

White Puzzle

Max Keynes

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“Doctor B, what do you think is the most reliable thing?” Doctor A asked.

Doctor B rubbed his chin, deep in thought.

“In myself, of course, Doctor A.”

“And where do you think your thoughts come from?”

“I believe because I’m confident,” Doctor B replied.

“You’re not wrong, but I think there’re something more than that,”

Doctor A smiled.

“And what’s that thing?”

“Just guess. Come on.”

Doctor B rocked his chair backward, crossing his arms tightly.

“I’m confident because I believe in what I know.”

“And...”

“I know because of the data inputted in my memory.”

“Exactly,” Doctor A snapped his fingers. “But do you think our memory is that reliable?”

“Why are you saying that?” Doctor B raised his brows. “If we don’t believe in our memories, what should we believe in then?”

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Doctor A smiled. “In fact, there’s so many information for us to choose to believe. To believe something, that data must be reliable enough for us. That information must be reasonable for our senses and must be repeated often enough too, or we have to be emotional enough. We have to have enough faith in that data.”

“I agree with that.”

“To put your life into someone else’s hands isn’t a good idea, so memory is our most trusted backup. However, I’m asking myself, is that really true? Is our memory that reliable for us?”

“What do you think?” Doctor B’s brows rose.

“Human is a complicated being, but in that complication, something simple is hidden.” Doctor A tapped his fingers rhythmically. “We believe we’re the most intelligent being on earth. A logical being with complicated thinking system, but, sometimes, we’re surprisingly stupid.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s go back to the memory. We all know human prefers emotion than logic when making decisions. Reasons come later. In some cases, reasons are just mere pretenses.” Doctor A tapped his fingers faster. “We choose to believe first, then, find some reasons to support our beliefs and make them trustworthy. When time goes by, the seed will grow into a big tree, and the

beliefs that have been repeated both through information and emotion will give us faith.”

Doctor B nodded in acceptance, invited him to continue.

“When you were young, you would feel that your classroom was so big! However, when you grew up and saw the bigger world and came back to stand in the same old place again, you would feel something had changed. The room that was so big became so small. If I’m not clear enough, I’ll give you another example. You already unplugged the microwave before you leave the house. After a short while, you started to wonder whether you had unplugged it or not. You go back to check and see that you’ve already unplugged it.”

Doctor A opened his hands. “Memory is something that can be twisted all the times. You’d never known if the thing you now believe in is truth or a lie.”

“That’s reasonable.” Doctor B nodded. “But what you just said are of your memory and your beliefs as well. We can go on because of them.”

“Exactly.” Doctor A snapped his fingers again. “Like I said earlier, they’re the most reliable things we have. But for myself, I won’t absolutely believe in them.”

“Then, what do you believe in?”

“I believe in myself. We all are.” Doctor A smiled.

“I started to get confused.”

“Well, let me ask a question then.” Doctor A said. “Do you believe in God?”

“God? I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

“Who can prove that God exists?” Doctor B shook his head. “I only believe in things that can be proved.”

“I’ll ask you another question. If you look up at the sky at night and can’t see even a single star, will you insist that the sky is empty?”

“No.”

“That’s it! It’s just like the God thing. It’s unprovable. The answer is unprovable fact. You can’t guarantee whether it’s true or false.” Doctor A smiled. “Now, let’s go back to my theory about belief. Like I said, I believe in myself. Most people do because nothing is more reliable than our own memory. However, I want to point out one thing. Human is a fragile being. We can be led rather easily.”

“You’re right.”

“We used to believe that we own everything in our life. However, that’s not the way it is. Not completely. There’re so many factors we can’t control.” Doctor A leaned forward to Doctor B. “We call these uncontrollable factors ‘fate’. Something occurs from so many events in this world lay on one another without any structure, without control. We, human, have our own

thoughts, more or less. Our decisions affect everything around us. When the actions of someone, or the change in the world itself, comes to meet, that's the time of fate."

Doctor B raised his brows. Doctor A paused then continued.

"Have you heard about the following theory?"

Doctor B shook his head. Doctor A's smile broadened.

"I heard about a research which the participants needed to answer questions without telling them that, within the same sample group, some of the participants were prepared by the researcher earlier. The researcher gave the same questions to all participants. The prepared participants would give the wrong answers. After that, the researcher would call the real participants to answer those questions. The sample group would be divided into 2 groups. In the first group, the researcher would ask questions without telling what other participants answered. The second group, the researcher would tell them what most participants' answers were."

"And then?"

"I want you to guess the research's finding."

"The research's finding... The first group would give the answers that they really think while the participants from the second group tended to follow others' answers."

“Correct.” Doctor A snapped his fingers. “The result is exactly like you said, but that’s not what interests me.”

Doctor B’s brows rose. Doctor A smiled broadly then continued.

“My question is... if we insist on the wrong information often enough along with an environment to support it, for people who have the right pattern thought, will they follow the lead?”

“That’s an interesting question.” Doctor B nodded. Doctor A laughed openly before keep continuing.

“There’s also something else I want to say. Human is a social being. We thought that we own of our life, but like I said, that’s not exactly right. Social has a strong effect on us, so strong that it can command us. It indicates how we should live our life through something called fear. We do things according to what we’re expected to do by those around us. People who won’t adapt to the globalization will be hated by the world. No matter which way we choose, a part of our life will be taken away by the social.” Doctor A paused. “Belief. Fate. Love. Preference. Memory. Everything is contaminated. We are shaped by what surround us until we become who we are now. The person we believe we really are.”

“Your theory is indeed interesting. “ Doctor B took note on paper. “But what do you want to tell me today?”

“From all I’d said, I want to tell you about a case I took care of.”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you know why I chose to be a psychiatrist?” Doctor A tilted head a bit. “It’s because I’m interested in human’s mind. The twisted mind is what frightens normal people, but it’s strangely alluring. I wanted to know about it. I want to understand it, and, of course, I want to cure it.”

“That’s a good notion.” Doctor B nodded while took note on paper.

“What I’d learned to make me believe that everything starts from here.” Doctor A pointed at a side of his head. “Brain controls everything: taste, touch, smell, sight. It’s also the source of our feelings. If our brain is twisted, we, too, will be twisted. I think I don’t have to keep repeating this. You should be familiar with patients with twisted perceptions, right?”

“Yes.” Doctor B answered. “But I’m ready to share my information with you.”

“I used to work with a patient who lost sight even when both of his eyes function normally. However, his brain was damaged so he couldn’t tell what’s in front of him. There was also a patient who had the wrong perception of his surroundings. He believes that the world has only the right side. His left arm was perfectly fine, but he hasn’t aware of it. These things are fact in their eyes. We can never actually understand them, yet we’re responsible for taking care of them.” Doctor A said. “Even these symptoms are frightening, but they

were incomparable with the case I've recently met. Human's mind and memory are truly mysterious."

"What kind of patient had you met?"

"That was one unforgettable patient." Doctor A smile. "But for the sake of a psychiatrist's ethic, I'll use a pseudo name. I'd already asked to use his case as a study case. I met a lot of patients, but he was truly one of a kind."

Doctor A sat properly. He moved closer to Doctor B. His face was decorated with a smile of happiness.

"Come closer, and I'll tell you about it."

2

White jigsaws were moved to join the other pieces. The secret of emptiness was about to reveal.

Ton used his finger to move a jigsaw to the middle of the board. He looked at the spaces thoughtfully before filled it one by one.

“How can you know?” I asked.

“It’s not that difficult. If you look carefully, you can see its pattern.”

He answered.

I took a piece from a box beside us, trying to find the place to put it. Secret always challenged me.

“If you can’t find it, you can let me do that.” Ton smiled mockingly while reached out his hand.

“Stop that. If I have enough time, I can do this too.”

I stared at the board for a while before raised my hands in resignation. Ton laughed lightly and took the piece from my hand. He found its place quickly.

“Milk Jigsaw is probably not my thing.” I signed.

“That’s not strange. It’s a blank jigsaw anyway.”

“But you can do it.”

“I played this since I was young. I play it so often that I’m very familiar with its pattern. If you are familiar with it, you’ll know it’s not that hard.”

I signed again while looking at the white pieces in front of me. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t understand them. Well, but that was a charm of this game, too.

Milk Jigsaw is a blank puzzle. Every piece was completely white. To make it a whole image, you needed more time and brain than other types of the jigsaw. When people plays jigsaw, they typically anticipated a beautiful picture hidden in the small puzzle pieces. For me, putting blank pieces together was a challenge. The final result might not be a beautiful image. However, if you looked carefully, these blank pieces were filled with the effort and time we spent on them. It was pure happiness.

Ton paused to think for a minute before putting a piece into its place. Every time he used his brain, it was as if the air around him stopped and became a wall that kept him away from the outside world.

“It’s strange that someone likes this game like me.” He said without looking up.

“Yeah. I’m surprised, too.”

Ton's words reminded me of Bill. I dated him four years ago. Bill had never liked this game. He said that puzzle was nonsense. I mocked him every time he said that.

“Bill, the secret is for people with a brain. It's normal that you don't like it.” I said.

“You're saying I'm stupid!?” Bill shouted.

Something like that happened a lot. Bill used to be a good boyfriend but then everything changed...

I caught him doing some illegal stuff. That was the end of our relationship.

However, that was not the only reason I broke up with him. We argued a lot. Bill was a jealous and violent man. He thought that every man came talking to me wanted to steal me away from him. He fought with men got close to me several times. His violent caused him to be repelled from school not long before his graduation.

Moreover, our attitudes didn't get along. Differences might not be a problem for others, but it was for him. Bill looked at everything as black and white. Nothing was in between for him. He had never accepted different opinions. Whatever he believed was the only right thing for. Bill usually hit me when we fought. He was the reason I was afraid of men up until now.

At the last moment, before our relationship broke, he wanted to take our relationship a step further. I refused him every time. The different needs made everything worse. Bill tried to break into my house to get what he wanted. My father and I called the police when he tried to break in, but the laws couldn't stop him. What he wanted, no matter how to get it, he would get it.

Not long after that, Bill just disappeared from my life. I didn't know what happened to him, but his absent was a good thing for me. My life went back to normal after that.

I closed my eyes, trying to forget what happened at that time. It was the past. There was no reason to think about it now.

"You're like that again, Dream." Ton said.

"I'm like what?" I raised my eyebrows.

"You space out a lot." He rubbed his chin. "You know? Sometimes I think you're like these Milk Jigsaw."

"Don't make a weird comparison." I adjusted my glasses.

"It's not weird. When I play this game, I'm often thinking of you." Ton said and laughed at the same time.

I lowered my head slightly before asked in a small voice. "How I like this game?"

"Remember the first day we met?"

I looked up and rolled my eyes. The first time I met Ton was two years ago. I usually went to sit at the university library. It was hard for me to fit in with the new surroundings. I came to study here knowing nobody and making new friends was so just not my thing.

When I was in high school, before my father and I moved to this place, I used to fight with my Dad. I wanted the freedom to make my own decision like other kids, but my Dad always refused my opinions. He didn't believe that I can make a plan for my own life. Every second, every thought, my Dad planned everything for me. He tried to build a new me according to his own wish. Not what I wished and wanted to be.

My father chose who my friends should be and blocked out people who he thought unworthy. I endured his control painfully. Danced with the songs he composed. I often felt that I wasn't his child, but a puppet that must do as he ordered and moved by the thread controlled from above.

Our relationship became worse each day. Our fights became more severe gradually. I started to rebel. I mingled with the back room kids, dressed brightly, dyed my hair, and neglected my study. I did everything I could. I did everything to mock my father. I even ruin my life so that I could be free.

Our war was dragging long, but it ended well. It ended with nothing broken.

Finally, Dad understood my pain. He lessened his control and tried to change himself. He paid more attention to my opinions. We still had some disagreement, but now it was the way it should be.

A large wound would leave a scar behind, however. The result from those conflicts caused me unable to fit in the social. I hated change. I lived my life alone. No friend. No companion. Nobody understood me. I heard screams every time I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, there was only the sound of the lonely wind. It didn't matter how much I wanted to pour my feelings. Only emptiness was there to console me.

At that time when the dark covered my life, I met Ton. He always came to play jigsaw at the library. At first, I only looked at him from far away. However, not long after that, I gathered up my courage and went to greet him.

Ton was a psychology student. I used to think that students from this faculty would be hard to understand, but Ton wasn't the case. He was an ordinary young man living his simple life. He looked for freedom and happiness others.

We shared many traits and interests. Our relationship grew so fast. Every day after classes, I would meet him here. We would play a few games before heading home. It was such simple activities, but it made me happy.

"Umm. I remembered." I nodded.

“The first time I saw you. I felt that you’re different.” He said. “You looked so lifeless as if you had no emotion at all.”

“It was that bad? I think I was rather lively.”

“Probably, but you now isn’t the same as the you at that time. The first times I saw you I thought of snow, something white. You looked so... empty, but quite mysterious at the same time.”

I smiled before leaned closer to him. “And now? How am I now?”

“You seem...” Ton said. “More silly than I thought. I don’t understand myself why I’d thought of you like that earlier.”

“Scum.” I hit his shoulder lightly and laughed.

“Well, what should we do now? I really don’t know the next move.” Ton said and pointed at the jigsaw on the table.

“Yeah.” I rubbed my chin while looking around. Suddenly, my eyes fell on a young man sat not far away from us. I called him in a small voice.

“Max. Max, come help us.”

A short, thin man slowly rose from his seat and walked to us. He looked tired.

“W- what’s the matter, Dream?” Max said while adjusting his black vest.

“Ton and I can’t finish this game. Can you help us?”

Max sat down next to me. He looked at the puzzle only a few minutes before putting every piece into places. They were in the right places only in a blink.

“I- it’s done.” He said.

“Thanks a lot.” I smiled at him.

“How can you do that? We’ve tried for hours.” Ton complained.

“I- I just know.” Max replied.

“Brilliant.” Ton smiled. He showed his gratitude sincerely.

“Very well done, Max. Unlike certain someone here...” I said.

“Never miss a chance to mock, huh, Dream?”

“I’m innocent.” I smiled.

After that, I started fighting with Ton. Max laughed lightly beside us. We were so loud that the librarian came over and asked us to leave.

We left the library and headed to the cafeteria. Suddenly, Ton became unwell.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“Do you have a painkiller, Dream? I think it begins again.” Ton asked me.

“I don’t have some with me. Do you, Max?”

Max rampaged his bag for a while before took out a bottle. Ton nodded his thanks and took some pill from the bottle.

“Sorry, but I have to go now. I don’t think I can manage to go anywhere anymore.”

“It’s fine.” I nodded.

Ton was like that many times before. The doctors couldn’t explain the source of his symptom. It made his life complicated sometimes, but he never saw it as a problem. What he did was smiling and paid attention only to what make him happy. I wanted to be like him, but I wasn’t strong enough.

Ton waved us goodbye and walked away. Max turned to look at me and tried to said something.

“What?” I asked.

“Dream. L- let’s have lunch together. O- Okay?”

“Umm. Let’s go.” I smiled.

Max and I used to live in the same neighborhood. I remembered that he was a lively boy. Max used to be called genius. He always got the first place in classes without even trying. Max also shined in extra activities. He won gold medals from almost all types of sport in the sports days. Children from other classes used to ask the teachers to limit the number of sports Max could participate; otherwise, the other kids wouldn’t have a chance. The teachers had to agree so that everybody could have fun together.

Not long after I moved, I heard that Max had some problem with his family and ran away. Max disappeared for months before came back in the

battered stage. He couldn't remember what happened after he left home. Nobody knew where he had been during that time. Even the police couldn't have an answer.

Max seemed to change completely. His liveliness was replaced with silence. Max used to be so friendly and have a lot of friends. He now tried to avoid people. He abandoned sports and activities he used to like and closed himself from the others, building a high wall and hid behind it.

I used to envy Max. He had everything I ever wanted. Freedom, skill, happiness. Every time I fought with Dad, I would look out the window at that vibrant boy. The boy usually looked back and smiled at me. I gave him my lonely smiles. My heart was squeezed with the loneliness that was unable to put into words.

Max was quite a unique young man too. He always wore a black vest no matter how the weather was. Even when he stood so far away, I could recognize him immediately.

“What do you want to eat?” I asked.

“L- let's go to the cafeteria a- and see.”

We walked to the cafeteria that located in the opposite of the library. When we got near, I noticed a man leaned on the wall at the entrance. I grabbed Max's wrist and left right away.

“W- what's wrong?” Max asked.

“I want to try another place.” I smiled.

Suddenly, there was a shout, and I heard heavy footsteps approaching. I tried to run away, but Bill was faster. He rushed in front of me and lifted both arms to block the way.

“When will you stop trying to run away from me?” Bill asked.

“When will you stop following me around? Everything ended four years ago.” I countered back.

“It doesn’t like I want to do anything to you. I just want to talk.”

“We have nothing to talk.” I turned around, but Bill grabbed my wrist before I could leave.

“I’m not done talking,” Bill said. “and I won’t stop if you won’t talk with me properly.”

I suddenly lost my strength and tried not to fall on the ground. His touch was the touch from hell. Even I had the long sleeve jacket covered my skin, my fear was still there.

Images from the past rushed back to me. Every time Bill grabbed my wrist, it would end up with him beat me severely. The moan of pain still resonated in my mind. Soft skin touched the cold concrete floor. Blood spread. I heard a faint breathing. It was like the sound of a clock ticking to the time of eternal sleep.

“Uh. Y- you.” Max took hold of Bill’s arm. “I- I think you shouldn’t do this.”

“And who the fuck are you?” Bill shook his arm violently.

“I- I...” Max’s voice was shaking. “I’m her friend.”

As soon as Max finished, a fist hit his face directly. Bill continued to hit Max until he fell and moan from the pain.

The university had two main gates. Both gates had security guards stood by. However, it didn’t matter how strict those guards were, Bill could leak in every time.

People started to gather. So many people came to watch, but nobody offered to help. They were worried that the moment they tried to help my problem would become their problem.

Even with lots of people staring, Bill hadn’t stopped. His kicks crushed the defenseless man several times sending Max’s puny body to fly away. I tried to stop him, but it was useless. Nothing could stop Bill’s madness.

“Moron.” Bill spat on Max. He lifted his foot, preparing to finish the man on the ground.

“Enough! Please!” I cried, begging him.

“You started to talk better,” Bill said. “if you wanted me to stop, you must come with me.”

I was silence for a moment before agreed.

“Fine... I’ll go with you.”

Bill squeezed my wrist tightly. He pulled me and walked forward. I turn around to look at Max’s bloody body. He cried out from pain. His body shook with fear.

He shouldn’t be involved in something like this. This was my problem. No one should be hurt because of me ever again. Even I was so scared, I made up my mind to end this...

While we were about to leave the university’s gate, I heard someone shout.

“Dream! Let’s have lunch together!” Ton ran straight to me without hesitation. He pulled my arm and ran back to the cafeteria.

“Hey! Who the hell are you?” Bill shouted.

Ton stopped. He gave a friendly smile to the mad man. “Me? I’m her friend?”

“Let go of Dream and I’ll forget all of these.”

“I guess you don’t care about the guards here, but they’re different from guards at the other places, you know?” Tom smiled and pointed at the gate. “If you cause trouble here, you should have known the outcome.”

Suddenly, Bill swung a fist at Ton harshly. Ton dodged it easily. Bill tried to hit Ton again several times, but no matter how hard he tried, his fists couldn't touch Ton.

The guards at the gate finally arrived to take control of the situation. They charged Bill, locking his arms tightly. Bill tried to attack Ton again and again, but the guards were a lot stronger than him. Finally, Bill had to submit his defeat.

When the guards dragged him away, Bill threatened Ton. "Remember this. The next time I saw you. You're so dead."

Ton pushed my head to his chest. He waved and smiled at Bill in a mocking manner. "So, I'll keep Dream for today then."

Since I knew Bill, this was the first time he gave up. Bill loved winning above other things. He wouldn't back down until he crushed his prey into a mush and Ton just proved that how much better he was than Bill.

After everything had ended, Ton let go of me and ran back to Max. "Dream! Come and help me here!"

We brought Max to a hospital nearby. He was covered with bruises all over. His eyes were red from the bloodshot. He shook from pain and cried as if he was about to die.

Max was laid down on a bed. The doctor checked him a while before told us that he was covered with bruises and cuts, but his internal organs were safe. Max was still alright.

“Max was hurt because of me...” I said.

“It’s not your fault.” Ton replied.

I kept silence, so Ton continued. “That guy. Who is he?”

“My ex-boyfriend,” I answered. “I went out with him in high school.”

“You broke up with him now?”

“Four years ago. But Bill refuses to accept it. He thinks I still care for him, so he came to see me.”

Ton nodded, so I continued. “Why did you come back anyway? You were sick, weren’t you?”

“When I was about to leave, I heard some rucksack, so I went ahead to watch.” He smiled.

I lowered my head. “Thanks...”

His big hand rubbed my golden hair until it’s messy. He smiled at me.

“Don’t worry.” He said. “So, since you’re so tired today, this brother will walk you home, okay?”

They were such simple words, but this care meant a lot more than that. I smiled without realizing. Ton always made me feel safe.

We left the university and went into a narrow alley leading to my home. We chose this path because it was a bit safer.

On the way, I saw a teenage boy, about 15 years old, fought with a woman. I guessed she was his mother. This image reminded me of my past, the past that didn't worth thinking of.

We walked pass them. I tried to ignore what happened over there. After a while, I asked Ton.

