his flesh peeling and sizzling. Vaughn ran to him and tried to help, but if he touched the collar, he would die, too. Spit and foam spilled from his mouth. His head finally hit the floor, splitting his skull open and letting blood fill the space around his body like a mighty aneurism.

“This is insane!” Damon shouted.

Vaughn pierced his eyes through Lucas’s skull, “You…”

“Yes? Me? The one who is taking off this damned collar?” Lucas removed it and threw it aside, smiling as he did it, “This would make a wonderful story, wouldn’t it, boys?”

Vaughn went to lunge at him, but Damon spoke, “Hold on, listen.”

The three paused as a knelling noise was heard.

“Was that a clock?”

“Seems like it.”

“He had a family…”

“Oh, shut it, Vaughn!” Lucas squealed.

“How are we going to get these collars off without killing someone else?” Vaughn asked, tears almost blurring his vision. He tried to ignore the dead, splitting body next to him as the blood pooled around his shoe.

“Here,” Damon walked up to him, “I’m well versed in this sort of thing.” He took off his watch and revealed a pin.

“Why didn’t you think of this before?!” Vaughn yelled, “Before Stefan died?”

“The letter said someone had to die. It’s a fair sacrifice, right? Take one life to save three.”

“That’s immoral.”

“That’s life,” Damon began picking his own shock collar’s lock, “Ouch.” The collar began to shock him, but he managed to slip it off before it did any real damage, and did the same for Vaughn.

The three jumped when they heard a bright *“Ding!”*

“Is that an elevator?”

Chapter 5

The clock struck six. Mary and Travis and Rory pushed the elevator button, for it restored its power at that time. They skeptically entered the elevator and the door shut.

            “Strange,” said Rory

            Travis looks. “What?”

            “The clock. We did not wait five hours. We waited an hour, maybe two at the most.”

            “Seems you’re right.”

            “Where do you think we are headed?”

            “Up. At this point where else could we go?”

            The elevator stops. “What? We are only on level two.”

            “We must be in a cheap warehouse or something.”

The door opens. A man, a broken man stands at the door. He falls through.

            “Hey, woah woah buddy, you alright,” said Rory as he catches his limp body. Ryan looks up.

            “Yes, yes I’m fine,” shutting out pain through pride.

            “Are you sure,” the doctor said, “your leg, it is shattered.”

            His bloody limp leg seemed crushed and it created a bloody, slug-like trail into the elevator as it shut and began to rise.

            “Don’t bother with it.”

            “If I don’t, you will bleed out.”

            “Did I stutter, doc? I said don’t bother.”

            “I’m not letting you die because of pride, boy, especially in front of the young girl. Enough blood’s been shed.”

            Ryan leers with hidden sympathy. “Alright fine, just make it quick.” Ryan looks up above Rory’s head and points, “There’s a small medical kit on the wall.”

            Rory then opens the cross marked box on the wall. There was some gauze, some antibacterial spray, pain killers, aspirin, and stitches. He then begins to rip his blooded coat to make a splint for his leg. It was not enough to fix his leg, but it was enough to stop the bleeding and to numb the agonizing throbbing.  Ryan stands, leaning on Rory. Travis then proceeds to press the button to the top floor. The light blinks, the gears began to spin and then the elevator stops unexpectedly. Terrified they all grasp each other with dreadful anticipation-awaiting what lies beyond it.

Chapter 6

I.

“How many people can we fit in this damned thing? It’s so cramped with only four people.”

“The survivors, we need all the survivors…”

“Have any of you come across a professor?”

The elevator fell silent.

“A professor?”

“Yeah,” Ryan was leaning on an elevator wall on the ground with everyone else while Rory continued to tend to his wound, “I was talking with him before I was taken. He’s about my height, wears teeny tiny reading glasses on the bridge of his nose. He goes by D.D.”

The three looked at each other. Mary buried her face in her father’s side, the guilt still sinking to the deep end of her stomach.

“It’s Ryan, right?” Travis asked while stroking her hair. The red bow was becoming looser and looser with every stroke.

“Correct.”

“The professor is dead,” Travis said matter-of-factly. Like a band-aid.

Ryan stared at him, his eyes starting to water.

“But we were just discussing the blame in this really good book we read, and…and…” his face contorted into disgust and tears. Rory tried to calm him down, but he continued to sob.