“Had you have a fight with your family?”

“Me? Umm... yes. Why?”

“Nothing...”

“So it means there's something.” Ton smiled. “Just spill it out.”

“I... I... just envy.”

“You? Envy?” Ton raised his eyebrows. “You fought with your family a lot?”

“Um.” I lowered my head.

“If you want to talk about it, I'm here to listen.”

“It's fine. I'm feeling better now.” I forced a smile.

“But from what I see, I think you're still feeling bad.” Ton smiled. He hugged my shoulders gently. “I have my own problems, too. I think having problems from time to time are good.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Having problem is natural for a human. When we think in different ways, it’s not that strange to have a conflict.” He looked up at the sky. “But you know? If you look at it from another side, a problem is a difference, and that difference makes us have our own place. I think that’s a good thing.”

“Is that so? You’re really optimistic.” I laughed lightly.

“Thinking of good things is better than thinking of bad things.” He smiled. “Moreover, I think a problem is proof of any relationship. If we can go through it, we’ll understand and accept what the others are more than we already do. What do you think?”

“No objection, mister.”

“Very well.” He smiled. “It seems that this little is feeling better.”

We laughed together. Ton could make me feel better without even trying all the time. Sadness made time go slower. Happiness made time run faster. In a short while, we arrived at my house. Ton waved me goodbye before walking away. I watched his back, feeling grateful for what he’d done for me.

“I’m home.”

I opened the door, took off my shoes, and left them on the shelf beside the door. Inside the house was darker than it normally was. The atmosphere was strangely silent.

I walked into the kitchen first then went to the upstairs. My father usually read a newspaper downstairs or cooked something in the kitchen when he had time.

While I was walking to Dad's room, I heard some noise. I put my ear to the door and tried to listen better.

I heard something like baby talking from inside. I plastered myself closer to the door with curiosity.

The door was suddenly opened. I was startled for a second and used both arms to support myself before I would hit the floor. When I looked up, Dad was watching me with a sly smile.

"Eavesdropping on me?" He smiled. "You're this big but still act like a baby."

"I hadn't seen you in the kitchen, so I look for you." I smiled to cover my mistake. "Anyway, what are you doing, Dad?"

"Why don't you come in and look for yourself?" He pulled me inside and walked back to his computer. On the screen, a child was laughing and singing happily.

"That's... me." My face was burning. "Close it!"

"Why? It's adorable." He laughed. "You are a lot cuter when you were young."

"Dad!"

While we were taunting each other, I noticed the photos spreading on the floor. These pictures were full of precious memories. I picked one of them up and thought of the past.

“Why have they so little left, Dad?”

“Your mom asked for some. She asked me to burn some photos along with her body.”

Dad burnt our photos every remembering day of my mom. He usually chose the pictures that I was most clear on them and talked to my mom as if she was with him still. Even their marriage wasn't that sweet, but the care they had for each other were unchangeable.

Dad and mom are divorced since I was young. Dad loved mom. However, mom wanted her freedom. She believed that women have rights to do whatever she wants and don't have to be bounded to house wife's duties as the society wants her to be.

So, she chose to go the separate way.

My Mom and Dad divorced when I was little. I was living with my mom at first. She was somewhat strict, but we were happy. Everything was good until my mom passed away. Then, I moved to live with my Dad.

My Dad was five years younger than mom. Their marriage was arranged by my grandparents. Many had said that the wealth was more

important than love, but I didn't think so. I saw many couples' lives crumbled because of the lack of love, including my own family.

Dad might be forced into a marriage, but he'd done everything he could for his family. He had worked really hard up until now to make sure that I would have a comfortable life. He dismissed his own freedom for the happiness of people around him. There might be problems among us, but I couldn't deny the good deeds he'd done.

For a little girl, living in an uncompleted family was hard. We might not be poor, but childhood was a fragile time of life. Children need something money can't buy. We need the completed love. I might have a father but not having a mother made me feel lost.

The stress was rising. The relationship became to plummet. The heavy burden had changed my Dad into someone unrecognizable. He began to avoid people, became stricter on me and everything around us, and was unable to forgive the mistake by his own daughter and the world. His pain expanded to everything surrounded him, biting and destroying until nothing was left.

I believed that the pass of my mother was the primary reason. Loneliness, pain, and worry were the keys that changed my Dad. That was the beginning of our broken relationship.

I always felt sad whenever I thought back to that time. My calling for freedom caused Dad even more pain. I was a stupid teenager who cared only

myself. I alone was important. Only my feeling was worth. Only my thought was the right thing. That was the only thought I had at that time.

After all the problems had been solved, my Dad changed himself. He became his old self, the one who worked hard but still kept some happiness in his life. He interacted more with the others. He made people around him and even laughs. After tried so hard, he got what he deserved. Even his happiness was the thing that reminded me of my mistakes, but I was glad that I could see him smile again.

I shuffled through the photos. Not many from the time when I was a baby were left. Most of them were the photos I took with Dad. It was obvious that my Dad didn't like taken a photo even he loved looking at the photos to memory the past.

“And this one? Where were we? Was it when we were on an island?”

“No. This one from when we were visiting a waterfall.” He mocked me. “You're quite forgetful.”

I used to be an A-straight student. However, after our fight, I needed Dad to remind me a lot of things. I felt like my memory was getting worse. I had so many nightmares but barely remember any of them. I could remember only that Dad was there with me all the time. When I opened my eyes, guilt flooded in my mind. The pain from making mistakes never left me.

This strange might be the cause of my bad memory. I heard that sleeping was the time for resting, recalling, and rearranging memories. What we see in our dreams is what we see when we're awake. Happiness and sadness at night are our feelings toward things in our day life. There were things that we have to endure, the responsibility for what we've done.

I dealt with my memory problem by writing a diary on days that something important happened so that I won't forget the beauty of my life. I didn't want to lose my precious memories again. Death might be painful, but emptiness was unbearable.

I looked at the photos with Dad, submerging in the happiness from the past. Those events might happen a long time ago, but the feelings were still there. I might forget so many things, but my feeling ensured me that I had been through those times with smiles on my face.

"Dad, do you remember Max?" I asked.

"Sure. Why?"

"Today Bill followed me into the university. Max tried to stop him and got beaten." I lowered my head, feeling guilty for what had happened.

"Again? I think we should do something with this matter properly." He sighed. "Max is a good boy. He shouldn't have to be involved in something like this."

I thought about the past. Max might not be that close to our family, but he'd never refused us. Dad wasn't friendly, but Max never talked behind his back and always smiled at my Dad.

Max had come to my house a few times after we moved. At first, Max was nervous, but he settled in just fine not long after that. It was strange that Dad and Max were close to each other now. They'd never interacted that often in the past.

Now, they opened up to each other in many ways. Their ages might be a huge gap, but that didn't stop their relationship.

I was glad about their relationship. It made my heart feel warm.

While I was looking at the photos of the mini-me, Dad took some photos from the album and looked at them with a smile before added them to the pile on the floor. I sat down and stared at the rushing away memories. Many things were erased, but they were still beautiful.

"I missed your mom." He said, and I nodded in agreement.

"What would it be like if your mom still around?" He looked up at the ceiling. "We might be able to have meals together, talked together, and laughed together. We might be happier than now."

"But I'm very happy now, Dad." I hugged him. He smiled and rubbed my golden hair.

Suddenly, Dad remembered something.

“Right! It’s time to prepare dinner.”

“Dad, don’t,” I warned him. “Let me cook for you today.”

“No!” He smiled and shut down his computer. “I know how much you love my cooking.”

He ran fast downstairs. I sighed for his stubbornness.

Not long after that, I saw black smoke in the air. Burnt smell reeked everywhere. From inside the kitchen, the loud cough sound was as if it was a scream from a beast. I rushed to the kitchen, knowing that something bad was about to happen.

“Dad!” My fear rose. Bad scenes ran through my head on after another.

Before I could reach the kitchen, a big black shadow moved to the kitchen’s door. The cough sound was there. Dad tried to get up, but he fell. I came to support him and brought him to sit on the sofa before rushed back in the kitchen to turn off the gas.

The kitchen walls were covered with black smoke. A metal pot on the stove was burnt black. Whatever inside the pot now turned into ash. I let out a big sigh before started to clean after the mess my Dad began.

After finished cleaning, I came back to check on my Dad. He looked better now. It seemed there was nothing to worry about.

“Hadn’t I told you that you shouldn’t cook?” I teased him.

“I can’t help it.” He laughed. “You seem tired. I want to do something for you.”

“That should be my line.” I tilted my head a little and made a dark face. “You work too hard. It should be me who do something for you.

“You should let me do as I please and then clean up after me.” He laughed out loud.

“Do as you please.” I mocked. “What about our dinner?”

“I’ll do it again. Are you hungry? I’ll cook for you now.”

“I think I’d better cook for you.” I laughed.

“No.” Dad insisted. “I’d started, and I won’t stop until you have the best meal in the world. You can watch those photos while waiting. I’ll be right back with something delicious.”

He wore his apron and headed back to the kitchen. The sound of metal clinking and starting gas signaled that he was starting a war with the compliances, in the place he didn’t belong.

I ran back upstairs, put the photos in the album, and took the whole thing downstairs with me. I started looking from the back. The old was the measurement of memory’s value. I felt like I was in a novelty world. The photos were the places that allow me to roam. The memories were the fights that I had to conquer. Imagination was all around. The truth was added with

colors. Thoughts sank deeper. The missing rose from my heart and turned a bad day into a beautiful day.

Suddenly, a few photos fell from an envelope kept in the album. I picked it up and stared at it with a different feeling. A big brown clock was hanged on the wall in my old house. The dark atmosphere leaked around. Dust that should highlight the value of old time made me aware of something dangerous instead.

The terrible thing that I didn't really know what it was.

The colors around me broke. Dust of imagination disappeared. The world seemed twisted like the mixed watercolors that turn black.

The gloominess replaced the warmth. The air was heavy. A faint image was in front of me. A white crack ran through the air, shaking violently until I felt pain. Cold mist touched my skin. I was scared, but I couldn't tell what I was scaring off.

Suddenly, a scream pierced through the air. Something mysterious lured me up from the chair, but my body felt too heavy to move. I felt like I was a doll that was pinned down. The piercing needles stabbed through my muscle.

The only thing I could do was moving my eyes. I tried to look around, looking for the source of the fear.

The scream stopped. Only silence remained.

I closed my eyes tightly. Everything was too strange to be true. However, my intuition was telling me that I had been through this before even when I couldn't recognize anything in front of me. I tried to swim in the sea of my memories, diving deeper to find the answer.

No answer. The sea of my memories told me that it'd never happened.

Then, I heard a strange sound from behind. I tried to look back, but my body couldn't move.

That sound became louder and louder. My nerve was frying. My head was so tight as if a metal bar was squeezing it. The only thing I could do was sitting still. I couldn't scream. I couldn't cry.

After trying hard to listen, I finally knew what that sound was. I closed my eyes unconsciously. The slumber was hugging my soul.

That sound was ticking in tune with the heart. It was the sound of the clock.

The clock's arms. The wailing scream... pain... and death.

3

The dream broke. The only reality was in front of my eyes.

I looked around. Everything was clear as it should be. The gloomy atmosphere had gone.

I stood up and thought hard, looking around the room carefully. What I saw seemed... too real. The high pitch scream. The gloomy feeling. Everything was there. I still could feel them as if I'd been through the same event for hundreds of time.

I stretched hesitantly. My muscles were tense from fear. I spent some times to walk around and touched whatever I could to confirm that they were real.

What did I see just now? I felt as if it actually happened, but everything in front of me was still the same as before.

A dream? Reality?

I shook my head, trying to get rid of strange thoughts. What just happened couldn't be true. But it also wasn't a lie. I saw it. I felt it. However, I couldn't tell what it was.

While I was trying to think about what just happened, Dad walked into the room. He laid the food on the table. Dad was a bad cook, but at least the meal was edible.

“Done.” He smiled. “I’m sure you’ll praise me this time.”

“No way.” I stuck out my tongue.

We ate and planned things we wanted to do this weekend. Many interesting movies were shown now. Even our conversation went on, as usual, I couldn’t shake what happened a while ago off my head.

My intuition whispered to me that there was a secret in there.

“Dad.” I pause. “When I was watching the photos, I saw a strange clock. Can you tell me when this photo was taken?” I left the table and brought that photo to my Dad.

“This one?” Dad rubbed his chin. “Oh, I remember now. I took it not long before we moved here. I felt a bit lost thinking about moving away from that house.”

“But a clock?”

“Weird?” He laughed. “This clock was in my room. It was not something valuable, but a simple thing can make us miss them too.”

I nodded before continued asking, “And do you have more photos of our old house?”

“Yes, but not many. Why?”

“It’s nothing...” I shook my head. “Anyway, why did we have to move here again?”

“I think I’d told you before.” He shook his head. “Your memory is really bad. I told you that I had to move because I got a job near here. My old company laid off many employees back then.”

Dad worked with documents for a big company. He wasn’t an exceptional employee, but his honesty and hard-working made people admired him. My Dad used to boast that he was so important that he was irreplaceable. I laughed every time he said that.

“Anyway, how about today’s dinner?” Dad asked.

“Suck as always.” I teased him.

We teased each other for a while before ended it all with laughter. Our dinner was always like this. No secret. No pressure. My problem was his problem too. Dad had always been there for me and listened to what I’d faced. He kept reminding me that if I had any problem, keeping it to myself wouldn’t help anything. Family and friend were another factors that could make things better. I usually told my Dad everything. He could comfort me every time.

However, I felt that I should keep what happened a moment ago a secret. It was too weird for anybody to understand and I didn’t want to make him worry about such unnecessary matters.

“I’m full.” I rubbed my belly. “I’ll wash the dishes.”

“It’s okay.” Dad waved my offer away. “I’ll manage it. You go rest.”

“Are you sure that you won’t make a mess again?” My eyebrows rose.

“Don’t insult me too much.” He waved his finger. “Everything will be all right. Just go rest.”

I thought about what happened in that dreamlike event. The clock ticking sound. The scream. The gloomy atmosphere. Is there any hidden meaning in them?

I switched off the light before sat down on my bed and looked out the window. The moonlight shone into my room. It bathed everything with the warmth of the night.

Darkness made me feel at ease. The silence was like a friend who always listened to our stories. We would be aware of ourselves when we let the loneliness touched us. Every secret would be revealed. Every feeling would be presented. This was the time to know what was hidden deep inside.

As if bewitched, both of my eyes were closed. My mind sank into the darkness. I’d heard a faint breathing before I lost my conscious.

I woke up again in an unfamiliar place. Only endless darkness surrounded me. I fumbled around to find something to hold on. Emptiness was frightening for a human and caused faith to become the most needed comfort above all.

Suddenly, everything went bright. I sat in my same old room. I left the bed and walked to a black piano stood on the opposite side. I lifted the cover and pressed a few keys. I used to learned music when I was young. I liked to express my feelings through the notes and saw colors in the air when I played. It was all memory now. Time had taken that simple happiness away from me.

I couldn't remember the last time I played music. It was a short period of time but felt like it was so long. I closed the lid before left the room.

The house seemed eerily silent, probably because Dad had gone to work. I went downstairs and walked into the kitchen. Everything was sparkling clean as he promised but that made me even more uncomfortable.

Suddenly, there was a metal clicking sound. I tried to look around.

There was no one.

I left the kitchen and looked around again. My intuition screamed that something wasn't right.

Courage was something you had to pick it up while fear was something that protected you. Listen to my own voice was important. I heard a whisper keep telling me that something dangerous was waiting for me but my curiosity was so intense that it erased all of my fear away.

I walked on each step in tune with my heartbeat.

One... Two... Three... I kept counting my steps. Only curiosity remained in my mind now, and it was calling to me.

Finally, I reached the top of the stairs and looked around for the source of the sound I heard moments ago. Bright orange light shone in through the window. Dust speckle glittered in the air.

Only silence was there. The emptiness was still around.

My feet stepped forward on their own, leading the way to the bathroom next to my room. I could feel that every answer I needed was hidden behind this door.

I knocked a few times, expecting some reply.

Nothing came back from the other side.

I heard my knocks resonated within the house. The silence made me uncomfortable. My breathing sound became the only music now playing.

Suddenly, the front door was opened. I looked down and saw a large shadow backed by the sunlight from outside. Footsteps knocked on the wood floor lightly before stopped.

Dad looked up with fear on his face. He took off his shoes and placed them on the shelf before walked into the house. His body was shaking.

I rushed down to greet him, hoping that the gloomy atmosphere would go away.

Suddenly, we heard a scream. It was not my scream. It wasn't my Dad's cry. That was a high pitched piercing scream that shouldn't belong to a human. The pain in that voice awakened the fear in me, making my body shook before I realized.

Dad seemed confused. He looked around before ran away from the house. What he was scared of was shown in his eyes. It wasn't the scream. It was me.

Why did Dad scare of me? What was going on?

I tried to run after him, but now my legs were chained with a metal chain. I used both hands to pull them off, trying to free myself, but the more I put my strength into it, the heavier my body had become.

The scream grew louder and louder. The bathroom door creaked open slowly. Dust floated from inside like a thin mist. I heard the sound of water dripping on the ceramic floor. The rustic smell of blood reeked everywhere. My heart beat fiercely. The scene at the front drove me crazy. I screamed on top of my lung and prayed for it to go away.

Blood spouted from the cut on the throat rhythmically. The eyes froze upward. The girl's hand grabbed the knife tightly. Her skin was so pale that it was completely white. However, the frightening scene was nothing comparing to the face I had to face.

There was a dead body in front of me. It was my dead body.

Eyes opened wide. Breaths were short. I woke up from the fright before closed my eyes tightly, refused to acknowledge my surrounding.

The atmosphere had changed now. I heard birds chirping and leaves fluttering. Fade glow light shone into the room through the thin curtain, bathing on me. I opened my eyes slowly and tried to endure the feeling inside my heart.

The scary scene disappeared.

I lay down in the familiar room. No blood stain. No screaming. None of my dead body. I was surrounded by familiar smell and touch.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to claim myself down. What had just happened was a mere dream. I let out a big sigh before looked at the clock on the wall. It was nine ten. I already missed today's first class.

I rushed out of bed and took care of myself at high speed. I ran downstairs, grabbed some bread, and raced out the door.

Half an hour later, I reached the university fence, but while I was about to run straight to the gate, I saw Bill waiting for me at the entrance. I slowed down, thinking of the other ways to get in.

I decided to detour and headed to another entrance at the other side of the university. It was quite far from where I was but facing Bill would be far worse. I preferred to go a longer distance rather than meeting him.

I reached the back entrance after spent quite some time going there. However, before I could step inside, I noticed a man following behind.

Bill looked at me with his menace eyes. His body leaned forward slightly. I knew right then and there that the hunting game had yet to finish. Bill would not let me go until he got what he wanted.

I leaned forward. My feet went tight. My heels lifted slightly. Then, I rushed forward with top speed. Bill paused for a second before ran after me.

Looking around, I tried to find a way to escape. The alley on the left? Sports field at the front? The cafeteria on the right? Whichever way I chose, Bill would follow me.

Suddenly, I got an idea. I chose to run straight forward with my top speed. Bill was faster, and he was getting near.

I had to buy some time. If I could stay away from him for a few more seconds, I would be safe.

The football team was practicing on the field. They were warming up by running around the field. I stopped at the side. Looking back at the hunter behind me, Bill sped up. I knew immediately that he wanted to end this game. I wanted to finish it too.

The moment he rushed to me, I suddenly ran through the jogging athletes as fast as I could. My nose brought in the air greedily. I ran away with

everything I had. There were loud shouts behind me. I turned around, expected that this hunt would finally end.

Unfortunately, this was Bill who would never stop until he got what he wanted. He jumped up and started to chase me again. Anger gave him strength. He was even faster than earlier and caught up with me not long after that. Bill reached out his hand, attempted to grab my collar.

I rushed forward and ran up into a building. Bill was still behind me. The guard tried to stop him, but now he was nearly invincible. He pushed the guard away before followed me upstairs.

Every second was priceless. The few seconds the guard gave me was enough for my plan. I threw myself forward with my last strength. Just when Bill was about to grab my collar, I rushed into the classroom and slammed the door shut, locking myself inside.

Bill stared at me. His expression was ugly. There were loud footsteps outside. A group of guards rushed to detain Bill as he caused a huge chaos. Bill was dragged away, but his eyes never left me. I was out of breath but kept smiling. This was my victory.

“What do you think you are doing?” An aged woman was looking at me with stern eyes.

I took a deep breath before looked up. I smiled with a sweaty face.

“I’m sorry. I’m late.”

After the morning class had ended, Ton and I went to have lunch outside the university.

The food in the cafeteria was cheap, but they were not that good, both in quantity and quality. We often left the university to find something to eat.

We chose a place on the opposite of the university. It was a small diner but always packed with hungry people. The university cafeteria was infamous for its small portion and the taste that couldn't say that it was good. Diners around the university were everyone's late resources.

After waiting in queue for a while, we finally got the seats. Ton ordered without looking at the menu. This was his favorite place. He came here so often that the owner knew what he would order.

I only glanced at the menu before ordered as well. The waiter shouted out my order before got us the drinks.

"Today, Bill ambushed me again," I said. "In the morning."

"Your ex is quite scary." Ton smiled.

"It's not funny. If you're in my place, you won't say something like that."

"Sorry but I don't have an insane girlfriend following me around like you." He laughed.