“It’s done, Ryan, he’s dead,” the doctor attempted to soothe, “Just think – you are a survivor. You survived. You’re hurt, but you’re still here with us and fully capable of coming out of this alive.”

With this, the elevator stops and dinged at level three.

“This must be the sixth death level. Someone died on this one.”

Mary gulped at the mention of death.

The four stayed still and in silence like mice hiding from a predator.

The door opened.

“Blasted!”

“Lucas, if you don’t shut your trap!”

“Oh!” Damon had turned around once the door had opened, “Hello, there.”

Lucas and Vaughn turned to look as well. They were peering at the nearly deceased.

The three men introduced themselves swiftly and found their way into the elevator. The smell of Ryan’s open wound seeped like mist throughout the elevator, almost making Vaughn throw up in the desolate corner.

“My mind is going mad.”

“I cannot handle this…”

“Why are we all here?”

“…madness.”

“My family…”

“This is what I get for…”

“…my friends.”

“…what have I done.”

“…being the best newscaster in the whole damn city…”

“We’re all a bundle of innocence in a smog of self-deprecating trials…”

Without the elevator sounding its infamous *Ding!*, the door opened and interrupted the worries and cries of the individuals stuck within the metal confinement.

“We’re here,” said no one in particular. Everyone already knew what it meant.

Two people helped Ryan limp up while the rest – tired and deranged – made their way out of the elevator.

The room was square-like, but with a circular hint to it. In the middle of the room were five black boxes labeled seven through eleven.

“Why those numbers?” asked Rory, “Why not one through 5?

“Don’t you get it!” Travis ran to the boxes, “We are in a clock tower.”

“That explains so much…”

“…the knelling…”

“Numbers…”

“Yes!” Travis pointed up. “Look!”

They all peered up.

There, bluntly in front of them, was the tremendously huge clock, the roman numerals the size of a semi-truck.

“We’re in Big Ben. The Elizabeth Tower.”

“Correct,” it was Mary’s turn to impress, “And look at the boxes. Every time someone died, the clock struck,” she knelt down and stroked the number eleven box, “Seven through eleven, meaning…”

“Five more people…”

“Yes,” Mary looked at her father, scared out of her mind, “Five more people have to die.”

II.

Instantaneously – right after Mary spoke – the lights in the tower went out. Only the dashing luminous light from the moon shone through tiny cracks made to be makeshift windows. There were a few gasps and stifled screams.

“Hello?” Travis quickly grabbed onto Mary’s hand, “Say your name so we know we’re all here.”

They all stated their names. Sighs were made when the last person spoke.

“Blimey,” Lucas stated, “I can’t see anyone here. Don’t run into me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it…” someone said.

“Oh, stop being big babies.”

“Hey, you stepped on my toes!”

“Dad?”

“I’m here…”

“Oh! I think I just stubbed my foot on one of the boxes…what is this? It’s dangling above it…”

With a sudden jolt of the tower, everything became silent. The silence was deafening to Mary. She instantly realized her father’s hand was no longer locked with hers.

“Dad?” she asked the empty space in front her. No response. She asked again with a little more vigor and worry, “Dad?!” Nothing.

Before she could let out a scream, the lights came back on.

And in front of her, hung four dead bodies. The clock struck seven, then eight, nine, and then finally, ten.

Mary stared, not knowing what to do, “Dad…” she gasped, her eyes tearing up at the sight of a rope hung around her father’s neck, “What is going on…”

There, in the middle of the four hanging bodies, was a familiar face.

Epilogue

I.

“Oh silly Mary, you still haven’t figured it out yet,” Ryan sat, picture-perfect, clean and proper, in the middle of a mass murdering.

            “Figured out what?” Mary was speaking between gasps and tears.

            “The reasons they are all dead. Why these vermin are here, including you. Why all this had to happen and for what purpose? I bet you are just dying to find out.”

            Ryan’s response left Mary stunned, shocked for she did not expect him to say such things. She began to bounce slightly back and forth, nervously. Ryan could tell he was getting on her nerves. There was a twitching above her eye and how she scolded him with fear gave Ryan the satisfaction of success - a job well done. For a moment, he looked familiar to her, but the memory was merely curt.

            “Ah, your silence speaks a thousand words, young Mary. It is wondrous to see you again for I - ”

            “Why? Why? There, I said it, you freak, now why would you do all this? What good is killing these people?”