I took my drink before let out a big sigh.

“What’s the matter?” Ton asked.

“Just feeling bad. Everything goes down the hill recently.”

“About Bill?” Ton asked. “Don’t worry. If you see him again, just call me. Don’t hold back.”

“It’s not just that.” I sighed.

“Um.” Ton looked at me as if trying to find something. “From the way you act, you’re... scared?”

“How do you know?”

“Your face is pale when you’re talking about it.” Ton smiled. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s...” I hesitated. “I had nightmares.”

“Saw ghosts?”

“No, not something like that. They were weird dreams. I feel like there’s something hidden in them, but I can’t tell what it is.” I lifted my glass and drank. “Moreover, the dreams were more solid than normal. They stuck in my head too.”

“Umm.” Ton rubbed his chin. “You might think too much.”

“Probably.” I shrugged. “But the strange thing is, yesterday when I was looking at a clock photo, everything just went dark. Then, I saw some weird image.”

“Image?” Ton’s eyes opened wide.

“Yes. It was unclear, so I don’t know where it is.” I told him, feeling strange that I couldn’t explain what happened at that time. “I remember only... only... the sound of a clock ticking.”

“And how did you feel?” Ton weaved his hand together.

“I felt that... I was strangely familiar with what I saw.”

“Um.” Ton nodded. “And do you think that the dream and the image you saw relate in any way?”

I looked up, trying to find any relation between both strange events. Relation? Maybe it was the same feeling...

The scream. The fear.

A whisper ran across my nerve. At that moment, my mind was shut down from the outside world. Everything was about to break down. I saw many white lines ran cross my eyes as if It was a TV with a bad signal that about to disappear.

A warm touch was on my shoulder. Someone was shaking me. My eyes went dark again before a light shone down. A man’s voice became clearer and louder as if it was resonant from a deep valley. My conscious started to come back. The image in front of my eyes became a reality again.

“Dream. Dream! Are you alright?” Ton was shaking me. I looked around in confusion. People in the diner were looking at us in shock.

“W... What? What’s just happened?”

“You screamed out of the blue.” He said. He looked frightened. “You saw something?”

“Saw something?” I recalled what Ton said. “Did you just ask me about the dream?”

“Yes.” Ton nodded. “You screamed because of the dream?”

“No. Not exactly.” I lifted my glass and drank, trying to suffuse the fear rising in my heart. “I heard a scream and feared something, both in my dream and when I looked at the photo. I don’t know what it is. I can’t explain why. However, every time I think about it, I can feel that something... something dangerous is waiting for me.”

Ton nodded then continued asking. “Dream, can you tell me about what happened in your dream and when you looked at the photo? What did you see?”

“I... I can’t.”

“It’s fine.” Ton said. “Take it easy.”

“I’ll try...” I closed my eyes, recalling what happened. It was strange that I couldn’t explain the dream that was so solid. It was as if a high wall stood between me and my memory. I tried to cross the wall, but it was useless. The wall was too tough for me.

The wall of fear...

All of my memories, even when they were so solid, I couldn't put them together. I suddenly realized that I was refusing them.

But why? Why did I fear them so much?

"If you feel too bad, you don't have to force yourself." Ton said.

"No. I... I'm trying. I can remember that image, but I can't put them into words."

"You don't have to force yourself." Ton insisted. "If you're too uncomfortable, just let it go."

"I... I..." I grabbed my head, forcing everything out from my memories. "I remember now."

"You... do you want to say about it?" He asked.

"When I looked at the photo, I heard a clock ticking. I was scared, but I didn't know what I was scared of. In my dream, I saw my Dad. I clearly saw that my Dad was scared of me. After that, a chain was on my legs. A bathroom door in my house opened and... and..." I stopped shortly. "And I saw my dead body in there."

Ton lowered his eyes, rubbing his chin. He was in deep thought. Would he think that I went crazy?

"That's a weird dream." Ton said with a straight face.

"Where do you think it's from? Why did I have a dream like that?"

“The cause of your dream isn’t clear but as far as I know they said that a dream is a form of your desire or some old memories. In your case, I think your dream might be from your stress.”

“Stress?” I raised my eyebrows. “What do I have to stress off to dream that I die?”

“I don’t know, but I can see that you’re scared. You might worry about something without realized it. For now, you might scare that Bill will hurt you. You might scare that your father will ignore you. That’s why he ran away like that. It can be none of these reasons as well.” He leaned back in his chair. “About the image, you saw when you looked at that photo, did you go through the same situation before?”

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to find the answer. “No. I can remember that I’ve never in such situation before.”

“Is that so?” Ton nodded. “Dream. I’ll ask you seriously. Have you considered going to see a psychiatrist?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Everyone will think I’m crazy.”

“That’s a wrong perception. You don’t have to care about those people.” He said. “But if you insist, it’s fine. It might not be a problem if you can confirm that you’ve never been through that situation. You may just too stress and worry too much.”

“That might be the case.”

“Well, if you're worried you can talk to me anytime.” He smiled. “I think you might too stress about Bill. The way you screamed earlier, I’ve never seen you like that. You might still worry about what happened the other day. Relax. Don’t worry too much about those things.”

“Thanks.” I smiled softly and felt much better. Ton could always help me.

Ton took out his wallet and calculated our lunch’s price before put out his money. I counted how much I have to pay before put out my portion too. Then, someone called me.

“D- D- Dream.” Max walked over to us. “Yesterday, I— I— I’m sorry.”

I looked up and saw that his face was covered with cuts and bruises. His mouth was swollen so as his eyes which also blackened. Guilt flooded into my heart.

“Max, you don’t have to say sorry. It’s me who has to be sorry.” I said.

“N—No. I’m s— sorry that I couldn’t help you.”

“Don’t think too much.” I smiled. “I have to thank you. Without you there, I might be in bigger trouble.”

Max smiled slowly. He nodded in acceptance before turning around.

“If you’re okay with it, can you help me with the English exercise? I don’t understand the current section well.” I winked at Max.

“O— o— okay.” Max nodded. “I— I have another class. S—see you.”

Max left. I looked at his back thoughtfully. That back seemed so alone.

After the class had ended, I went home right away.

Ton offered to walk me home, but I refused. I didn’t want him to have trouble because of me

I walked home carefully, rushing through the alley to the house door that I was familiar with the most. When I was in the house, I locked the door tightly to make sure that nothing out of expecting would happen.

I put my shoes away and walked into the kitchen. Dad was still at work. Sometimes, he went out with his colleges before heading home. It was a small happiness for a middle-aged man living alone with his daughter.

I walked upstairs and went into my room. I locked the door to make sure that nobody could barge in. Bill tried to break into my house many times. My Dad and I could chase him away every time, but we both knew that if we weren’t cautious, we might be in trouble. Bill was the cause of all problems. As long as he didn’t give up, I couldn’t relax.

I sat on the chair in front of my computer. While I sank into the seat, my eyes fell upon a beautiful woman on the side of the table. I picked up the photo and looked at it with a familiar feeling. Mom in my memories was always this beautiful.

Mom left us since I was young. Even when I couldn't remember a lot about her, the one thing I could be certain was the love she gave me. That was the fact that couldn't be changed forever.

Dad had never talked about Mom with a sad expression. No tears or regret for me to see. He always acted tough in front of me. However, when nobody was around, he would look at mom's photo silently and let the emotions consumed him.

"It's good that I look like you, Mom." I smiled and rubbed the photo with my thumb.

Suddenly, a piece of paper fell from the photo frame. I picked it up and inspected with curiosity.

When I saw what it was clearly, the hidden images started to reveal as if pieces of jigsaws put together into a complete image. I stared at the mysterious photo in my hand. My brain worked hard to process the information it got.

It was the image of my old house. This photo was taken from the outside. Whoever took this picture must be away from the house about 300-

400 meters because I could see the electric lines in front of the house. The lines on one side were cut. They swung around by the wind.

Who took this photo? And why the photo was here...?

Suddenly, the images from my memories surfaced. The colors around me started to fade. The room was twisted into another place I didn't know. I looked around, trying to make sense of what was happening.

This was the room I heard the clock ticking.

Numbness expanded throughout my body. All of the energy was sucked dry from both of my legs. I fell. Then, the numb became a pain.

I could feel that something terrible was about to begin.

Faint breaths. Blurred eyes as if the world was about to end. I heard a scream. However, this time the scream was different from before.

It was the scream of sadness.

I looked at the source of the scream, trying to put myself up but none of my strength was left.

The scream became louder and louder. Who was screaming? Why the scream was heard from inside my Dad's old room? I could only think all of these inside my head.

Suddenly, a warm touch was on my chest. I lifted my arm with all of my strength to touch it and looked at my hand out of curiosity.

Dark blood was thick on my hand. It was still warm.

I wanted to scream, but my mouth was shut tight. I twisted around to get away from the invisible devil, but my body refused to comply. The scream rang louder. The hidden emotion was stronger than ever. The sorrow covering this place woke up the madness in me.

I wanted to leave. I wanted to get out of here.

Let me go. Let go...

The scream moved nearer and nearer. I tried my hardest to struggle, but it was useless. My eyes moved on their own even I wanted to close them to avoid whatever was about to show in front of me. My curiosity was dancing, though. My eyes moved to the source of the scream that getting near. They caught on the emptiness that was heavy in the air.

The scream stopped near me. My eyes slowly moved to the left, went to the right, then looked above, and finally stopped at the bottom.

The scream was from somewhere near me. I tried to find where it came from for a moment before realizing the most frightening fact.

The most frightening fact wasn't the scream, but it was the place that my eyes stopped upon.

The hollow scream. Sorrowful. And lonely...

Every scream... Every single one... was from my throat.

4

The dark broke down. The light replaced it.

Eyes opened slowly. Blurred colors twinkled in front of the eyes. The thick mist that covered reality became thinner, revealing the familiar place.

I felt confused. Reality and dream had merged together until I couldn't tell the differences. I shook my head a bit before looked around.

This is my room with the same piano, the same mirror, and the same me, but something had changed.

I couldn't remember what had happened before.

I tried to swim in the river of memory. Images of the past floated down the fierce tide before crumbled down in front of me. The more I tried to think, the more memories were destroyed.

I tried to recall further. After I'd got home, I came into my room and then I...

The images crashed into my mind. The scream resonated inside my chest. The pain was so intense as if my body was tearing apart. Red blood bathed every inch of the room. The raw smell reeked in the air whispered to the soul that...

I was about to die.

I'd screamed before I knew it. A tear ran down my face. The only thing I could feel from the crust of memory was fear. It didn't matter how clear the image was, I couldn't tell what it was.

I tried to deny something.

I took off my shirt in a hurry, trying to find the wound on my body. From memory, I faintly recalled that blood poured down from my stomach, but I couldn't tell the exact spot.

I got up and walked in front of the mirror. A petite figure reflected in it. I roamed my eyes throughout my body, seeking the wound I saw in the dream.

Nothing... No wound was there.

Fear was replaced with curiosity. My heart might deny it. It knew that something dangerous was waiting ahead, but my intuition was telling me that the truth was also hidden there.

I needed to find the answer.

At night, I went into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Dad worked so hard. He should take some rest.

Dad still obsessed with the photo albums. He kept telling me that it didn't matter how bad your past was, it was what make us the one we were. Every memory was beautiful.

After the dinner was made, I placed them on the table neatly and went to call Dad.

The atmosphere at the dinner table was the same. I talked about Bill and my study, discussed the news and what was going on recently. It didn't matter what I had talking about, Dad was ready to listen to me.

“Bill is following you again?” He shook his head.

“Not just wait for me like the last time. This time he actually chasing after me.” I said and put the dinner into my mouth.

“That’s terrible.” He looked upset. “Well, but at least someone takes a fancy to you.”

“Come on, Dad.” I adjusted my glasses. “Someone likes me doesn't need Bill to clinging around. I'm quite popular, you know?”

The conversation went smoothly as usual. However, I couldn't shake off the uncomfortable feeling. The faint memory still haunted me. My thirst for truth was screeching loudly.

I would never be free if this won't end.

While Dad was laughing at his joke, I gathered up my courage and asked.

“Dad.”

“Yes, darling.” He looked at me in confusion before showing his seriousness. Dad might realize that I was about to say something important.

“Dad, have you seen this photo before?” I took the house’s photo from my pocket and handed it to him.

He took the photo and looked at it carefully. The seriousness on his face changed into confusion.

“I remember this photo, but I forgot why I’d taken it.” Dad scratched his head. “Where did you find it?”

“I found it in a frame in my room. You put it there?”

“I can’t remember.” He replied. “But what’s wrong with this photo?”

“I just feel strange.” I looked down. “Had a burglar broke into our old house before?”

“A burglar broke into our old house, huh?” His eyes moved around. “I don’t think so.”

“And what about the electric lines in the photo? They were cut.”

“The electric lines? Let me think.” Dad stared at the photo while rubbing his chin. “Ah! I remember now. There were some times we had a storm that torn out these electric lines down. I took this photo and sent to the officers and had them to come and dealt with it. I had to go way back to take the whole shot. In case there was more damage elsewhere.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t really convinced with that. “But you’re really sure that no one broke into our home?” Even I was confident that Dad wouldn’t lie to me, I had to ask again. It made me feel better.

“No.” Dad raised his eyebrows. “Why do you ask that?”

“Well...” I hesitated. “I feel weird.”

“Weird?” He asked. “How?”

“I can’t explain it myself. It’s just a feeling that... I don’t know. I don’t know how to put it.”

“If you’re worried about something, you can tell me. Don’t be shy.”

“I know but... but this is different...” I shook my head.

“It’s fine. It doesn’t matter how embarrassing it is, I’m ready to listen.”

“Well... okay.” I smiled and took a deep breath. “When I saw that photo, I... ah... I had a weird dream.”

“Dream?” He raised his eyebrows. “Can you tell me what had you dream about?”

“I tried to remember but... it’s like something is stopping me from thinking about it as if I’m forbidden to talk about it.”

“So it makes you worry about the old house?” He asked with concern. “I want you to calm down and tell me about your dream again. I promise I’ll take it seriously.”

“You promise.” I waved my finger.

“Promise.” He nodded.

“Well, I saw myself... I... I lied down and couldn't move. Blood was all over my body, and I heard someone screamed from afar. After that, I realized that the scream was from my throat.”

“That's all?” Dad raised his eyebrows.

“Yes. That's all.”

Suddenly, Dad roared out laughing. He slapped his leg and shredded his tear at the same time.

“That reminds me of when you were young, you used to dream of strange things like this and came begging to sleep with me. Ah, a child is still a child.”

“This is not funny, Dad.” My face was bright red. “You promised to be serious.”

“I'm serious. I am.” He smiled. “But what you'd seen isn't something you should be worried about. We all have weird dreams from time to time, especially when we're stress. Tell me, what your stress really is?”

“It's obvious that you don't take it seriously.” I raised my voice. “What make me feel stress is this dream. If you don't take it seriously, I'm so out of here.”

“Dream, calm down. I know that you...”

“Do you know why you see this amusing?” I asked. “You have something hidden from me, haven't you?”

“I think that doesn’t matter.”

“It does! If you don’t have anything hidden from me, you’ll tell me everything!”

“Why do you think like that? Why do you think I have something hidden from you?” Dad raised his voice in response. “I don’t have anything hidden from you! Ask your friend or your ex. I just don’t think that your dream has anything wrong as you think. It’s just a nonsense dream everyone has!”

My mind snapped. My chest was burning like there was some hellish fire within. I cursed at my Dad loudly before ran to my room. I couldn’t even remember what I’d said to my Dad. The last sound I heard was the sound of the door crashing close.

That movement... That voice... It was as if... as if our relationship went back to where it used to be.

I leaned on the door before slipped down on the floor. No matter how hard I tried to forget, the wound still left a scar. The conflict between my Dad and me ended a long time ago, but a small gap between us was still there. Memory was the thing that bid us to the painful past. Dad might say memory was beautiful, but that beauty was hurting us now.

I looked up at the ceiling. The complete white reminded me of something Ton said. Sometimes I wanted to go back to the nothingness,

leaving everything behind. I didn't want to hurt anyone because I was still hurt from a small wound from the past. I wanted it to disappear and forget about the bad time that still haunted me.

I pulled up my knees, put my face on them, and cried silently.

After today class had ended, Ton and I met at the library as usual.

Ton took out a new Milk Jigsaw from his bag. He poured out the pieces and placed the board on the table. It was a signal that the time to solve some puzzle had started.

I fumbled around a while before picked up a piece and placed it into the position at the left side of the board.

“You become faster.” Ton smiled and took a piece. “Already get the idea, huh?”

“What idea?” I said “I just start from the side. Anyone can think of that.”

“Yes. Anyone can think of that.” He laughed. “But don't forget that such simple principle is critical.”

“Maybe.” I took another piece and placed it down on the board.

“Have another problem today?” Ton asked. “Bill chased you again?”

“Nah.” I shook my head. “Bill wasn’t here today. I’m just not feeling well.”

“You’re a bad liar.” Ton smirked.

“I’m not a bad liar.” I stepped back a bit. “You’re too sharp.”

“Okay, fine. What’s the matter?” Ton asked. “Let me guess. It’s about that dream again.”

I nodded in acceptance before took the photo from my bag and handed it to Ton.

“What’s this?”

“I found this photo hidden in a frame. After I saw it, I...”

“You can’t remember again?”

“Not that I can’t remember but... It’s like something was blocking my thought. I felt it. I touched it. I remembered it. But when I have to talk about it, I can’t recall it.”

“You mean...” Ton tilted his head.

“I was... scared of something but I can’t tell what it is.”

“I understand.” Ton nodded. “You don’t have to say. Do you realize that your hands are shaking?”

Suddenly, I lost my strength. The photo fell from my hand and flew to the next table. I tried to grab it, but someone reached it first.

“O-- old house? I miss it too.” Max smiled before returned the photo to me.

“Thanks.” I forced out a smile.

Max gave me a puzzled look. He nodded before returned to his seat.

I was a bit surprised that he missed the house he used to live. Max used to play with me when we were young. However, whenever we had good times, Max’s mom would come to berate him and dragged him away. After that, I would hear him fighting with his mom. That might be a reason for Max to run away from home. From my point, I didn’t think that that place has anything good left for him.

“You’re sure you are okay, Dream?” Ton asked.

“I don’t know.” I lowered my head. “At first, I thought what I saw was nonsense, but I start to not so sure about that.”

Ton nodded, thinking hard. I felt good every time I saw him like that. Sometimes, what we wanted is someone who sees how important our problem is, no matter how the small the case is.

“I said that it might be caused by your stress. Not something big to be serious about it but I don’t think it’s like that now.” Ton said. “Hallucination won’t repeat easily. You haven’t got a lack of sleep recently, have you?”

I shook my head. He nodded in reply. “It seems... strange. Can you say about what you saw in the dream again?”

“I’ll try.” I took a deep breath and concentrated on my memory. Every bit of the broken images, I tried to collect it all.

I used all of my strength to pull the memory bits together to make a whole image, but the fear in my heart was so intense. The more I tried, the stronger the wall between my memory, and I became.

I imagined of a fierce tide. Both my arms pulled the chains that took hold of the images that floated in the tide of time. The chains got heavier and heavier. My tiny body was dragged down under the water gradually.

I put more strength in my arms until the tendons appeared on both of them. My feet scratched with the rough bottom under neat and torn off my flesh. I clenched my teeth, squeezed the rest of my strength out.

The tide became even fiercer, but I refused to give up. My arms and legs were tense. I bawled out from pain before snatched the images above the water.

Suddenly, every chain fused into one, forming the whole image, from the still image to the animated one. Colors and music were added in, creating the story from emotions and thought of the past.

I closed my eyes a bit before opened them again.

“You remember now, right?” Ton asked.

“Yes... I remember now.” I nodded. “After I saw the photo, I returned to the room I heard the clock ticking. This time was a bit different.

No clock ticking sound. Instead, I heard someone scream from afar. I saw myself covered in blood. The strangest thing is that scream belonged to me.”

“It seems... confusing.” Ton raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t know what that means too.” I shook my head. “I can’t even remember facing something like that. At first, I think I was attacked, but there was no wound on my body. I already asked my Dad, but he said something like that had never happened.”

“It might be more than some ordinary stress.” Ton said. “You might face something far terrible than that. You were freaked out or so scared that it stuck in your mind.”

“My Dad said the same thing too, but I feel that there’s something in that place. I feel that what I saw was real. Something tells me that. My Dad just laughed it off and said that I over thinking it.”

“Your Dad wasn’t wrong. It can be like he said but there’re also other possibilities.” He leaned back. “You said that you’re scared of those photos?”

“Yeah. After I saw the first photo, I can’t remember it. No. I feel that it was blocked by something so I can’t reach it. I’m still scared, but I can’t tell what I’m scared of.”

Ton nodded before continued asking. “And had you experienced something similar to what you’d seen? It’s not necessary to be exactly the same. Maybe something like you cut yourself when you were young and hurt

until you cried out. Maybe nobody was there to hurt you. The wound might not necessary be physical. It maybe what your memory use to compare with something similar happened in the past. For example, you were crying. The cut wound could mean that you heard someone said things that hurt you.”

“I don’t think so.”

“How about before you moved house?”

I tried to think of everything in the past, digging out the unusual events and the gaps between memories that could change my life. I came back empty hand.

“No.” I shook my head.

“Fine. In this case, I think you might really too stress. Normal worry shouldn’t trouble you this much. Sometimes dreams are from the stress. But the hallucination...” Ton covered his mouth with his hand. “It’s... too strange.”

I sat there to listen to his conclusion with depression. Everything was so contradicted. No memory. No wound. But what I saw and felt were so intense as if they were real. Should I stay with the fact or believe in my intuition now?

Suddenly, a thought appeared in my mind. I knew how I could solve this problem.

“If we can’t conclude now, how about we go to find the truth at my old house?”

“Hey! That’s not a good idea, Dream.” Ton lifted his hand, gestured the stop motion. “We don’t know whether what you saw is real. If it’s real, doesn’t it too risky? If the attacker is still around and you’re attacked there, the same thing might happen over again.”

“I know but...”

“Think it through.” He warned. “I don’t want this matter to harm you.”

I nodded even when I knew which path I would take.

“Well, how about we have you go to see a psychiatrist first? If the problem can’t be solved then, we can find another way later. Okay?” Ton smiled.

“I’m not crazy,” I said in a playful tone.

“I’m not saying that you’re crazy, but it’ll be better than having nothing to confirm that the image you saw was real or not.” Ton smiled. “We can’t say that you don’t have a problem either. You’d better go to see a psychiatrist. We might learn something more.”

“But...”

“No buts.” Ton touched my lips with his finger.

I let out a big sigh before lifting my hands in surrender.

“You do that.” Ton smiled devilishly. “I’ll take it as a yes.”

5

“How do you feel?” The young doctor asked.

“Well... I... I’m a bit stressed.” The dream was too embarrassed, to tell the truth.

Ton gave Dream a fierce look. He was forcing Dream to say everything.

“And... and I saw some illusion too.” Dream hunched her shoulders.

The doctor took note before kept asking.

“Can you give me the details? What was the illusion appearing to you?”

“It’s... some weird dream. I saw the image of my old house when I looked at some photo.”

“You were thinking of it?”

“No.” Dream shook her head. “I just... froze and saw the image of the old house.”

He nodded and took more notes.

“How long has this happen?”

“Not quite a week but I think it might be a problem, so I come to see you early.”

“Other than seeing the illusion, do you have any other symptom?”

“Sometimes, she would cry out strange things too. Just scream out of nowhere without realizing it herself.” Ton added. Dream lowered her head with embarrassment.

“You are her brother?” The doctor asked.

“No. I’m her friend. I saw that she’s been in trouble, so I take her to see you.”

“Do you have any problem with your family or your study?”

“No.” Dream shook her head.

“Something to worry or stress over?”

Dream shook her head again. The young doctor noted down before looked at Dream in the eyes. She stared back, not trying to avoid him.

“Do you have particular belief or faith? Such as you’ve met an alien or think that you’re a magician.”

“Never.” Dream answered. “But when I saw the illusion after looking at the photos, I feel that what I saw had actually happened.”

“Thinking that the illusion happened in reality?” The doctor raised his eyebrows. “Can you tell me what you’ve seen?”

“I... every time I tried to explain something is blocking my head. It’s hard to say out loud.” Dream replied. “I can’t remember much of it. If you want me to tell now...”

Dream took a notebook from her bag and handed it to the doctor. He read through it very fast before returned it to Dream.

After I'd told everything to Ton, Ton suggested that I should take note about every image from my dream. He said that I might need this information in the future. He wrote down about the dream and illusion when I was unable to write them by myself. I would copy it to my notebook before I went to bed.

“So, you saw yourself back in your old house, chained down, your father showed that he fears you, and you also saw yourself dead. Are these correct?”

Dream nodded.

“Do you have a feeling that someone is talking behind your back?”

“No.”

“OK, then. From your history, you have no chronic symptom, never use the drug, and haven't on any medication currently. Anyone in your family has the same situation?”

“No.”

The doctor nodded.

“Do you feel too energetic or sad than usual? Something that you're anxious about? Such symptom can indicate some other illnesses as well.”

“I feel worried right after I saw the illusion, but after a while, it’ll be fine.”

“When you saw the illusion, did you realize that it’s not real?”

“I did.”

“Not thinking about suicide?”

“No.”

“Well.” The young doctor leaned back and rubbed his nose. “Your symptom matches the perception disorder. However, many indications aren’t right. I think that we can say for certain for the time being, but I’ll give you some medicine first. Do you have any medication allergies?”

“No. Never.”

“The pharmacist will explain about the medicines. I’ll schedule the next appointment, but now please let me test your concentration.”

After we paid the bill and left, Ton led me to the exit. He turned back to me and asked.

“Little one, do you want to go home now? This brother will take you home.”

“Thanks but I can go home by myself. Don’t trouble yourself.”

“Aren’t you afraid of Bill?” Ton tilted his head and asked. “Even we haven’t been to the university, but that bastard might come to see you anyway.”

In that case, I think I might be in bigger trouble if something happens to my favorite friend.”

I felt thankful to him, but at the same time, I felt bad that he called me ‘friend’ like that.

“Just let me take you home. Believe me. Bill will come to see you today.”

I nodded slowly before followed Ton without another word.

We chose to go home in a different path, hoping that Bill wouldn’t find us. He followed me for quite some times. Using the same route was too risky.

While we walked into a shortcut lead to my house, Ton broke the silent.

“Feel better now?” Ton asked. “The doctor’s conclusion might not be so clear, but it seems we can relax.”

“Um, thank you,” I said. “I think I can forget about those images soon.”

Even though I was so serious about that illusion, but now, I felt so relax as if those terrible moments had never happened. It might be like Ton said, I probably too stressed out about something.

After that, we walked home in silent; beware of the danger that was not yet to come. Ton made me feel safe, but at the same time, having a man walked beside me was an allowance for Bill to attack.

Especially Ton... Ton was Bill's most wanted prey.

Bill always severely hurt men who getting close to me and always found a way out of trouble. The police usually avoided this kind of problems. That was the main reason he was still around up until now.

We walked safely all the way home. However, I was shocked when I saw Bill waiting in front of my house. A large iron wrench was held tightly in his hand. He knew that the university wasn't a good place for him to keep follow me around anymore.

I headed another way and pulled Ton with me. He looked at me with confusion for a while before he understood what was going on.

"It's okay, Dream. I can deal with him." Ton said.

"That's not good. I told you that I won't let you get hurt." I whispered. "I definitely won't let him see you. You might corner him once, but Bill is more dangerous than you think. We'd better call the police."

I took out my phone and called the police. They promised that they would arrive soon. Meanwhile, I had to find a safe place. This was my problem. I couldn't have Ton risk himself for me again.

We walked to the back of the house then turned into a narrow walkway on the right. At that moment, I saw Bill rushed after us. I sped up and pulled Ton with me. However, Ton stood still. His eyes were on the enemy who was heading toward us.

“What are you doing?!” I shouted.

“I know we can’t avoid this.” Ton smiled. “I saw you try to run away even when you don’t know where to go. Your eyes tell me that.”

“The police are on the way. Don’t do something stupid.”

“But while we’re waiting for the police, you do know he is faster than you, right? You can’t escape him.” He looked at Bill with challenging eyes. “Don’t worry. I can take care of this.”

Ton walked to Bill slowly with a friendly smile on his face. Bill stopped less than a meter from him. He lowered his eyes, looking at Ton with a fierce grudge.

“Are you crazy or stupid?” Bill knocked that wrench on his hand. “You really think you alone can stop me?”

“I want to ask the gentleman a question. Wouldn’t it be better if we end this without a fight?” Ton waved his hand forward. His smile tainted with something evil.

Bill looked at Ton in puzzlement then roared out laughing.

“Are you so scared that you’ve gone crazy?” Bill wiped away his tear. “You really think that you can get out with that lame joke. I’ll tell you what. Anyone dares play with my woman never escape my wrath.”

“And where’s your woman?” Ton asked. “I see only a blank space next to you.”

“You just talk shit.” Bill gritted his teeth. “She’s standing behind you, moron.”

Ton turned to look at me briefly before turned back to Bill. “She’s your woman? Does she look like she is? I only see a girl who trying to escape a psychopath. You must be thinking on your own that she still likes you.”

Suddenly, Bill hit him harshly with the wrench. Ton moved slowly but rhythmically and turned to stand behind Bill without a scratch.

“You must be crazy to think that you can fight me.” Bill roared. “I’ll kill you!”

“That’s why I said I don’t want to fight.” Ton shook his head. “Let’s end this nicely.”

Bill rushed to Ton and hit the wrench from above. The metal aimed at the head of its prey, meaning to take life. Right now, Bill was mad beyond control. Anyone else’s life no longer had a meaning to him.

Ton avoided Bill's attacks in rhythm. He stepped back to Bill's side and punched the mad man's face right on the spot. Bill staggered to the side before took his stance again.

"What's wrong?" A smile appeared on Ton's face briefly before turning into coldness. "If you want to fight, come on."

Bill growled out loud and rushed to his prey swaying the wrench around. The anger caused Bill to attack aimlessly. Ton avoided all of them and hit Bill's face a few times. I'd never seen Ton like this before. He was like a sleeping tiger. His smile was the cloth that covered his edges inside.

Bill fell. He tried to use the wrench to protect himself, but Ton kicked it away and pulled him up by the collar. Ton punched Bill again before let go of him.

"Let's end it here." Ton said. "This is the fight you want. I give it to you, and I win."

Ton turned away and walked back to me with all the coolness, showing off how far above he was for the mad man to see.

Bill was leaning on a wall. His breath is ragged. His eyes focused on the rabbit that turned into a wolf. They were full of hatred and pain. Bill was like a puppy that was feared by the roar of a great wolf, could only show off the courage he'd never have.

Suddenly, he rushed to Ton. His right hand took out a knife from his pocket. His left hand reached out to grab Ton's shoulder. The blade was directed at Ton's back in a flash.

Ton glanced at Bill with disdain. Ton turned around to dodge the attack before kicked the attacker's stomach. Bill staggered back. His legs shook. All of his strength was used for keep himself upright. Bill pointed the knife at Ton. The puppy refused to back down.

"I think you should give up." Ton said expressionlessly. "We've got nothing from this fight."

Bill was silent. He waved the knife around slowly. Ton stepped back to avoid it for a moment. He hadn't attacked Bill once, acting as if a king was forgiving a prisoner and showing off his own nobility.

The siren was screaming from afar. Ton stopped in front of Bill. He held the loser's wrist tightly and looked at a faraway place.

"You still have choices. End it here or let her go. You choose."

Bill looked at Ton's face for a moment before lowered his head again. He let go of the knife he'd hold on so tightly. His eyes were on me now.

He shook his arm away from Ton, stepping back from us a bit before completely stopped.

"You agree to end it now?" Ton asked.

Suddenly, Bill rushed at me. He squeezed my wrist with all of his strength he had left. I tried to escape, but he was a lot stronger than me.

Most of my strength as if was sucked out. I fell on the ground, seeing that my environment started to twist. The atmosphere became gloomy. My fear of men resurfaced.

Suddenly, the images in front of me broke into fine pieces. The dust of reality floated in the air before completely disappeared.

I looked around in the dark place, trying to find something to hold on, desperate to find something to make me feel safe. While I was walking aimlessly, I heard a strange noise.

It wasn't a scream. It was a birthday song.

The high pitch from hundreds of children sang a chorus. They clapped in unity in tune of the birthday song. The chorus and the cheer surrounded me. I tried to listen to understand the meaning of those voices.

'Blow the candles! Blow the candles!'

I listened to those voices in confusion. A birthday? Blowing candles? Why did I hear the sound from a birthday when...

When what? Where was I? What was happening in the real world?

Suddenly, the Kids' voices became lower. Every voice merged into one before broke out as if the sound of a violin playing a wrong note. The

screeching sound was getting closer to me. I closed my ears, feeling like my head was crushed fiercely.

I was about to die. I was about to die. I was about to die. I was about to die. I was about to die. These words became louder and more frequent from within my head. My body shook violently from the pain before I fell on the ground. I screamed, crying for help.

But nobody came to my rescue. The feeling flooded inside my chest.

I would be in pain... lived in torment... alone... and forever.

Suddenly, the confusion disappeared. The darkness was destroyed and replaced with colors. The chilling atmosphere was gone. There was only the sun's warmth shining from the sky.

The siren from the police car was getting near. I heard shouting, footsteps, and grumbling. I opened my eyes slowly, trying to make sense of things around me.

It might be blurred, but I still knew the man who was looking back at me. Bill was hunted down by the police. He ran straight before turned left and jumped over the wall. While he was jumping, our eyes met.

Bill looked at me as if he knew something about this.

After the commotion ended, Ton finally took me home.

Ton insisted that he would walk me home from now on. Bill wasn't a treat I should overlook. He was the man who could harm me at any time. If I kept letting him intrude into my life, I might lose something precious one day.

I nodded docilely in agreement. After what had happened today, I had no right to object his offer again.

"Good luck." I smile. Ton nodded.

Before Ton left, he paused then turned back to me.

"What?" I asked.

"Well... do you realize that when Bill grabbed you, you suddenly went out of it? When the police arrived, you suddenly screamed." Ton was silent for a minute. "What did you see at that time?"

I lowered my head a bit. "I didn't see anything. I... I..."

"You can't remember again?"

"No. No, this time I can remember. It just that everything was black. Then, I heard... some kids singing a birthday song."

"Birthday song?" Ton rubbed his chin. "It relates to the illusion you've seen before?"

"I don't know..."

"That's weird... So weird."

Ton was silent briefly before continued.

“Illusion is created from our brain. It can be anything.” Ton shook his head. “But that’s not the thing I’m worried about. What I’m concerned is that it happens when you see Bill and the look he’d given you before he ran away.”

“You saw that, too?”

“Yeah.” He tilted his head a bit. “Maybe you’ve been right. What you saw might not be caused by some normal stress. Bill might have actually hurt you in the past. He might try to kill you, but there’s still something I need to be answered.”

“You’re thinking of something?”

“Not exactly.” He shrugged. “From what you told me, generally, when you will see the illusion when you saw something about your old house. Bill had lived around there, too?”

“No. Bill’s house hadn’t been around there.” I shook my head. “But Bill had tried to break into my house.”

“If you say that, everything seems reasonable.” Ton nodded.

What Ton just said sounded logical, but my intuition was whispering that it wasn’t the real answer.

“You’re thinking about finding the truth again, huh?” Ton said. “I can tell you are.”

“How do you know?”

“Your actions scream it.” He said. “But I still insist the same. Even though I think of many things, it doesn’t mean that I’ll let you go. The evidence we have is too few. You can’t use your emotion to confirm them, you know?”

“I understand,” I replied.

“It’s good you understand.” Ton smiled. “Well, if anything happens, you can call me anytime, but I have to go now.”

That was the last words before Ton was swallowed by light from the setting sun.

6

Tonight was bright with the twinkle stars. Cool air caressed everything it could reach.

What happened today made me unable to sleep. The birthday song, the screeching sound, and the dark image at that time made me scared. I got out of the bed and found something to do to distract myself from thinking of those things.

I walked to the computer, turned it on, and looked at the frame placed beside it.

Since I found these photos, my life had changed. I felt as if there was a scream from within, calling for my soul, leading me to the abyss, before gave me death as a reward.

Those screams were still calling to me. I might give up on finding the truth, but my heart was still restless.

However, if I decided to pursue the truth, I might be unable to step back again...

I lowered my head, recalling everything once again. My intuition was whispering that what I involved myself at this time was far different from everything I'd faced. There was something dangerous out there. I should

believe Ton's advice. However, if I didn't know the answer, I felt that I wouldn't be free again.

I shook my head to get rid of the nonsense thought. I shouldn't put myself in danger without any proof. I agreed with Ton about this.

While I was waiting for the computer to start a program, I noticed the glowing orange light from outside the window. I walked to the window, stood behind the curtain, and put out my head a little to have a better look.

The warm flame was burning down there. A man took a paper and fed it to the flame.

Dad was burning the photos. Memories lost in the smoke reaching to the sky.

I tiptoed downstairs, walked to the back of the house, and stopped at the door. Dad was standing outside, looking at the photo for a while before threw it into the fire. His eyes revealed deep emotions.

That was right... Today was mom's death anniversary ...

Dad looked at the bright flame before took another photo and looked at it.

"You... you should see how our daughter is now." He smiled then threw another photo into the flame.

"Can you remember? It was when Dream cried for the first time, and I handed her my hand to hold on, Dream squeezed my finger fiercely as if she

would never letting go, then she laughed. At that moment, I vowed to myself that I'll take the best care of our daughter." Dad smiled, his eyes reflected the past. "Now you might be unable to see Dream. It's okay. I'll try to send you as many photos as possible. So, you can see how adorable our daughter is."

Dad took more photos from the album. He paused at this one longer than the other. His hand was shaking. His face twisted from the sadness. A tear dropped to the ground, broke into tiny pieces like the heart of the man who carried the torment on his shoulders for years.

"Don't worry." He said with a shaking voice. "There might be some problems between us but our child has grown up strong. I'll send you more photos as often as I can... I promise..."

Since I could remember, Dad had never revealed his sadness, or cried, for me to see even once. What he'd always done was smile broadly to comfort his only daughter, telling me that everything would be fine.

I stepped back and tried to hold back my own tears. Even though I'd knew how much pain Dad had to endure, I'd always cared about my own problem. I saw only the small stain on the large, clean cloth. The cloth that had someone else's tears stain on it. The tear stain belonged to the man who always there to give me love and hid his own pain at the same time.

I walked back to my room slowly and threw myself on the bed. It was the same old bedroom, but tonight, it felt so much different.

I looked outside. The orange glow from Dad's fire made the cold night felt warm. It reminded me that with so many troubles in my life, I wasn't alone.

While I was closing my eyes, I heard a notification sound from the computer. I got up and walked to look at it with curiosity.

There was a white box in the middle of the screen, a box from the chat program I left open. I looked at the top of the box to see who it sent the message.

...

No name appeared there.

When I was about to read the message, it disappeared.

I sighed and closed the chat box, thinking that it might be sent to the wrong person.

Suddenly, I received another message, a timed self-deleted message.

Four limbs.

Two eyes.

Seven blades.

I look at you with my two eyes and slowly stab you with a knife. Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab! I want to cut off your four limbs, but now you are beautiful as you should be.

Four. Two. Seven...

427...

The number of my old house...

I tried to take a photo of the message, but they were deleted too fast. Everything disappeared in a blink. So, I tried to remember every message and wrote them down on paper instead.

Suddenly, a new message appeared.

That night I killed...

That night I kill...

You died...

You died...

You died...

This message was repeatedly sent several times before disappeared. The screen scrolled down so fast that I couldn't keep following them. Everything happened in just mere seconds.

Suddenly, the chat box disappeared too. The program sent me a notice that the person sent me messages had deleted his or her account.

I looked out the window, confused with what just happened in front of my eyes. I couldn't make sense of the messages I just received.

My thought turned into suspicious then suspicious turned into fear. What if the person who sent the message related to my illusions and dreams? If that person was somewhere nearby...

I looked around to see if anyone looked suspicious. Dad still sat there burning photos to my mom. Nobody else was near my house, not a single one.

Then, who sent me the message? Who else knew about my dreams and what happened that night?

Who...?

I wrote the rest of the message down in a hurry, took the paper, and called one of my most familiar numbers.

"Ton. This is Dream." I said. "I found evidence that can prove my illusion."

7

The bus moved slowly along the road that led to the uncertainty.

I looked out of the window blankly, seeing the scenery rushed past at a fast speed like a life taken away by fate. Cool wind touched the skin as if a cold hand trying to comfort me, to forget what happened in the past.

“Don’t be that serious.” Ton said. “I’m here with you, you know? Cheer up a bit.”

“Thanks,” I replied without looking at him. “But I really can’t take what happened last night out of my mind.”

“I believe you now.” Ton said. “That’s why I’m going with you.”

“Don’t you worry that you’ll get into trouble as well?” I turned to ask him. “As you know, now we have evidence that the attacker is still around. It means that something terrible might happen at any moment. Aren’t you scared?”

“I’m scared...” Ton smiled. “But I’m worried what might happen to you as well.”

I looked out the window again. My face was hot with embarrassment. Ton took out cards from his bag before shuffled them fast.

“Well... did you report to the police?”

“I did this morning... but they ignored me.”

“Fucking again...” Ton sighed.

“Do you think the message last night have any hidden meaning?”

“Hidden meaning?” Ton’s eyes moved around. “Well, when thinking about the illusion you saw, it might be related. The person sent you the messages might be the one who stabbed you. I don’t think this is a joke. How many people know about this?”

“That doctor, you, me, and my Dad...” I was silent for a moment. “But Dad doesn’t know the details. So, I think we can count only you, me, and the doctor.”

Ton nodded before putting the cards back into the box.

“Do you have any scar?” Ton asked. I shook my head in refusal.

“It’s strange that the number the attacker sent to you is your old house’s number. Four means your limbs. Two are your eyes. These matched what he wrote, but what about seven? What does it mean?”

“I don’t know...”

“And people who know about this aren’t that many. Who can be the attacker then?” Ton rubbed his chin. “You know what? I’m kind of suspect Bill.”

“Bill... you told me he looked at me strangely back then, right?”

“That’s it.” Ton nodded. “But that’s not the point I care most. I care more about when Bill squeezed your wrist then you saw the illusion.”

“The birthday song...” I whispered.

What did I see when Bill tried to hurt me? How did a birthday song relate to all of this? I couldn't make sense of anything.

“Yes. The birthday song.” Ton repeated. “I can't see its relation with your other illusions.”