            “Why, it was for you, my dear.”

            “What?”  
            “You foolish girl,” Ryan slowly walks towards her, “the purpose of all this was for you. To save you, of course.”

            “Save me? Save me from what?”

            “These people that were around you. Can’t you see that they are the reasons, the exact cause of why your childhood was hell? Effy raised you and beat you in the orphanage. She prevented you from ever leaving the godforsaken place. Never allowed any play time, no extra meals, no contact with the other kids.”

            “How do you know…”

            “Cook - he beat you – mentally – as well and mocked you in front of his friends. Who was your only social group at the time. Then cheated on you consistently, night after night, until your poor little heart gave out and you still never broke it off. He never loved you.”

            “That’s a lie. You don’t know him.”

            “Oh, on the contrary, sweetheart, I know him too well. I study my victims before I kill them and his unholy ways made him the perfect subject.”

            “That was none of your business. You had no right to kill those two, or any of them.”

            “How about your father? He seemed innocent didn’t he? He was far from it. He states he upholds the law and protects those innocent people. He’s corrupt. He’s been paid to let the sludge of this city roam free with no consequences whatsoever. Even though he adopted you, he is no hero. He is just like every other criminal – ”

            “Like you?”

            “Cute, you have the same ferocity your mother had.”

            “My mother? She died.”

            “How could I forget? It was the first time I felt any joy, and the last time unfortunately.”

            “Wha – ”

            “You see, sweetheart, I loved your mother very much. We had been through it all together. Having you was a blessing, but it cost her her life, and you were taken to an orphanage because I could not take care of you due to a violent outbreak. It nearly killed me to give you away. Doctor Rory who you saw today was the man who couldn’t save your mother. He was the reason we could not life happily - as a family. That pathetic Justine spilt the medicine in the hallway on the way to her hospital bed,” Ryan‘s emotions took a hold of him and he sat quietly for a moment… “Those fools killed her. They could have saved her but they didn’t. Imagine, having a life in the palm of your hands and you dedicate your own life to not let that life slip away. When it does, you’ve failed. You’ve failed the patient. You failed the father. You failed the kid. You failed the opportunity of redemption.”

            Mary’s legs felt numb as she stumbled to stay up. She tried every effort to interrupt him, but a clamp set upon her throat. The conflicting demons that encircled her mind were so vial and twisted, she began to cry. She did not know what to think, how to feel, what to say. Throughout her whole life she never knew her parents. This is how she finds out.

            “So to protect me…you just kill? You plotted this entire out? You took the time to create all of this?”

            “Yes, Professor H.D.D has the key to the clock tower. He owed me big time and perturbed me. I would not have had to kill him, but if he discovered all of this, I would have not been able to carry it out. I was debating highly if I wanted to kill him, but I had personal reasons, so it was a win-win. When he did discover my plan, I took action, locked him up like all of you and he became the twelfth little mouse in my tower. I took his money and paid for the reconstruction – “

            “Wait, mouse? What do you mean by mouse?”

            “’Hickory Dickory Dock,’ my favorite nursery rhyme when I was a boy. The entire scheme was based off of that poem. I did not want to because it sounded so childish, but it seemed to keep popping in and out of my head, like it was a sign or something.”

            “You’re sick. You’re absolutely sick.”

            “NO, what’s sick is how my wife died and I was sued and lost custody of you. Then, since it was such a “big hit” in the media, some imbecile named Lucas made money of it. That selfish pig made money off of my suffering. He made money off of her death. Oh, my sweet Eleanor. I avenged you. I avenged you my darling.” He closed his eyes for a moment, almost like he was picturing his dead wife’s face tattooed on the backs of his eyelids.

            “Eleanor?”

            “Yes, that was her name. Sweetest being God ever created. When I lost her, and after all of the trials and custody poppycock nonsense, I drank - I drank and drank and drank. I was never a drunkard before. Ha, Eleanor never liked the idea so I never tried it. Never considered it. Stefan, the bartender, he got me drinking. I only sat down in the bar to meet up with Vaughn, my friend. I’m actually quite surprised he didn’t recognize me when he stepped into the elevator. But he must have been too concerned about his own life to notice me bleeding out in the corner. Or maybe I have not aged well, it’s been years and years…anyways…Stefan persuaded me to drink and pay my pockets dry. He did that with everyone there in his cesspool of a business. He stands and makes profit off of encouraging the vile to drink into healthy minds. He always says to stop, but he knows in his heart you won’t.”