“Or all of these happened on my birthday?” I said. “But what about that child's voice? The image of when I was stabbed... it didn't happen when I was a child.”

“You said that you heard cheering to blow candles, too, right?” Ton asked. “When we talk about birthday cake and candle, what will we think of?”

“Children,” I replied.

“That's right.” Ton said. “Maybe there wasn't any child on that day, but you may relate what happened that day to the definition of the birthday.”

“Well, that's possible.”

“But what I interest the most is that the attacker tried to send the message that he killed you. Why does he have to do that?”

“Is it weird for a psychopath?”

“Yes.” Ton shook his head. “Why does he need to do that exactly when you saw the photo? How could he know that you can remember something when for all the people who know are you and me?”

“What about that doctor?” I asked.

“You’ve seen him before?” Ton asked. “From my understanding, if the attacker wants to hurt you, covering himself must be number one priority. However, telling you the house number or something like that shows that he must know your house very well. I don’t think that the attacker who came to hurt you on one single night would be able to remember your house number. It doesn’t count the case that he’d followed you for some times.”

“I don’t know anything about those.” I shook my head, feeling depressed. The more I tried to think and dig deeper in this matter, the more I felt bad. Even though I wanted to know the truth, my heart had denied something all these times.

“I’m sorry...” Ton said. “I forget that you’re not ready to talk about it.”

Ton took the cards out of the box again. He tried to smile to make me feel better.

“Anyway, let’s play a memory game so you can relax a bit.” Ton placed the cards into rows on the empty seat. “The rule is easy. The one who can remember more cards wins. You and I will have one minute to remember the card and where it is.”

“Fine...” I agreed without really paying attention.

“But just playing isn’t fun.” Ton smiled. “Let’s have a bet.”

“Bet on what?” I raised my eyebrows, feeling that Ton would set up a strange condition for me.

“The loser will have to pay for lunch, okay?”

“If I say no...?”

“Hey, we’ve never play this game before. Don’t you think that you can win?” Ton said playfully. “I read that women’s brain works better than men’s. Don’t you think that you’re refusing the bet and letting go the chance of winning?”

“Okay... Fine...” I agreed with annoyance.

“So, you agree, huh?” Ton winked. “Then, let’s start.”

We walked into a restaurant not far from my old house. Ton looked at the menu and smiled brightly.

“What should I order, hmmm?” His words had a hint of delight.

“Just pick something and stop bragging.”

“The loser shouldn’t complain, you know?” He smiled. “Moreover, I hadn’t forced you to agree. Can you remember that?”

I sat still, couldn’t go against the fact he said.

“Anyway, how can you remember all those cards?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Want to know my secret?” Ton laughed. “Nothing’s special. I just made up a story from them.”

“Make up a story?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Yes. Something like when I saw a King and a Queen, the story will be that the King marries the Queen. If the next card is a Jack, I might add that the King marries the Queen with the Jack standing beside them.”

“I see.”

“Good.” Ton ordered his food before turned back to me. His playfulness became serious.

“It’s probably useless to ask because we’re here now but I’ll ask you again anyway.” He weaved his hands together. “Are you sure that you won’t back down? You still have that chance.”

“I don’t know...” I avoided his eyes for a moment before staring back at them. “It might be... dangerous but I think that letting the attacker follow me like this is more dangerous.”

Ton nodded. The waiter came to serve the drinks then left. Ton paused to take his drink.

“Um.” He started. “If you’d already decided that, I’ll help you with everything I have. I just don’t want you to force yourself.”

“Thanks.” I forced a smile. “I’ll end this as soon as possible.”

We left the restaurant after finished the meal. On the way to my old house, I tried to look around, seeking for something out of the ordinary. I realized that everything around here might be the key to the answer I'd been looking for. I wanted myself to be reassured that this trip would end everything.

Houses and shops lined along the way we walked. I noticed some minor changes. Grandma who used to like sitting in front of a house was gone. A sweet shop I used to frequent was now closed. Paints on buildings became faded and brittle. Memories remained the same but the reality changed. Ending and lost stay with us, support us to go to the end, then sing us the song of eternal sleep. We have born to end. That the reason making our lives meaningful.

Many things might have ended, but our mind still yearned for them. I felt familiar with this place as if I'd never left here. The bond made the happiness stayed forever. However, this happiness hurt me after I learned that this place hid my dark past.

We walked until the end of the road. The old house stood grandly in front of us. The electric lines on the side were changed as Dad told me. I'd left this place for three years, but everything hadn't changed much.

I took out the photo to make sure that this was the place I used to live. The place I once called home. Now it might be empty, but the livelihood from the past was still kept inside.

I looked at the house on the opposite side. Max's old house was silent. No light could be seen. It was closed as if a dead house.

Since Max had moved to the dorm, I hadn't asked him about this house again. I didn't know what had happened after I moved away. Fate and time might already drive Max's family away from here. I couldn't confirm it. I didn't know.

Ton stood still. He looked around the house I used to live with the doubtful eyes.

"It's this house?" He asked. I nodded.

"Give me a minute." He walked around the house, examined everything that might be dangerous for us. Ton might be laid back, but he'd always be very careful with important matters.

At that moment, a wasp flew from the sideways. I stepped back a bit to avoid it.

When I was young, I was hit by a wasp once. Its needle pierced into my flesh, released the deadly toxin. I cried out loud from pain. Dad took me to the hospital immediately. I still remembered his expression from that time.

The cold mask broke into pieces. He was so scared. His eyes revealed the fear of losing.

I was in pain for quite some times, but the pain in my memory lasted even longer. I wasn't scared of an insect that much. However, after that incident, whenever I saw one of them my intuition screamed for me to run.

“What’s the matter?” Ton turned to ask me.

“It’s a wasp,” I replied.

“A wasp?” Ton raised his eyebrows and walked to my side. “Well, that’s not a wasp. It’s a fly.”

“It’s a wasp.” I tilted my head a little. “A fly doesn’t look like this.”

“Yes. A normal fly doesn’t look like this.” He said while extended his hand forward. The wasp flew to stop on his finger. “This is a fly that has a similar appearance of a wasp. What strange is how come it appears here?”

“There’s something like that?”

“Don’t you see that it doesn’t hurt me?” He moved his hand closer to his face before shook his finger a bit to let the fly flown. “Because it looks like this, other animals are scared of it and allow it to survive longer.”

“It disguises as a wasp?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Nah.” Ton shook his head. “It doesn’t even realize how it looks. Other animals just think that it’s toxic and avoid it.”

“That’s strange,” I said.

“Yes. Nature has many strange things.” Ton said. “Probably like a human.”

“You start to compare something weird again.”

“Weird?” Ton laughed. “If we keep assuming things on our own, don’t you think it’s a bit hard to live?”

“Well, maybe.” I nodded in agreement.

He brushed the dust of his clothes, took a deep breath, and turned to me.

“Okay. Are you ready to go?”

I hesitated for a minute before nodded. We looked at the old building in front of us with strange feelings. Some secret was hidden in there, and this was the time to seek it out.

We walked inside together with straight neck and determined eyes. We had to throw away all hesitation if we wanted to know the hidden truth.

We had to sacrifice everything.

Old memories were replaced with the silent. The dark inside the house erased the warmth it once held.

The house wasn’t locked, so we got in easily. It was a bit bigger than the house we were living now. The room Ton and I were standing was the living room. The dining table was in the middle of the room. A pair of dark

sofas was put in a corner. They used to be white but the time made it duller. The bright color turned to be blackish brown.

Their vast space invited people to rest on them. On the side was a bookshelf that looked as if it was ready to crumble. Not a single book was left on it.

The air in the room was full of dust and smoke. Spider web filled the corners and wood creaks. I could hear creaking sound with every step I took. Water dropping sound resonated around the house.

I touched the dining table lightly. This was the room Dad, and I used to have meals together. Now we might have a new happy place, but my heart still yearned for the gone memories.

Deep in the kitchen, the wall and the ceiling reminded me of my Dad's cooking skill. He might like cooking, but the kitchen obviously refused to have him there. Every time he poured the oil into a pan, black smoke would cover the whole area and burnt smell would permeate the entire house. It always needed some times to settle the chaos down.

I was amused every time I thought of this. Even we'd brought the new house not so long ago, the kitchen here and the kitchen there weren't that much different.

But those happy memories had something hidden in it.

The dark smoke here reminded me of something... Something that made me scared.

Blood...

This house might be full of fond memories, but it also concealed an indescribable disgusting atmosphere.

Ton walked behind me. He looked around and seemed to be alert.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I feel something strange about this place.” He said. “No one moved to live here after you’d moved away, right?”

I nodded, and Ton continued to ask. “Before you moved out, there’s so much smoke stain downstairs like this?”

“It did,” I said flatly. “My Dad always destroys the kitchen like this. Our new house is in the same condition.”

Ton looked at me doubtfully for a while before smiled.

“It’s probably like you say.” Ton said. “I probably overthink it.”

When we looked inside the kitchen, a mouse rushed out from under the sofa and went straight at me. I shrieked with shock. My body jumped automatically. I loudly hit my back to the wall on my right side.

“Are you alright?” Ton came to support me immediately.

“It’s okay. I’m all right.” I rubbed my back gently.

Ton smiled and supported me to get up.

Suddenly, blood was drained from his face. He looked straight through me. His eyes opened wide. His mouth is dried. Ton stepped back as if a monster was getting near.

I turned to look at the back with curiosity. What could make Ton that frighten? When I saw it, I was shocked with the answer.

Bloodstain has covered the wall. The once white wall was painted into dark brown. The smell of old blood that I knew shouldn't actually exist started to arouse my senses. The smoke's blackness and the red of blood mixed together disgustingly.

My stomach twisted terribly. A bitter taste rose through my neck. I had to force the overwhelming feeling down. Right at this moment, I noticed my pale hands and realized that I was too scared to face all of this alone.

The blood on the wall was the proof that what I saw wasn't an illusion.

It was an image from the past, my disgusting history.

I used to die once. Here.

Ton took a few more steps back. He took deep breaths, trying to calm himself. He supported my weak body, touched my back lightly and tried to comfort my mind that was shaken by the dark truth.

"Just as I said." Ton said. His voice was so low as if he was whispering.

“We shouldn’t be here...”

8

We stood there completely still. No one said a word.

Even when we came here to find the truth, however, finding the truth now made our hearts trembled.

Blood stain on the wall was an important key. It allowed us to know that the truth was near. In the same time, it reminded us that if we crossed this wall, we might be unable to return.

Ton raked his hair. He let out a big sigh before led me out of the kitchen.

“I know that you’d already decided.” He said. “But are you sure that you’ll keep going further now?”

I hesitated for a moment, feeling the fight between my logic and emotions. I could lie to myself and went back to live like I’d used to, expecting that the police could deal with everything for me. Or I had to keep going and saw the truth with my own eyes.

The truth that might destroy me forever.

I felt sick. The stress spread over my body. My nerves fried, sending the torment to my mind. I fell, seeing everything around me twisted and faded.

Ton came to support me. He touched his forehead before touching mine.

“No fever.” He released a sigh and relaxed a bit. “You probably are over-stressed. Maybe we should stop doing this.

“I’m fine.” I shook my head. “I know that I’m scared, but I can’t back off now. If I do, this would never end.”

“When you look like this?” He asked. “You should know your own limit. This is too dangerous.”

I struggled to get up, pushing all of my strength to my legs. If I wanted to keep going, I had to prove to him that I was strong enough.

“Look like what?” I smiled. My face was soaked with sweat.

Ton looked at me with worry. He shook his head and let out another sigh before spoke.

“Okay.” He shrugged. “But I insisted that you shouldn’t overdo it.”

I nodded, so he continued to ask.

“And what’s your plan? What do you want from here?”

“I want to know exactly what did I saw. I can’t even remember it, why do I feel like it actually happened?” I pointed at the blood stain. “Like you see here. The blood. The message. The images I saw aren’t mere illusion.”

“I understand.” He nodded. “But how can we find something from here? We might have those strange messages and the blood stain, but we don’t know how to find further evidence.”

“But if we do nothing we won’t find further evidence either.”

Ton nodded tiredly then shrugged. He shook his head for my stubbornness.

“But at least we need a plan.” Ton said. “If we just walk randomly like this, I don’t think we can find anything.”

“Well...” I moved my eyes around. “Let’s have a look around first. We might find some clue.”

“Okay.” Ton said. “But be careful. I don’t think the blood stain can tell anything much but... the message. It indicates that the attacker might lurk around.”

“Um.” I nodded. “I want this to end soon too. This place makes me uncomfortable. Let’s split.”

I looked around, making a plan before said to Ton.

“I’ll look on the left side. My room was over there. You look on the right side.” I turned around and walked to the stairs on my left. Before I stepped on the stairs, Ton grabbed my wrist.

“Wait.” Ton called out.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The blood stain... Don’t you think it can happen again? You might be hurt again.”

“I understand,” I said. “But I think staying here longer is riskier.”

“Um.” Ton rubbed his chin and looked around. He knew that facing the attacker wasn’t like fighting with Bill. What we might face at any moment was far more dangerous. Ton realized that he couldn’t guarantee our safety.

“I feel that this place isn’t good.” He lowered his head a little. “Well, you take this. It’ll make you safer.”

Ton took something from his pocket and placed in on my hand. I felt a cold touch. The metal weight pressed my hand down a bit. I lifted it up, looking at a pocket knife Ton gave me.

“Be careful.” He said. “If you find something suspicious, just use it.”

“You don’t need it?” I asked.

“I’m fine.” He smiled. “I have another one. Remember that if you see anything strange, call me. I’ll go to you, but now we have to be fast and leave this place. Understand?”

Ton turned around, walked up the stairs on the other side and disappeared in the dark. I walked up the stairs in front of me and turned to the hallway on the left. I looked around for a moment before heading inside.

The wood creaked. Spider webs covered everywhere. I walked slowly, scared of the uncertainty awaiting me. We don’t scare of death because of the parting. We’re scared of it because we don’t know where the death will lead us to.

Water dripping sound was in harmony with the creaking wood, shaking my nerve to no end. The fear alerted my every muscle. My heart beat crazily. It punched my chest so hard as if it was pulled out by an invisible claw. I had to accept that I was just a weak girl. Ton was the only reason I could still stand tall after coming in this place.

I stopped before a door. Water dripping was loud from inside. This used to be my personal bathroom and might be the only place that I could feel free. I used to hide in there for a long time to forget every problem waiting for me outside. Sometimes, I wanted to sleep forever in this locked room, letting the broken soul free. However, reality wouldn't allow me that. Every time, I woke up with fear; fear that when the sun shines, my life would have to face another dilemma.

I let out a big sigh before opened the door.

Only the broken pieces of memories remained inside. The old mirror was covered with dust and dirt. The sink leaked. The white toilet was now dry. Everything was in the same place as when I moved out. They might be worn out, but I still could see the room I used to hide in when I had troubles.

I looked around for a moment, trying to find any clues. After a while, I had to give up.

Suddenly, I heard a call.

It wasn't Ton's voice. The voice belonged to somebody else I used to know.

The atmosphere started to change. The water sounded hitting the floor became louder. I heard wood breaking from every direction. The screeching sound was replaced with an innocent laugh from a child.

I was so frightened, but my eyes moved to the source of the sound. I slowly looked at my left side. The blurred and broken images were hiding something.

Someone's shadow.

I stared hard to make sure that I didn't see things. The blurred images and the screeching sound started to fade. I moved closer. A lot of questions went through my mind.

That shadow was looking at me. It smirked and laughed playfully before ran into a room. That smile was strangely familiar.

It was the young Max's smile.

As if enchanted, my feet moved on their own. My mind tried to stop them, but my body didn't take the order. My legs led me to stop before a wooden door. When I saw it, a cold feeling ran throughout my body.

I used to feel sick all the time. The wounds from fighting with my Dad destroyed the light of my life. I walked on the road with disgust toward

everything coming my way. When looking through my eyes, the world that everybody else believed it was so beautiful only contained with the ugliness.

I was frightened to awake to every sound at nights, even it was just a whisper. I often dreamt that I was pulled into an endless abyss. Only darkness hugged me. Only loneliness was my true friend. My eyes opened wide, scared of everything I saw before realized that they were not real things.

This door pulled my memories back to the surface of my conscious. Everything might end a long time ago, but I felt the torment from that time as if it had never ended.

I grabbed the doorknob tightly. The hesitation stopped me from stepping forward while the curiosity called for the truth from the bottom of my heart.

I didn't fear the past. It was my mind that nurtured terrible things to grow.

The sound of the door grazed the floor sounded like someone was screaming. I pushed myself into the room slowly, used the door as my shield. Even I had prepared myself for coming here, but at this very moment, I was scared to know.

I closed my eyes tightly, took a deep breath, and pushed the door hard.

The room was empty. The child who ran in here disappeared.

I gingerly walked inside, looking at every corner of the room. This was my old room, but I barely remembered it. The furniture was moved out. Only emptiness remained.

I walked around the room once, looking for something that might relate to my illusion. In the end, I found only the silent.

“Why does that child run in here?” I mumbled to myself. “It’s as if... there’s something hidden in this room.”

I kept searching, trying to look at everything in the room no matter how small it was but had to give up eventually. This room didn’t have the answer I was looking for.

I sigh tiredly, brushed the dust off my hair and clothes preparing to leave.

Before I could open the door that was closed out of habit, someone knocked it.

Suddenly, I heard a scream. The darkness around me seemed to squeeze in. Everything went dark. The images became blurred. The knocks were slow and light, but it made my heart trembled with fear.

The illusion was there only briefly before disappeared.

I stepped back a little, thinking of the warning Ton gave me before he went the other way. I took out the pocket knife. Its tip pointed at the door, ready to take the life of the monster trying to come in.

I put myself to the door, hoping the person outside would leave but the knocking became even louder. I took a deep breath, holding tight on the knife. My other hand grabbed the doorknob, twisted it slowly, then, I charged out.

Right when the door was opened, the blade attacked its prey without mercy.

The man stood outside shouted in alarm. I closed my eyes tight while my hand swayed aimlessly.

“Hey! Dream! Dream! Calm down!” Ton screamed. I opened my eye slowly. The grab became looser.

“I gave you the knife, but I didn’t mean for you to harm me!”

“S... sorry.” My voice shook. “A minute ago, I saw... the illusion when I heard the knocks.”

“Illusion?” He raised his eyebrows. “Can you give me the details?”

“It’s not the same as before.” I put the knife away in my pant pocket. “Normally, I’ll see the illusion based on the place I saw from the photos but this time I just heard someone knocked. It was you, right?”

“Yes. I don’t want to frighten you.”

“It’s you that frighten me, idiot!” I berated him.

“Sorry, sorry.” Ton lifted his hands to stop me. “I won’t do that again, okay?”

I let out a breath with relief. The illusion from before might be from the fear I created.

“And what did you find in there?” Ton asked.

“Nothing,” I replied. “But before I went in, I saw a child ran into the room, so I followed him.”

“A child?” Ton raised his eyebrows. “Do you think that was a real child?”

“No, it shouldn’t be.” I shook my head. “Because that child looks like... Max when he was young.”

“Max?” Ton rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You said that Max used to live around here, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” I pointed at the window. “His house is just on the other side of the street.”

“If you saw him,” Ton mumbled to himself. “Do you think it’s possible Max knows about your illusion?”

I moved up my eyes, trying to image Max hurting me. Just the thought made me want to laugh.

“No way. Try thinking about Max hurting me.”

He moved up his eyes before shook his head. “Probably not.”

“Anyway, what did you find on the other side?”

“Nothing.” He shrugged. “Just normal stuff and dust, and dust, and even more dust.”

I nodded, so Ton continued. “I’ve searched thoroughly but found nothing out of place, so I came to this side. Well, since I’m here let me have a look.”

He put his head inside the room. His hand grabbed on the door knob. He looked around for a while before stepped back.

He twisted the knob before stepping back. The door moved slowly, causing the squeezing sound.

Suddenly, something out of place happened.

I heard the knocking sound from the door on our back, resonated through the walkway. I turned to see where the sound was from but saw only dead closed doors. The environment changed. I was moved to the place I was now quite familiar with.

I was back in my old room, sitting on the bed that should be moved away.

In the moonlight shone into the room, the knocking sound was getting near. I retreated to the wall behind. My breath stuck. The fear was pumped throughout my body.

The knocks turned into hitting. I hold my breath without realized. Whoever was on the other side of the door didn’t mean well.

The hitting became harder. Suddenly, I heard the sound of a key unlocked. The door was opened slowly. The screeching sound of the wood was like the music that sang us to the eternal sleep.

I screamed on top of my lung, praying that everything was just a nightmare waiting for me to awake.

A long shadow came closer. Footsteps hit on the floor lightly. The monster in front of me was about to grant me death.

I shut my eyes tight, trying to close myself from whatever about to happen.

The footsteps got near. I heard panting sound in front of me and retreated back further.

He put his hand out. I tried to get away even when I knew there was no way out.

The moment he touched me, everything disappeared.

The touch from the cold fingers was replaced by a shake.

“Dream. Dream!” Ton shook me violently.

I opened my eyes slowly before looking around in confusion.

“You’re like this again.” His voice was full of concern. “I should stop you from the beginning. You shouldn’t be here. You really shouldn’t.”

“What’d happened?” I asked, feeling that my body was still weak.

“You went out again then you screamed.” Ton shook his head. “You saw the illusion again?”

“I... I...” I tried to dig out the memory, but it was blocked by something.