            Mary looks in his eyes. Seeing the desperate emptiness everyone hates so dearly. Pondering the thoughts of his life and what he has gone through. Growing more empathetic and blocking out the thought of his recent massacre.

            “You shouldn’t have done that. Revenge never solves anything…”

            “Oh wait…”

            “…in fact, revenge is what got you here. You should have - ”

            “…it gets much better. Once I’m drunker than a lord a few nights after Eleanor’s death, Vaughn shows up. With two girls at his side. He always had a knack for women. I would know, he tried getting Eleanor to bed with him. Vaughn, the friend I survived through my childhood with, all of my hopes and dreams. My passions. He always wanted what he couldn’t have. When he found out that I had asked her to marry me, he became lustful and hit on her. She was strong and resilient and went to me right away. I was furious and we haven’t spoken since. Until that night, where I beat him senseless and got thrown out; I had nowhere to go, no wife to come home to or a child to nurture.”

            “I, I don’t know what to - ”

            “That same blasted night, a man came and stole everything I had, even my clothes. I didn’t fight back. I had nothing to fight for. When I woke up on the bitter pavement I started remembering everything that just happened. I picked up a wallet on the street, thinking it was mine, but it was Damon’s, that vermin who robbed me. Then I was put in jail for a day for being in public, in the nude by Sherriff Travis. He released me and I sought vengeance on all of them. All of them who hurt me. Who hurt us.”

            The clock struck twelve and Mary sprang to her feet. Ryan gazed upon the clock and embraced the bells song. It was the cry of relief. It has been done. The deed is accomplished and the demon of regret has been lifted from Ryan. He sat there and meditated in the harmonic atmosphere, it alleviated the pain and he forgave himself. Upon that, the burden of treachery and murder filled his soul.

            When he opened his eyes, she was gone. Mary had fled like the mouse she was. Ryan stood and marveled at the punishment he had created. It was marvelous. It was a work of art. He began do walk towards the elevator. He knelt to a floorboard and tore it up. Beneath the board contained a box with a lock. He punched in the code and headed into the elevator. He opened the rusty box and pulled out memories. It contained pictures of his wife and her wedding ring. He put it on and clicked the button to the bottom floor. On his way down, he pulled a syringe out of the case.

            “You will do wonders for me.” He muttered.

            When he reached the bottom, he walked out into the hall. Upon a coat rack, hung clothing for him. He changed into his contrasting attire. In the box contained scissors that were freshly sharpened. They glistened against the shameful sunlight. He proceeded to cut his hair and once done, went to the nearest bathroom to bleach his hair. He left the bathroom and continued along the hallway.

A small red bow was left on the floor, untied. Ryan picked it up and smiled.

            “I hope we cross paths again, my sweet Mary.” He held in his feelings, like everyone does, shaming what humanity he had left, and threw the box across the hall.

            He proceeded towards the boiler room. He engineered it to explode and trailed dozens of gallons of kerosene throughout the entire tower. He looked back at the scenes of the crime and relished in them. Once back to the entrance of the building he pulled out a lighter and a cigar. He lit the cigar, took a deep breath, and through the lit cigar. It set every floor ablaze and Ryan left satisfied. As crowds appeared at the sight of the tower burning like a candlestick, Ryan pushed through the crowds and disappeared. The police never discovered what actually caused the fire because the boiler room exploded and toppled the entire building. All they knew was of the kerosene because of the smell, but nothing else.

            Ryan headed for a nice suburban life, far away from what he left behind. He bought a home, got a job and rekindled the fire within him. However, his demons still terrorized his mind. He knew there was only one solution. He went to his room, wrote himself a diary containing all the details of his current life: what to do, who he is, why he can’t remember anything, why he had no family, etc. It was all lies though, to keep him sensible. He took out the needle he hid for a year. He stared at it and cried as he injected it into himself whispering, “Please forgive me.”

II.

            His eyes opened. He regained consciousness. He wandered throughout his room, pondering and considering what to do. He had no memory of where he was or who he was. He looked in the mirror in his room and stared at himself for a while. Ryan was conflicted, until he noticed a book on his desk addressed to him. He may have lost his memory, but he could still recognize items and speak and walk and read, etc. He picks the book up, unlocks it, and begins to read.