“I... I- I- I saw myself sat in this room.” The invisible wall blocking my memory was destroyed. I pointed at the door with my chin. “I sat locking myself in the room. Someone knocked then hit the door, trying to break into my room.”

“Sit down. You don’t have to say it now.” Ton supported my body. “You shouldn’t overdo it.”

“No. If I don’t tell you now, I probably can’t tell you ever again.” I said. “I saw that illusion when you twisted the door knob.”

“When I turned the door knob?” He turned to look at the door. “And when you opened the door, you didn’t see any illusion?”

I shook my head. Ton leaned me against the wall. He looked at the door and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“If you saw the illusion when I opened the door that means...” Ton looked as if he realized something. He took his mobile phone from the pocket and grabbed the doorknob with the other hand. He took a photo of his hand.

“What are you doing?”

“I think I know something.” Ton said, moved the camera here and there to get the best shot. “From the photo you saw and then this, the images that cause you to see the illusion, they all have some condition.”

“Condition?”

“Yes. Condition.” Ton put his phone in his pocket while looking at me. “Your subconscious might hide something. The person who hurt you might be a man because you didn’t see the illusion when you opened the door yourself.”

“But that’s strange.” I contradicted. “Why can’t I remember that someone hurt me? I just feel it. I did try to think, but my memory is completed. I can’t even remember people around here talking about this incident. They always gossip. There’s no way I won’t know about it.”

“That’s what I want to know too.” Ton rubbed his chin, looking upward. “How can you see that illusion when it had never happened? Maybe it hadn’t happened to you, and your neighbors have never known about this. You might see someone was hurt. What is strange is that illusion. It shows that you were wounded. Do you think it’s possible that you saw someone was hurt but were too scared to help? The guilt might cause you the nightmare and make you see yourself locked in there.”

“I don’t know, but my intuition tells me it’s not like that.”

“I can’t confirm that too. It too complicated.” Ton said. He looked at the other end of the walkway with a distant look “However, what I’m certain is the pieces that can lead us to the truth are scattered around this house. They’re hidden everywhere. Maybe in that stuff, I saw or maybe under the smoke on the wall.”

Ton looked far away . His eyes showed his worry.

“Everything can be a clue.” He whispered. “Everything.”

9

After the long search, we finally gave up.

Ton and I walked out of the house feeling tired. We tried everything to bring back my memory. Ton thought of many theories that might be useful to solve the problem, but nothing worked. We couldn't find any clue that really led us to the truth.

"This just becomes more suspicious." Ton rubbed his forehead. I suddenly knew that his headache was back again.

"Shall we take a rest?" I asked. "You've been tired all day."

"I'm fine." He waved his hand. "You shouldn't be worry that this burdens me. I'm also interested."

"Didn't you say that we shouldn't come here?" I raised my eyebrows.

"I did, but your case is just like... the Milk Jigsaw."

"It does? How?"

"Indeed, it's dangerous, but it's also a kind of puzzle. It's like we're putting pieces of the white jigsaw together." He rubbed his head. "Every event isn't related to each other, but I can feel that something can put them together."

I nodded before asking.

“And what about the bloodstain? What did you want to say at that time?”

“I’m just curious. Before you moved out, the smoke downstairs was already that much?”

“Let me think.” I rubbed my chin. “As far as I can remember, it didn’t.”

“Then that’s strange.” Ton rubbed his neck.

“Why is it strange?” I asked.

“If the attacker is still around, he might try to cover the evidence, but even that is really strange.”

I tried to think as Ton said, organized and analyzed the information as much as I could.

“What you find strange is that... he doesn’t have to erase the evidence, right? Because those blood strain can’t prove anything by now.”

“Yes. I understand that you want to come here because of those messages, but it’s different for the attacker. What you saw is just images from your memory. The attacker sent those strange messages to you means that he must know about this. I think the attacker shouldn’t send the message from the beginning. If he didn’t, it should be better for him. Those blood strain... from what you told me, it should be at least three years now. It should be no longer of any use. Why does the attacker try to cover it?”

“That’s right.” I lowered my head in deep thought. “I feel strange about this.”

“About what?” Ton raised his eyebrows.

“I hit the wall then the smoke came off. Have you cooked?”

“Sometimes but I’ve never make the kitchen that lot of a mess.” He laughed. Suddenly, Ton knotted his eyebrows as he realized something.

“You want to say that the smoke is new?” I nodded in reply.

“Then that means...” Ton paused.

“The attacker is still around, and he might not be far from us,” I said.

Ton opened his mouth before shook his head.

“I know that you want to know the truth, but if we insisted on digging deeper, we’d be at a disadvantage.”

“Why?”

“Like I said, even if we know who the attacker is, we don’t have any evidence to prove in court. The messages were deleted. The mere note you took can’t be anything for the police. If the attacker doesn’t do anything more obvious than this, he’ll be safe.”

“But if it’s as you say, it’s also mean that we can look for the truth without having to worry. The attacker seems to be careful about that already.”

“You’re not wrong. However, we might be his target by now. If he covered the blood stain with the smoke recently, it means that he might

already know about us.” Ton sighed. “He might be careful but don’t forget that there are so many ways to harm us without gaining attention from the police. Moreover, he can hide for three years with you and people around you don’t even realize. Why can’t he do it again this time? We have a huge disadvantage.”

I nodded in agreement. What he said was reasonable. Finding the trust was risky. We are to the disadvantage of the attacker in every way.

“Let me ask you a question,” I said. “Like you said, the attacker doesn’t have to hide anything. He doesn’t even have to frighten us. Then, why does he try to cover that blood stain? Even when I learn the truth, I can’t do anything anyway.”

“I’m thinking about that, too.” Ton said, looking away from me. “I think the attacker might don’t want you to learn the truth but covering it now... It’s a signal warning us that he’s still around. Why does he do that?”

“Yeah.” I rubbed my chin in deep thought.

While we were on our way back, I noticed a middle-aged woman walked from the other direction. She looked at me with uncertainty for a moment before approached us.

“Hey, are you Dream?” She asked. I nodded in confusion.

“From your look, you probably can’t remember me.” The middle-aged woman laughed. “Can’t you remember? I’m Aunt Orn.”

My eyes opened wide. When the confusion was gone and replaced with familiarity, I gaped.

“It’s Aunt Orn!” I called excitedly. “I remember now. I haven’t seen you for a long time. How have you been?”

“Right. Since you moved away. How is your class? Are you a university student now?”

“I’m a second-year student. Liberal Art.”

“Good, good.” Aunt Orn nodded. “We haven’t met for a long time, and you’ve become even more beautiful.”

“Not exactly.” I scratched my head.

“It’s good that you don’t look like your father.” Aunt Orn laughed. “So you become charming like your mother.”

I laughed. People usually told me that I looked like my mom. Mom used to live here with us when I was small. She was friendly with everyone, offering friendship without boundary. That made her beloved by the people here, unlike Dad who was silent and preferred to be alone.

Before mom moved out, everybody came to bid her farewell. I could remember that day until now. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. On people’s faces were sorrow from the parting and happiness from spending time together. Mom was someone whose life was fulfilled with love and ready to

give love to any person shared her path. Since then, I'd always wanted to be like mom, but I couldn't be the person I want to be.

“Well, since we already meet again.” Aunt Orn said. “Let's go to my house and have a chat. It's so long since we met.”

Aunt Orn placed the teapot and some snack on a small table. Ton and I received them with proper manner.

“When you were still around, I haven't got a chance to do something like this.” Aunt Orn sighed. “You father didn't like to socialize with us, so you hadn't got the chance, too.”

Ton looked around the house with interest. The living room's wall was painted with dark red. Gold traditional Thai decal was presented and told stories of it. There were four cupboards in the room. Two of them kept antique tea sets. The others showed off tiny dolls and old books. A lovely gold ceiling fan turned slowly. I drank some more before placed the cup down.

“Yes. Dad doesn't like talking.” I laughed lightly. “But he's fine now. He's a lot better than he used to be.”

“Is that so?” She laughed. “It's good then. So you can normally live like other teenagers now.”

“That's right.”

“It’s good your father becomes less strict.” She poured tea into her cup. “I still remember. You used to fight with him a lot. Sometimes it was so loud that I could hear both of you fighting from here.”

“Really?”

“I was worried about you, you know?” Aunt Orn took a sip. “But I didn’t dare to do anything. I think you probably very stress during that times, but I didn’t know how to help you. It’s good that your neighbor was there to help and talked with you a lot.”

“My neighbor?”

“You can’t remember? The one who moved in the last.”

“I rubbed my chin before shook my head. “Not at all.”

“Well, it’s fine.” Aunt Orn smiled. “When you had any troubles, you liked to go over to that person. I’d never seen you talking with him. However, every time I heard you fought with your father, I would see you ran to your next door. So, I guessed you went to talk with him.”

Suddenly, I heard footsteps from the stairs behind us. A middle-aged man was walking down. He looked at us with interest.

“Hm? Isn’t that Dream?” He greeted. “How come you’re here?”

“Hello.” I greeted him. This man should be Aunt Orn’s husband.

“Can you remember me? I’m Uncle Chai.”

I shook my head with embarrassment. Uncle Chai laughed.

“It’s fine. It’s not strange that you can’t remember me. We hadn’t seen each other for a long time anyway.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, really.” He smiled. “But I accidentally heard you talking, had someone stayed in the house next to yours?”

“It had.” Aunt Orn scolded him. “He died two years ago.”

“Didn’t he just move out?” Uncle Chai scratched his head.

“No. He was sick.” Aunt Orn shook her head. “After he died, his relative moved in before moving out, too.”

“Is that so?” He laughed. “Maybe I’m too old now to remember everything wrong.”

Uncle Chai walked to the kitchen, took a water bottle, and walked back to upstairs. “It’s good to see you again, Dream.”

I nodded in reply. Aunt Orn shook her head before turned to smile at me. “Don’t mind him.”

“It’s ok.” I smiled.

“You may not remember now, but I think you could be happy at that time because he helped you.” Aunt Orn smiled. “Every time I saw you left his house I suddenly knew that you felt a lot better. I often saw you smiled when you left.”

“Is that so?” I felt embarrass when hearing about this.

After that, Aunt Orn and I talked about trivial things. The longer time passed, the more I missed those memories. This place was full of memory and happiness. If I could turn back time, I wanted to live here again once more.

Every time Aunt Orn talked about the man who used to live next to my house, more of my memories came back. When I was in high school, there was a man who always gave me advises. Even when I couldn't remember his face now, the warm feeling was still there. I immediately knew that this memory was real.

Ton listened until he was bored. I talked with Aunt Orn a little more before I bid her farewell. Aunt Orn waved goodbye to us with a smile on her face. She told me that I could come back anytime. She and the others were always ready to welcome me.

“People here are sure nice.” Ton said. “If we come back again, it'll definitely be a lot more comfortable.”

“Stop it.” I elbowed him in his chest.

“Well, where should we go next?”

“Well.” I tilted my head. “Um... let's go have a look at the house next to mine.”

Ton nodded as if he knew what I wanted.

We walked back to the way we just passed. I brought some flower from a shop nearby before heading to the old house located deepest in the alley.

I placed the flowers in front of the house, bent myself down a bit, and weaved my hand together as if praying. Memories and feeling circled around my mind. I thought about when I came to see him when I was hurt. Every time I came here, I went back home with a smile and hope. He was the one who helped me grew up to be a happy person. He was another force that never let me gave up. I felt a bit guilty that I couldn't remember his face, but I promised myself that I would remember everything he'd done for me forever.

Ton looked at me from afar without an expression. He let me freely spend the time with the memories that couldn't take back.

We both stayed like that for a long time, letting the silence comforted our tired souls.

I opened the door. Dad sat reading the newspaper on the sofa. He turned to look at me briefly before turned back.

I walked upstairs, looking at the pain on his face before went into my room silently.

10

Someone knocked the door, so I got up to open it.

Max stood there panting. His vest was soaked with sweat. There was a large bag in his hand. I smiled at him as a greeting before went to get some glass and a bottle of water.

Max sat down on a green cushion on the floor. He opened his bag, took out several papers, and placed them on the table. I sat down too and poured him some water.

“You look tired. Drink this.” I said.

Max nodded and took the drink. “T- t- thanks.”

“It’s okay.” I smiled. “Well, where should we start? I’m not good at this subject.”

“F- f- from how to reading the vowels,” Max said while looking around. “D- d- Dream, you have a piano?”

“Oh? That? I used to learn it when I was young but gave up now.”

“C- c- can I play a little b- b- before we start?”

“You can play the piano?” I looked closer at him. “Of course, go ahead.”

Max stood up. He walked to the piano slowly and opened the cover before sat down, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then put his hands on the keys.

The first note softly floated into the air. Max paused to take another deep breath before placed his left hand on the key and pressed gently.

The song became louder, from a whisper to a scream. I didn't know much about music, but I could feel the emotion he wanted to express.

I used to learn piano when I was young. Mom used to take me to a concert at a music university. At that time, there were many musicians on the stage, but I was enhanced by the large instrument that stood gradually in the front. The piano is a solo instrument, but its sound is so powerful that made me forgot about other instruments played along with it.

From that moment, I dreamt that I wanted to be a piano solo. It was my first dream. When we were young, we used to dream of a lot of things without caring about reality. We wouldn't care what the society wants us to be. We're just the person we want to be, and that's it. When we grew up, the society takes away our life bits by bits. Reality comes to hurt us. Finally, we often chose to leave the dreams of our young self because they were worthless and useless for the present us.

Not long after I learned piano, I realized that I wasn't good at it. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't play it beautifully. I didn't have any

problems with the techniques, but I lacked the most important traits of a musician.

I still liked to listen to the sound of the piano. However, every time I touched the instrument, the pain would run throughout my heart. The dead dream from the past would come back and haunted me. Leaving your dream was hard but living with the shattered dream was even more difficult. It was a long time before I could forget about my past failure.

Max's song reminded me of myself when I still played the piano. Intense emotions were sent through the notes. Max was doing the thing I could never do. Even it when hurt me, it comforted me at the same time.

Max's perfection had never gone. He was still the same old Max.

He increased the tempo. The notes moved through time in fast speed. The gentleness turned into something fierce. The sorrow turned into the bravery. Max pressed the keys hard, spinning the audience's emotion to the fury along the tone.

Max switched cords in a fast speed before slowed down and changed into the softer notes. He completely controlled my emotion. He made me grieve when he wanted me to be sad. He made me joyous when he wanted me to be happy. It was as if my heart was twisted and turned in his hands.

Max's song became gradually slower and lighter. He let out a breath, touched the keys with the tips of his fingers elegantly, and let the silent replaced his song, allowing the audience to admire him.

I clapped and cheered. He might play the piano in a tiny room, but I felt as if I was listening to a world-class concert.

"Bravo, Max!" I said. "I've never know that you're this good."

Max scratched his head before bowed to me.

"You don't have to be that formal." I laughed. "You look like a professional pianist."

"N- n- not at all." Max stuttered harder than he normally was. "S- s- shall we start studying?"

"Oh, I already forget about that."

"T- t- then let's starts."

Max taught me from the beginning; how to correctly pronounce the vowels, sentence structure, and basic listening. I tried hard, but I really wasn't good on this subject.

After an hour, Max let me took a break for ten minutes. I walked downstairs and grabbed a few snack from the fridge before ran back to my room.

Max was writing something at the low table we used with a serious expression. He scratched his head until his hair was messy. Max was in Mathematic Science. He probably tried to solve some solutions.

I sat across from him, placed the snack on the table, and called for Max to eat.

“Eat. Don’t be shy.” I said while chewing on the snack leisurely. Max looked up and smiled at me.

At that moment, I saw what was on the paper. Max used a red pen to draw something. I stared at it when Max was busy with the snack. The image was clear to me. Finally, I knew what was hidden in that paper.

A man covered with several wounds was stabbing a girl with a knife. Blood splurged around the room.

Even when Max drew it simply, the image gave the intense effect as, if the event was actually happening.

When I was looking around the house with Ton, I saw Max led me to the room. Maybe Max...

“D- d- Dream. A- a- are you okay?” Max raised his eyebrows.

I stared blankly for a minute before regained my conscious.

“What?” I forced a smiled. “Why do you ask that?”

“Y- y- you look a bit pale,” Max said with worry. “W- w- will we stop for today?”

“Stop?” I repeated his words. “That’s maybe good. I’m probably too tired.”

Max nodded and put his things in the bag before left the room. We had waved goodbye before he left, leaving a lonely back for others to see.

After I had finished my last class for today, I walked to the library.

Ton waited for me at the table deepest in the right corner of the library. He was writing something in a notebook. I walked over to him and sat down on the other side.

“What’re you writing?” I asked.

“About you.” He replied. “I still can’t find an answer.”

“So, you believe me now?” I smiled.

“Something like that. The blood strain we saw the other day... it was too obvious. The smoke you told me, too. If it’s indeed like you said, it confirms that your illusion is real.”

“Of course, I don’t really care about seeing the illusion,” I said with mockery.

“But you can’t tell why you’re unable to remember them.” Ton pointed at me with the pencil in his hand. “The information you have now is still useless. If you tell it to anyone else, they’ll think you’re crazy.”

“But you still believe me,” I said with confident.

Ton looked up at me expressionless. “Yes, I believe you. Are you satisfied now?”

I sat still. From the first day I knew Ton, this was the first day I saw him this serious.

“And... what did you write?”

“I write about the door knob, trying to figure out what its condition is and how can I find some relation to the other images. The three images in your hand aren’t enough for you to remember anything more, right?”

I nodded, so Ton continued.

“Even if I know the condition of this photo, when comparing with the other two, I still don’t understand what the key that ignite your memory is.” Ton sighed. “We are seeking some invisible information.”

“Just the condition isn’t enough?” I asked.

“No, it’s not. Your case isn’t like those cases the police generally handle. Their investigation starts from the evidence they have, then link to other factors, then to the attacker, but your...” Ton paused. “We’re start searching from your memory. We don’t have any solid evidence. I have no idea how to find the next image. We’re the investigators who have nothing to investigate.”

“Well, you’re right.” I nodded. “But why do you become this serious?”

“You don’t want my help?” Ton raised his eyebrows.

“It’s not like that. I’m glad you help me but...” Ton stopped me before I could finish.

“You don’t have to feel guilty. I’m just interested.”

I thanked him before adjusted my glass to hide my embarrassment. “Thanks...”

“It’s fine.” Ton knocked the pencil with the table. “Give me some time. I might be able to think of something.”

Ton looked at his notebook thoughtfully. I sat there silently for a while, feeling uncomfortable that my problem became his burden.

“Uh... can you remember what I’d told you about I saw Max in that house?”

“Yep.” Ton replied without looking at me.

“Um... yesterday I was studying with Max. After we’d finished, he drew something weird.”

Ton looked at me raising his eyebrows. “Something weird?”

“Yes, when I left the room to find some snack, Max drew a strange picture... It’s a picture of someone with many wounds covering the body stabbing a woman with a knife.”

“Stab with a knife?” Ton’s voice rose a little. “Do you think Max does it?”

“I’m not sure.” I shook my head. “I don’t want to suspect Max... but everything seems to point at him.”

Ton rubbed his chin and looked at me thoughtfully. He put the notebook into his bag without saying anything more before searched for something and handed it to me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The photo of I grabbing the door knob.” Ton said. “It should be useful in the future. Just keep it for now.”

I took the photo and put it away.

“About Max, I think we can’t confirm anything yet.” Ton shook his head. “Bill came to see me today. We were almost got a fight.”

“Again?” I shook my head. “We should seriously report to the police.”

“Not necessary. It was just almost. Nothing actually happened, but that’s not the point.” Ton put his face nearer. “Today, Bill came to curse at me about that I took you to your old house.”

“What!?! How come he knows about that?”

“He said that the day we went out he went to your house and your father told him that you were out with a friend.” Ton leaned on the chair. “Why does he so sure that I was out with you?”

“Do you think he followed us?”

“From his actions, I don’t think so.” Ton shook his head. “But it’s something that can fake after all.”

“Bill is so annoying, but I don’t think Bill followed us. Just seeing you with me, he already believes that we disappeared to do something nasty.”

“Your ex is crazy.” Ton smirked. How come did you agree to go out with him?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged before asked him. “Is this the reason you said we can’t be certain about Max?”

Ton nodded before explained more. “Between Bill and Max, you will suspect Bill first, right? Bill used to break into your house anyway.”

I nodded, so Ton continued.

“Max can be suspicious too, but now it’s too soon to conclude it’s really someone close to you. The attacker can be anyone. However, one thing is certain. That man knows what we are doing otherwise he wouldn’t go to burn the kitchen to cover the blood stain.”

“If it’s like you said,” I rubbed my chin. “This person must know about the photos.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“No.”

“Really not?” Ton asked.

“Really,” I replied.

“If you haven’t told anyone else, then it must be someone who sees your actions and then immediately knows everything.” Ton bit down on the pencil. “I remember that Bill seemed a bit strange when we fought with him. It was like he knows something. Does he normally good at lying?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I could catch him every time.”

“Then Bill is suspicious. How about Max? Is it possible for him to know about the photos?”

“I don’t think so.” I lowered my head. “Probably not...”

“I know you don’t want to suspect Max, but we have to collect every possibility. Since he was your neighbor when you were young, he should know a lot about you.”

“That’s true... but...” I said hesitantly. I might not want to accept what Ton said, but I couldn’t deny that it was true.

“And you saw him when we were at your old house as well.” Ton said. “Sometimes, the illusion we saw isn’t completely out of reason. Worry or memory can cause us seeing the illusion, too. For example, before my grandma passed away, she also thought that I was my mom.”

“But Max doesn’t have any lead intention.”

“That might be right, but I don’t want you to ignore what you saw. Well, let keep it aside for now. Comparing with the lead intention, Bill has higher possibility to be the attacker. You haven’t had any conflict with Max, right?”

I nodded.

“And do you think Max secretly likes you?”

My face was burning hot. Ton looked at me for a moment before smiled.

“You’re really easy to read.” Ton laughed. “It seems that he does.”

“N- n- no.” I lifted my hand to stop him. “Never.”

“Oh? Okay.” Ton smiled. “Does it means that you don’t know whether he likes you or not?”

I nodded.

“Then, it means that... you like him.”

“E- e- enough! Enough already!” I shouted. People around us looked at our direction. The librarian also pointed at the rules plastered on a wall. I shrank down and nodded as an apology.

“That’s it. Just the way you talk says it all.” Ton laughed. I looked at him with threatening eyes.

“Ok, ok. I’ll stop now.” Ton leaned back. “But well, if Max likes you, he can also be a suspect, but I don’t think it’s him. Even if he really love you, there’s no reason for him to stab you. I think that’s... a bit harsh way to confess.”

Ton rubbed his head. I knew immediately that his headache came back again.

“But this is the conclusion in case someone close to you is the attacker. He can be a complete stranger too. I want to repeat again that Max and Bill both have the possibility to be a suspect.”

“I understand.” I nodded.

“Let’s stop it for today. Ton sighed. “If I can find something more I’ll contact you.”

Ton stood up. Before he left, I called him.

“Ton.”

“What?” He turned to smile at me.

“If you’re searching the attacker from people who knows about this,” I said. “It means that you can be the attacker, too, right?”

Ton looked at me with surprise before laughed.

“Yes. I can be the attacker, too.”

I heard the sound of siren and people shouting.

I walked out of my room sleepily. I was irritated every time I had to get up earlier than usual. Six in the morning was way too early for me.

I came downstairs and opened the door to outside. A lot of people gathered in front of my house. The police were staring at something on the wall.

Everything seemed out of place.

Dad was standing there squeezing his forehead with his fingers. I walked up to him in confusion.

“What’s going on here?” I asked.

Dad didn’t answer me. He just pointed at our house’s wall with his chin. I followed his lead and was shocked with what I saw.

A lot of white jigsaw pieces were neatly put into English alphabets. Each word became smaller from the top. Every piece was painted red. The paint dripped down in lines.

The color of blood.

I looked at it shocking. My shaking finger pointed at the words in front of me. My lips moved without me realizing. Every word was soaked with fear.

Stop

Or

Die

The police were discussing the teenagers who caused troubles around the neighborhood, but I knew immediately that this wasn't a typical prank.

This was the message for me.

It was a threatening...

The threatening message to bring me death...

11

The police looked around the house before came to ask us questions.

They told us that our house wasn't the only one faced this situation. Many houses in the same neighborhood suffered a similar problem as well. The message was all the same, but only some houses had the jigsaws painted red.

The policed presumed that the culprit was some out of control teenagers who didn't want to threaten specifically someone and the color was painted randomly. There was any hidden agenda.

I immediately knew that the police was there only because they had to. This case wouldn't have any further investigation. The faster this case could be closed, the lesser burden for them to bear. That was exactly what they wanted.

However, having the police looking around still had a good point. The culprit wouldn't dare to take such blatant threatening for quite some time but if you looked from the other side, having the police showing up was a way to force the culprit to use the more severe method.

And that meant I was in danger.

"Dad, have you seen anyone suspicious around here?" I asked.

Dad looked at me expressionlessly, and I realized that he was still angry with me.

“Someone suspicious?” He raised his eyebrows. “What have you done to ask me that?”

“No.” I shook my head. “And have you?”

“I’ve seen no one suspicious. Oh, but I met... uh... Bill? That’s your ex-boyfriend’s name, right?”

“Bill? Why did Bill come to our house?”

Dad sighed. “He said he wanted to see you. I told him that you went out. After that...”

“After that what?”

“After that... He just became rowdy. Saying you went out with him. Who is this ‘him’?”

I lowered my head. Heat spread throughout my face.

“He’s a friend.”

“A friend?” Dad raised his eyebrows. “But you’re all red. Are you sure he’s just a friend?”

“Let it be, Dad!”

“Fine. After he was done making a scene, he left.” Dad shook his head. “But he came back again after a while and kept walking around here. I thought it didn’t look right, so I called the police.”

I nodded before took out my phone and called a familiar number.

“Hello, Ton,” I said.

“I think I found something you might find interesting.”

Ton looked around my house before headed back to the front. He rubbed the color with his thumb and smelled it thoughtfully.

Just his appearance made me feel safe. I breathed in slowly and let out the stress I'd been kept in.

“What do you get?” I asked.

“I've walked around here, looking for the houses that haven't cleaned these jigsaws off.” He shrugged. “It likes the police said. Only some houses have them and just a few that the jigsaws were painted red.”

Ton stared at me before continued.

“But I know that you don't believe what they said, do you?”

“Yeah, I know it's a threatening message for me.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Something is off, but I can't tell what it is.”

Ton laughed while waving his hands.

“You're not wrong, but you can't use only your feeling to explain it. In this case, we need to use some logic as well.” Ton said dryly. “Before I

arrived, I'd already looked at the other houses. The police weren't wrong, but the culprit also left us a sign."

"A sign? What sign?"

"At other houses with painted jigsaws, the red is indeed color from some spray paint," Ton shook his head. "But here it isn't."

I recalled the intuition appeared when I first saw the threatening message.

"Blood..." My face became ashen. Ton nodded.

"Yes, blood." Ton said and turned to look at the jigsaws. "The police seem to didn't pay attention to this point, but don't worry. The culprit doesn't use the human blood. This is pig blood."

"How do you know?"

"Anyone cook often enough would be familiar with the smell of pig blood." He smiled. "Moreover, I'd fought often enough. I used to be a rogue and fought with anyone came in my way. I often had small wounds that drew blood and rather used to with the smell so I can distinguish them."

Finally, I could understand why Ton could fight against Bill without much afford. More than his intelligence and systematic thinking, Ton had a great physical ability too.

"But that isn't the only thing the culprit left for us." Ton pointed at the jigsaws. "There's another one here."

“What is it?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Can you see that the message becomes smaller?” Ton pointed from top to bottom. “What did the police say about this?”

“They didn’t say anything. They didn’t even care about this case.” I told him. “I think that the culprit put the jigsaws on many houses’ walls to let me know that his threatening is for real. The culprit probably knows that we always play jigsaws together. Painting the color randomly is just to divert the police’s attention, making them think that this is a random act. If he put the jigsaws on every house’ walls, it can divert the police’s attention, but then his purpose will be lost.”

“Why do you think the culprit does that?” Ton bore his hand as if inviting me to continue my explanation.

“The culprit wants to threaten me. If he put it on every house, it’s possible that I wouldn’t pay attention to the message. However, if it happened only to some houses, I will realize that the threatening message is for me. This theory doesn’t have to be true because putting the jigsaws on every house’s walls costs a lot, both money and time.”

Ton nodded. “This way is effective for diverting the police’s attention. You realized that you’re threatened, and the police didn’t even care to check whether the red is a paint or blood.”

“And what about another important point you said? What is it?”

“Another important point... is a real proof that he wants to threaten you.” Ton touched the letters with the tip of his finger. “When you see the illusion, what object is used to hurt you?”

“The weapon?” I looked up, trying to recall the memory that my brain tried to seal off forever. “I think... it’s a knife.”

“Take a few steps back and look at these letters again.”

I stepped back a little and stared at the letters that gradually turned into an image.

“It’s a knife...”

“Yes, a knife. The culprit remembers what weapon was used to hurt you. I don’t think the culprit chose the sign by coincident.”

I nodded before said, “But this is... strange... I felt like it’s more than just a threatening message.”

“It’s strange? Why do you think that?”

“Like you said, it’s just my memory. It’s even some unclear memories. If the culprit knew what we’re looking for, then he must know about this point, too.” I rubbed my chin. “If I don’t have anything to proof in court, letting me pursue the truth should be a better choice. Doing this is like resurfacing an old case that the police hasn’t initially paid attention to.”

“You’re right.” Ton leaned on the wall. “I’m thinking the same thing.”

Ton and I stood there thinking for some times. Suddenly, I remembered something out of the blue.

“I think I understand now.” I nodded, admiring the theory that I could think of on my own.

“What do you understand?”

“I just feel that threatening me now isn’t wise. Even if he wants to threaten me, doing it on the internet like the last time is better and easier. I might get scared and stopped pursuing the truth as he wants and it wouldn’t attract the attention of the police as well.”

“The culprit might don’t want the case to be permanently recorded.” Ton said.

“I don’t think that’s the case.” I shook my head. “Social network has the better information security, maybe better than the police’s. Moreover, if he wants to delete the message, he can do it. See the earlier messages as an example.”

“Are you trying to say that the culprit wants to make the case known?” I nodded then Ton lifted his hand to stop me.

“That will be too contradicted. The culprit wants to do this secretly because he intends to divert the police’s attention and only you would be aware of the threatening. What you said will make everything goes against one another.”

“You’re right,” I lowered my head. “But I’m certain about one thing. That’s doing it like this is way too strange.”

“It’s a normal threatening,” Ton said. “But I feel the same. When the culprit is clever enough to divert the police’s attention, he shouldn’t make such a small mistake. About the proof in court, too.”

“I agree,” I said. “but now we know something important.”

Ton smiled, nodding his head with satisfaction. “So, you feel it, too.”

I nodded in reply. “If the culprit chooses to do it like this, that means he wants to cover himself. Even if he could escape from the police, he doesn’t expect me to know who he is. It means that...”

“The culprit is someone close to you.” Ton said abruptly with a smile.

I nodded in agreement.

“Well, at least we know the important point now.” Ton laughed. “It seems that playing the Milk Jigsaw with me every day benefits you quite well. You’re far smarter than before, you know?”

“I’m already smart enough.”

“Okay, okay.” He scratched his head. “Then, let’s think about who can fit the description.”

“Good,” I replied. “It’s you...”

“Me, too?” Ton pointed at his face.

“Yes, you too,” I said. “Because you also know about this case. Thus, you said it yourself that you can be the culprit as well.”

“Fine. Who else other than me?”

“Bill.. and Max.”

Ton stood still. His eyes revealed his agreement.

“Good, then, what do you think is the motive for each of them?”

“Shall we start with you?” I spoke playfully.

“Got it, my lady. Why do you think I would do it?”

“You might want to play a prank on me.” I laughed evilly. “Or you used to live in my neighborhood and pretend not to up until now.”

“Maybe I am.” He smiled coolly. Ton could always make the atmosphere more relax.

“How about the other two?” Ton asked.

“The other two?” I repeated his words. “I can’t think of anything now.”

“Then, I’ll say it for you.” Ton said. “I believe that you’re not ready to suspect them, especially Max, right?”

I sighed, resigning for Ton’s sharpness.

“Let’s start with Bill.” Ton said. “For Bill, I don’t think we have much to say. He likes you and follows you every day. Regarding this, he shouldn’t have a reason to cover himself.”

“But it also quite contradicts.” I rejected. “I told you that Bill has been involved with the drug. Moreover, if it’s indeed as you said, Bill should have even more reasons to cover himself because he would be the most suspicious person. If he threatens me like this, I’ll immediately know who do it.”

I paused for a moment. Ton smiled and signaled me to continue.

“Another point is if we consider that Bill hasn’t had a reason to cover himself, but he’s always been like this, why would he try to cover himself now?”

“Then, you suspect Max?”

“Max...”

“However, if we base on your reasons, it means that while Max is the least suspicious person, he also has the highest possibility to be the culprit because he doesn’t have a reason for us to suspect him.”

“You’re right.” I nodded with defeated. “I forgot to tell you something. Bill was around here yesterday.”

“Is that so?” Ton said. “Then, there’s a fair chance that both of them can be the culprit, right?”

“Probably,” I said, feeling tired.

“Max might dare to threaten you because he knows that you’ll never suspect him while there’s proof that Bill can be the culprit, too. Well, this is difficult.”

I sighed. Many times, I thought back to Ton’s warning that we shouldn’t involve ourselves in this case. Everything was as he said. I brought both of us up to this point. Even when Ton was satisfied with finding the answer to this puzzle, but he also had to risk himself because of my problem. There was no excuse to release me from this fact.

“Well, if the culprit doesn’t have a reason to threaten you, who would he do it?” Ton rubbed his chin. His expression became serious again.

I shrugged. This was the question that I didn’t know the answer.

“I think... well... other than the culprit’s nature that doesn’t want his prey to know who he is, there should be at least another reason. Dream, can you remember when I asked you about Max?”

“Which one?”

“That Max might like you.” Ton said thoughtfully. “If Max likes you, trying to cover himself might have some benefit.”

“Benefit?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Like I said,” Ton started. “Do you notice that before you see the illusion, your life has been very normal? However, now, the culprit chooses to

send you the threatening message. Rather than to scare you from pursuing the truth, it's also a truce.”

“Can you make it simpler?”

“The culprit is offering a proposal... If you agree to retreat, the culprit promises that he won't do anything to you and will let all of us live peacefully. This makes me think that the culprit might gain some benefits from you being safe.”

“What does that mean?” I tried to think about what Ton said, but I couldn't really understand it.

“The culprit wants to be with you.”

“What!?”

“The culprit also wants to remain living like this.” Ton insisted. “My guess is if the culprit really like you as I think, he'll want something from you. Now, he chooses to threaten you. Even when you're wary that one of the people around you might be the culprit, the safety he offers you will make you let down your guard eventually. A warrior who lives a peaceful life for a long time will forget how to fight. It's something like that.”

“And what does he get from waiting?” I asked.

“Like other ordinary people, if he stays with you, as usual, there's a chance that the relationship between you and him might get better, or at least, he'll feel good to stay near you.”

“That sounds creepy.”

“I think so.” Ton nodded. “As long as the truth hasn’t been revealed, the culprit can expect something from you all the time.”

“I feel strange,” I argued. “Why does the culprit make this up from the start? Those messages, too. Why did he have to send them to me? I’d already give up finding the truth then. This is like he wants to encourage me. Moreover, if the culprit really is Bill, why does Bill have to do that? It goes against what he’s doing now.”

“I don’t understand the messages either. About Bill..” Ton shrugged. “Personally, I don’t think Bill is that bright but it’s also strange that Bill can make a plan now. Moreover, Bill might have other reasons.”

“Other reasons?”

“Yes, he might come to hurt you later because you know about his illegal stuff. What if Bill hasn’t only managed drugs? What if the case is still active?”

“You mean...” My eyes opened wide. “Bill killed someone?”

“It’s possible. It can be other cases, too. What I’m certain is that if Bill does this, there’s a high possibility that the evidence still remains. Any witness might be useful. You knowing about his crime can also affect the case. His reputation is already ruined. If you can remember something more, things might be worse. However, if he can get rid of you, he can also get rid of

another witness. Bill might have a way to deal with the evidence he used to kill someone. If it's really like I suspect, dealing with the evidence wouldn't be too difficult. If you forget everything like you're now, the evidence, the place you used to know, the face of related persons you used to remember, all of these will disappear. Even if you know what Bill had done, when you report to the police, they will just ignore you. Even when they don't ignore you, Bill can find some excuses easier because the information you give to the police is unreliable."

"I know that Bill is annoying, but I don't think Bill can do something like that."

"Don't be so certain," Ton looked away. "It might contradict what we've thought so far. However, if you think carefully, following you around might be a method Bill uses to divert the police's attention or confuses us from the truth. If Bill has to be punished, referring to this will lighten his punishment. Sometimes, the police want to close the case as soon as possible. If it's really like what I said, as long as you don't know the truth, even if you know who did it, you can't do anything. It depends on whether the culprit pays more attention to the person or the truth you might know."

Ton let out a big sigh before stared straight at me.

"Both of them have a fair chance to be the culprit. It depends on what you use to consider the matter."

I looked up at the sky, feeling drained from finding the truth of what was happening around me.

“It’s strange that no one else knows about this,” I said.

“That’s true.” Ton said. “I also don’t understand this. Not only your father but even your neighbors also don’t know about the accident. You can’t remember anything. No news reported. It might be a small matter, but there should be someone else knows about it.”

I became silent. Ton looked at me with worry.

“And after this, what do you plan to do?” He asked.

“I... don’t know. I don’t know what do to next.”

“You can retreat. If it doesn’t worth, you shouldn’t do it.” Ton said.

“But it’s just a threatening message. I don’t think anyone would really do it.”

“But you’re finding the truth because you were harm.” Ton shook his head. “Threatening is like a law. It exists to stop us from doing something in the first place. If we really do something, not following a law will cease its sacredness. The same goes to the threatening.”

I nodded slowly. Ton walked over to me and placed his hands on my shoulders to comfort me.

“I’ll respect your decision, but I want you to be certain that what you choose won’t make you regret it later.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling the warmth through his hands.

“You don’t have to decide in a rush...”

“I’ll keep going.” I looked at Ton with determination. I had faced many uncertainty and fear. This is just another one. “It might be dangerous, but if I don’t know the truth, my life can’t be truly safe.”

Ton smiled while patted on my shoulder lightly.

“The culprit might know you well.” He laughed. “But he doesn’t know one thing.”

He smiled, looking at me with confidence.

“You’ve never give up.”

Talking with Ton could reassure me, but the puzzle left behind still made me worried.

I sat on the bed, thinking about what we’d talked today.

The culprit might be someone close to me.

Bill. Max. Even Ton. All of them could be the culprit.

I might have some conflicts with Bill, but I didn’t think that he would kill anyone even though he’d caused troubles for others all the times.

Max might have changed, but I could feel that the same Max was still there. Max tried to help me as he’d done in the past. He was another person

that helped me through the hardness of my life. The bright smiles of the boy at that time gave the liveliness to the me now.

And Ton...

While I was deep in thought, I heard someone knocked the door.

“It’s me,” Dad said from the other side of the door. “Can I come in?”

I headed to unlock the door. Dad opened it slowly and walked hesitantly into my room.

“I think...” Dad smiled apologetically. “I think I should end this. I’m sorry.”

“No... it should be me who say sorry.”

Dad dragged a chair from in front of the computer to the bed and sat down with a more relaxed expression.

“Thank you, Dream. For forgiving me.” Dad smiled. His eyes were bright.

I sat down on the bed, letting myself sunk in thought for a while before realizing that Dad still sat there.

“What’s the matter, Dad?”

“Nothing.” Dad denied with his lifted hand. “I just feel that you’ve grown up so much... so much that I can’t understand my girl anymore.”

I looked at him without any expression. I didn't know how to answer him. My thoughts were complicated. I could see only problems waiting for me.

Dad looked at me as if he knew how I felt. He touched my shoulder. The warm touch was gentle and made me strangely comfortable.

"I know that you have something in your mind." He winked. "Since you asked about that photo, I already know that you might have some problems. It might be a problem that I can never understand, but please, believe me, I really don't have anything hidden from you."

He sighed and looked out the window absent-mindedly. The stars shone bright into the room as if guiding a lost soul.

"You told me that you dream of something, right?" Dad asked. I nodded in reply.

"You might be too stressed. You dream of something terrifying, and now we have to face something like this. It probably scares you. Don't worry. I promise you will be safe. I promise on your mom behalf as well, okay?"

I smiled before lowering my head.

"I'm sorry... that I cursed at you the other day."

"It doesn't matter. Just let it go." Dad rubbed my head gently.

"But I..."

“It’s okay.” He smiled. “I used to be a teenager, too. Even when I can’t catch up with ones nowadays.”

Dad laughed. He tried to make me relax. I’d fought him, but he still forgave me without expecting even an apology. He chose my happiness over his own. His kindness reminded me of the shameless thing I’d done to him. I was such a bad daughter.

“Well, I want to ask you something.” He leaned back on the chair. “Who did you go out with the other day?”

I hugged my knees, hesitating to answer this question. Dad looked at me thoughtfully before smiled.

“It’s fine. You probably don’t want to tell anyone. Everybody has a secret.” Dad rubbed my back. “When I was your age, I have things I didn’t want to tell anyone as well.”

I looked up at him to see that he winked at me again.

“You look at me like that. Are you curious how do I know?” Dad smiled. “Because I’m your Dad.”

I smiled back. So many feelings were overwhelming inside my mind. The heat spread throughout my face. A tear fell from my red eyes.

I threw myself into his arms and silently cried the tears that mixed with happiness and sadness. Dad rubbed my head gently. I felt like a baby in its parent’s warm embrace. I felt safe.

“It’s fine. It’s fine.” Dad's voice was gentle.

Every tear drop was from my pain. Dad let me cry until I had no tears left, letting all pain to go away.

I cried in his arms like that.

Let the tears fixed our broken relationship.

I cried like that... until I fell asleep.

12

I stared out the window, trying to avoid the beating on the door.

The beating sound became louder, and I heard a man shouted. I didn't understand what he said, but I knew why he was there.

He was there to kill me.

I tried to stare out the window. Human is naturally afraid of death even when we don't realize it. Every time we have to face something we fear, our mind will order us to protect ourselves subconsciously.

I always reacted to whatever I feared by turning my face away from it. Doing that wouldn't make me any safer but we human are so fragile, we always need something to hold on. It doesn't matter how useless it is, if it made us comfortable, we're ready to hold on it tightly.

I moved away a bit more, placed my cheek on the window. The cool touch spread over my face. For now, it was the feeling of safety.

The beating became lighter before finally disappeared. The footstep on the outside was moving away. The stairs' wood boards had screamed for a while before everything went silent. I turned to look at the door to make sure that the attacker actually left. I sighed with relief.

But the silent was scarier.

I sat there alone hugging my knees, staying with the fear my heart created. The attacker might be lurking somewhere in the house, or he could pretend to run away to lure me out.

I felt like I was caged in a locked room.

Suddenly, my phone rang. I looked at the light blinking on the screen, hesitating to receive this mysterious call.

I slowly reached the phone with my shaking hand. My eyes shook. My body bathed in sweat. I squeezed the phone tightly, hesitating briefly before answered it.

No voice was heard from the other side. I listened a while before hanged up. Suddenly, it rang again. I felt uncertain but still answered it.

I heard breathing sound.

I hang up immediately. Then, someone knocked on the window. I looked there with confusion. I was on the second floor, and the house structure was rather high. It was impossible for someone to knock on the window.

Outside was empty. Only bloody hand prints were there.

My body reacted to what I saw automatically. I jumped back, trying to stay away from the window as far as possible.

Nowhere was safe. Nowhere to hide.

I heard someone shouted from outside the window. The glass shook violently as if someone hit it. Blood seeped down through the cracks in the ceiling, dripping in the room as if they were rained.

Suddenly, my shoulders felt heavy. Coldness went throughout my body. I turned around slowly. No matter how much I wanted to run away, the curiosity pinned me down.

White teeth lay neatly. It smiled happily in the dark.

That was the last thing I saw.

I woke up frightened. My body was soaked with sweat. I tried to look around, trying to separate the dream of the reality.

The sunlight shone through the window. The birds were chippering, waking people up from their slumber.

In the bright morning light was a man sitting there in the same place. His hair was messy. Both eyes had dark circles under them. His look let me saw his tiredness and sacrifice.

Dad...

The corners of my lips went up before I realized it. I proudly watched at the image of the middle-aged man in front of me. Dad wasn't the most capable person in the world, but he was the best Dad I could ever wish for.

“Why do I have to be so scared?” I laughed lightly. “Dad has been with me the whole night.”

I stretched my limbs to relieve the tension before left the room silently. Today was a holiday. I should let him rest.

I took care of myself for half an hour. After finished dressing, I walked out of the bathroom.

Dad still sat there.

I threw myself on the bed, looking absent-mindedly at the ceiling. A lot of thoughts mixed together. For how long had I forgotten this empty feeling? After mom had died, Dad had tried even harder to fill the hole in my heart. Our family might be uncompleted, but I was happy with my life now.

Even when we used to fight each other, even when I used to hate him so much, nothing could be compared with the good things he'd done for me.

I got up, leaning on the window glass. Dad might not be a perfect father, but he really was the best father for me.

While I was thinking about the past, Dad opened his eyes and rubbed them confusingly.

“It’s... morning already?” He yawned.

“Yes, it’s already morning,” I replied and pointed at the clock. “Don’t you know that your daughter is getting hungry?”

“Oh, yeah, I forget.” Dad frantically got up from the chair. He arranged his messy clothes and hair before rushed out the door.

Before he stepped off the room, Dad turned back and smiled at me.

“Thanks, Dream.” He smiled broadly then ran downstairs.

I smiled to myself before dropped on the bed again. This might be the best thing I could do to repay him.

I might not be a good daughter but, at least, I wanted to pay him back even just a little. Now, I could only give him chances for little happiness like this, but I promised that one day, I would make him truly happy by myself.

I promised.

While I was lying around waiting for my breakfast, my phone rang. I looked at the screen before answered it.

“Dream, Ton’s here. Are you free now?” Ton’s voice was comfortable.

“Yeah,” I replied. “What’s the matter?”

“Can we meet at the library?”

“What’s going on?” I asked while scratching my head.

“It’s the same old thing.”

When I arrived at the University, Ton was waiting for me at the gate.

“Haven’t we agreed to meet at the library?” I asked.

“I’ve been curious about something. Let’s walk there together.”

We walked along the sports field before went through the back of a building. We walked through a park until reached the library. Ton looked back before asking me.

“You do realize that Bill follows you?”

I nodded, so Ton continued. “I’m just wondering how Bill know that you’re coming here? You don’t normally have class today.”

“Bill comes here every day, doesn’t he?”

“That’s because you see him almost every day.” Ton said. “Normally, if you don’t have a class, I won’t see Bill around.”

“Are you telling me that Bill knows my schedule?”

Ton nodded. I forced a laugh.

“That shouldn’t be possible. Are you trying to tell me that Bill has been stalking me? That’s insane.”

“But your ex is really insane.” Ton said. “Well, let’s hurry to the library.”

While we were heading to our usual seats, Max walked over to us from the other side.

“H- h- hey.” Max greeted. “Y- y- y you don’t have a class today, right, Dream?”

“I come to play around,” I replied.

“I- I- I’ll go to my class then.” Max waved goodbye. “I- i- it’s about to begin. See you.”

Max left the library in a hurry. I sat down on my usual seat while Ton took out a notebook from his bag, placed it on the table, and started to write something.

“What are you writing?”

“The information we discussed the other day.” Ton looked up briefly before lowering his head to continue writing. “It might be useful. I can’t get the whole image if I don’t write it down.”

“Well, and what do you want to talk about?”

Ton placed down the pencil before looking up.

“About the condition. The culprit starts to do something now. Moreover, Max and Bill saw you today, so they probably know that we won’t give up easily. So, we need to hurry.”

“You can think of a way to find the condition?”

“No.” Ton played with the pencil. “I still have no idea.”

I leaned on the chair’s arm, adjusting my glasses thoughtfully.

“You just said that you prefer to write everything down?” I asked.

“Yes.” Ton looked at me curiously. “Why?”

“Why don’t you try to draw it?”

“Draw? Draw what?”

“I think it might be not enough. We have to go back to the old house again.” I leaned back. “We have nothing more to investigate now, I think then why don’t we just draw that house and see how the culprit got into the house? What else had happened there?”

Ton’s eyes went wide with surprise. He sat straight, laid the pencil on the table, and clapped lightly.

“W- what? Why are you clapping?” I didn’t feel good with his action.

“Great. Your idea is marvelous.” Ton smiled. “Why haven’t I thought of it earlier?”

“So, you agree that I’m cleverer than you now?”

“Don’t be overconfident.” Ton picked up the pencil and used it to point at me. “It’s just this once. Moreover, we still have a lot to find out.”

Suddenly, the library went extremely bright. Rain dropped on the roof harshly. I could hear the sound of thunders before the light went out.

“That’s too bad.” Ton said. “When the library will have enough money for the reserved electricity?”

I laughed. Ton put his stuff into the bag before stood up.

“Let’s go outside.”

The gray cloud covered the sky. Large rain drops hit the leaves fiercely until they dropped. Ton looked around before turned to me.

“Sorry for dragging you into this.” He said. “Do you have to hurry home?”

I shook my head. Ton smiled in reply.

“Okay, where should we sit the rain out now?” He asked.

“I think standing here is fine.”

“Well, since we have nothing to do,” Ton rummaged his bag. “I think I’d better walk you home.”

Ton took out a small umbrella from the bag. I raised my eyebrows before asked.

“Can it cover anything?”

“It sure can. If my lady won’t mind.”

I turned away to hide my emotion. Ton laughed before shook the umbrella a bit. The umbrella sprang out. It was a lot bigger than I thought.

“We don’t have to cramp together.” He smiled. “Let’s go and chat pleasantly.”

I hit his chest once then we left the university.

While we were turning into the shortcut, Ton asked.

“When will we go there again?”

“I don’t know, but if it’s as you said, we’d better go there sooner.”

“You might be able to think of something more than me. You’re more familiar with the place. This time we might get something useful.”

“I hope so.” I sighed. “But I’m not sure if I can do it.”

Ton stared at me for a moment. He coughed before started to say.

“I observed you when you talked about the illusion.” He looked straight. “Sometimes you were... out of it. Sometimes you seemed... in pain. It was like you were thinking of something terrible. You also told me that you can’t remember them, right?”

“Yes. Your memory is good.”

“What I want to say is...” Ton paused. “I think this is important. I have a conclusion, but it seems impossible. If I’m not certain of it, I don’t want to tell you about it. It’ll just make you worry.”

“If you have something to say, say it. Why act like it’s a top secret?”

“It’s not that I want to keep it a secret. I just think that...”

Suddenly, the sky was brightly lit. Thunder hit the ground not too far from where we stood.

But that wasn’t what stopped us.

In the middle of the thundering sound and the heavy rain, we heard footsteps.

We made sure that no one secretly followed us when we walked passed many people a while ago.

Then, how did a mysterious man suddenly stand behind us? Why did his footstep sound different from anything we’d heard in our lives?

Why did the atmosphere change from what it should be?

The wet smell of the rain was replaced with the smell of blood. The sound of thunder was replaced with a rhythm of metal hitting.

A chill spread throughout the area. It was an unusual cold. I could feel my bones eaten up. It was as if ice was trying to penetrate inside.

The surrounding exuded the feeling like... we were standing inside that old house. The smell of death reeked throughout the place.

A man in a black raincoat walked toward us as if an approaching monster. He held a large hammer so big that an average person shouldn't be able to lift it, but he wielded such killing weapon easily.

I glanced back. My muscles were tense from fear.

Everything was like the nightmare I saw.

But what was happening now... It was a reality...

The hunt... was about to begin.

13

The whistle from the mysterious man played a familiar tune.

Ton squeezed my wrist hard. He walked forward without looking back before turned in and out small valleys with efficiency. Ton was someone with a good memory. He could remember every way that could lead to my house. I looked at his serious expression and knew that he was genuinely worried about me.

“As I thought... the culprit knows that we don’t give up. From now on, his attack will be more and more severe.” He whispered. “You’re in danger.”

Ton turned left at the next junction. He tried to take us to where people gathered. The mysterious man followed us unhurriedly. He hid the weapon on his back before changed his movement to be more natural.

“He still follows us,” I whispered. “What does he want?”

“He intends to do as he threatened you... He chooses the time when it rains. He decides to follow you to where no others around. Even we try to run away, it’s still quite far until we reach the point that there are more people. He plans everything neatly.” Ton whispered without looking at me. “Even when we reach more people, from his action, at least he wants you to know that he’s serious.”

I glanced back. It was as if he knew that I was sneaking a peek at him. He lifted up his hands and cracked the knuckles. For others, this action seemed pretty normal, but I knew right then and there that he was trying to send me a message.

Stop...

Or...

Die...

I frantically turned back, trying not to think about his threatening.

“Let me ask you something,” Ton sped up. “Do you think that is Bill?”

“I can’t tell.” I shook my head. “This isn’t the same feeling when Bill follows me, and I don’t think that is Max, too. Max used to be good at sports but that weapon... Max couldn’t lift it up.”

I wrangled with Max once. Max was swift and sharp, but he wasn’t good at sports that require a lot of physical strength. When he and I were in elementary school, Max won most sports competitions, but those sports didn’t concentrate on strength.

“That’s why I choose not to go against him directly.” Ton turned right at the next junction. “From what I see, I don’t think that I can win... I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to.”

“It’s still so far until we reach your house. We need to buy some time and choose the path with more people, so you won’t be hurt.”

“I think I have a way.”

Suddenly, I left Ton and ran in another direction. Ton shouted after me in shock.

“Dream!!!”

I ran straight before looked back to see the situation.

As expected, he chose to follow me.

I preferred to risk my life so Ton could be safe. I wouldn’t let anyone in troubles because of me again.

No way...

I turned left, going to the back of a building on the side to slow him down. I ran forward and turned into an alley on the right before stopped and waited at the next junction.

The moment I saw his shadow, I moved to the right. I ran through several tiny alleys around the buildings. This area was a small maze. It wasn’t extremely complicated, but unless you were local, it was very easy to get lost.

I stopped from time to time to make sure that he fell into my trap. This man must know that I would leave this maze sooner or later. Looking from the other side, this was the best place to hide. If he wanted to harm me without a witness, this place was the best place, too.

After running around until I was confident that I could leave him behind, I frantically ran out of the alleys. I looked around at the exit to make sure that no one followed me and rushed out with everything I had.

Suddenly, I heard a whistle from behind. The tip of the hammer was swung down fast.

My instinct screamed. My nerves alerted every muscle with high electric voltage. I sprang back. All of my nerves were completely cut out of everything around me.

The metal hit the floor hard, crushing the cement ground into small pieces. The whistle still rang in the air. He walked out of an alley that could lead to another alley, dragging that killing weapon with him. His face might be covered with a black mask, but I knew what he was thinking.

He was smiling and licking his lips in enjoyment. I was completely in his hand to play with.

I was dealing with a non-human... but that wasn't the worst thing...

The image of my death replayed in front of my eyes. I saw myself crunched into mush. Every piece of my bones was cracked. The muscles shook in tune with the blood that was rushing out.

I felt that I had no way to escape...

I saw myself... died here.

He charged forward fast, swinging the large hammer as if it was a floating feather. His aim was to finish his prey in one go.

I bent down to avoid his attack automatically and bolted away. My legs were stretched to the limit to take my body to escape the danger. I ran without looking back, trying to force down my fear that was roaring inside my heart.

I ran through the alleys and turned at every corner in an attempt to slow him down, but my effort was useless. Even though I ran with all my strength, the whistle sound was getting nearer and nearer.

No way out. No way to escape.

My legs were getting numb. My breaths became short. My heart beat so hard that it hit my chest fiercely. It beat so hard that I thought my heart might jump outside.

I was at my limit, but I couldn't give up now.

Suddenly, I could think of a way to escape this situation. I rushed forward with all of my strength I had left. I forced myself so hard that I could actually hear my muscles screamed but I couldn't give up.

I ran straight to the road, waiting for the moment that a car would pass. When he was running toward me, I bolted.

I cut in front of a car that ran in fast before slipped down on the wet ground. I got up in a hurry and kept running without caring anything.

The sound of metal hitting something hard was deafening. I kept running without looking back, praying all the danger to go away.

I ran for some times before finally stopped. I breathed in the air greedily. Every muscle was full of the wasted energy my body didn't need. My heart pumped the blood so hard that the vessels almost broke. My body was hot from burning so much energy. I really was at my limit.

But at least I was safe.

I smiled to myself before looking back as if I won.

I took in another deep breath before letting it out, walked forward tiredly, and laughed for this miserable event finally ended.

But my wish and the reality were different.

The nightmare didn't stop after waking up.

The sound of footstep and whistle was getting closer. I heard the sound of a hammer hitting the electric poles from every corner. That man walked out of a dark corner. His black rain coat soaked with blood. His face was distorted from pain. There was some red liquid at the tip of the hammer.

It was blood... human's blood.

The moment that I rushed out, this man was hit by the running car harshly. His body was thrown away so far. When the driver came down to check, he got up again with the killing weapon in his hand that crushed its prey's bone into powder.

His life was exchanged with another innocent soul.

Nothing could stop him.

Anyone tried to stop him must die.

I tried to run away, but I'd used up all of my strength. I didn't have any strength left to even walk another step. There was nowhere for me to escape or hide anymore.

Was this my ending?

Did I really have to die here all alone?

I turned my body away, lifting my arms to protect myself. The road might be dark. The fear squeezed my heart. However, I would never give up no matter how bad this situation would end.

I would never give up.

No way...

Even though I tried to tell myself that, there was only despair in my heart...

I was well aware of the truth... I... couldn't escape.

Not anymore...

He moved closer with a disgusting smile. He rested the hammer on his shoulder briefly before lifted it over his head. The last raindrop hit the ground, breaking down into a small wave. I saw my reflection on the puddle beside me. My face twisted from fear, but the eyes were determined as ever.

The sun shone on the weapon as if a god was about to punish a puny human. The golden light caught my eyes. I closed my eyes, ready to face the upcoming ending of my life.

Dad... we just made amends, but my life had to end like this.

Ton... thanks for every moment we spent together. At least, in the last minute of my life... he didn't have to be troubled because of me again...

Thank you...

Goodbye...

A tear dropped on the ground the second the hammer was swung down.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps from behind. Ton rushed out and grabbed my wrist before hit the mysterious man in the face. The man dodged fast, but the weight of the hammer dragged him to stagger behind. While he lost his balance, Ton carried me up and ran away.

I looked at him with surprise. Since I knew him, I'd never saw him like this.

"Y- you..." I wanted to say something, but my mind went blank.

"Shut up!" Ton scolded me. "And never do something stupid like that again."

I nodded docilely. Ton sighed before looked back.

“He still follows us. I don’t know whether I can take you home in time.” Ton said. “When you went the other way, I already called the police. What we have to do now is to buy time before the police arrive.”

“Umm...” I stared at Ton without a blink. “You should let me down... I can walk.”

“Shut up.” Ton gritted his teeth. “If you can walk, you should run minutes ago. Don’t lie to me.”

Ton ran until we reached the next junction, he then lost his balance. The mud was slippery and took us down the low rise. I fell from his arms not far away and hit a stone pole of the bridge below. I cried out loud before Ton covered my mouth with his hand.

“Silent.” He whispered.

I nodded. My eyes brimmed with the tears from the pain.

The whistled got near. That man looked around slowly, using the sharp eyes to detect his escaped preys. My breaths stopped from fear. Just his appearance made me feel of disaster.

He walked around as if he could smell something good to eat. He walked to the left, looking into the alley behind a building before came back to the same spot. He stood there like he was thinking before turning to where we were hiding.

He walked over to us slowly. The sound of metal scratching with the cement ground was loud from above. Ton pressed me to him harder. His eyes looked at the mysterious man with wariness.

Three steps... Two steps... I counted the steps the man took to get closer to us.

...

One more step... Just another one...

Before he could have a look, the siren from the police car rang in the air. He looked at the source of the sound, hid the hammer at his back, and ran away.

Ton remained still in the same position. His eyes followed the mysterious man carefully. I tried to get free and made a sound in my throat in an attempt to tell him to let go of my mouth.

Ton looked at me seriously before realized that everything ended now. He stepped back swiftly. I took a few breaths greedily and coughed loudly.

“S- sorry.” Ton apologized.

“I- it’s okay,” I said with a rough voice. “I have to thank you even.”

“Thank me... for what?”

“It’s because of you...” I coughed out loud. “That we survive.”

“Oh, um... that’s fine.”

I wore a serious expression, stared into Ton's eyes as if trying to excuse him. Ton stared back. Then, we laughed loudly.

"We made it!" Ton shouted gladly.

The tiredness from the earlier event made me dizzy. I laughed lightly before coughed a few more times. Ton got up energetically and brushed his clothes before extended his hand to me.

"It's okay now." He smiled. The shadow from the sun covered his face. "As I promised, princess, I'll take you home."

I looked at him in awe with a small smile was on my face and grabbed his hand with a feeling that was hard to describe.

He pulled me up and brushed the dirt off my hair before leading the way.

"Are you ready, princess?" He turned to ask me. "I'll take you home."

I smiled in reply and followed him slowly, feeling the warmth that went throughout my heart.

Every time I was with him, no matter what happened, I would feel safe.

We walked together in the sunlight. The storm was gone. Bright rays passed through the silver cloud. The air was fresh. The birds sang as if to celebrate our safety.

I leaned on Ton's arm lightly. Ton looked at me with surprise before turned back to look ahead, letting me did as I wanted.

I prayed for the moment to last forever.

14

Ton pushed the door open. Dust rose in the air. The sunlight reflected in our eyes.

I followed him and looked around. The smell of death was still thick in the air like the first time we were here.

“Where should we start?” Ton asked.

“Let me think.” I looked around, trying to think of the ways to go in and out of this house. I moved away for a long time, but I could remember its structure rather well.

“This place can be reached only through the front door. We had a backyard, but Dad didn’t build a back door.”

Ton nodded before walking around. He surveyed the first floor carefully. I headed to the dining room, looking at each window before called Ton.

“If he didn’t use the front door, then he had to get in through the window,” I shouted, waving to get his attention.

“Don’t you think the culprit would get in through the windows on the second floor?” Ton shouted his question. “Your house has only two stories. I’ll look for a broken window.”

I nodded in reply before walking around and trying to find something that could help recalling my memory.

Coming here to find the truth pained me a little. I really like this house because it was the house that my family was once living together. Mom might go on her separate way, but the images from memory remained. However, the house that used to offer warmth and was the resting place was now might be the same place that hid my nightmare.

If this house had a dark history, all good memory might be painted over with darkness. Good things would fade away, leaving only broken happiness behind.

I walked into the kitchen and looked around carefully. The kitchen was full of smoke and broken tiles. The sink became rusty from times. The worn shelves were full of broken glasses and spider web. The kitchenware had been brought away and left the dead mice and spider web there.

While I was looking for a clue, I noticed a piece of broken glass covered with smoke on the floor.

I looked at the middle of the kitchen. The window glass was broken. Cinder and dried weeds at the back of the house blended together that it was hard to see anything clearly. I walked ahead and inspected the broken window carefully.

The window was big enough for a person to get through.

I walked out of the kitchen and called Ton. He gave me a confused look before ran over.

“Look.” I pointed at the window. “I’d checked. The culprit probably got in through this way. Why don’t you try it? Be careful and don’t cut yourself.”

Ton crawled through the window outside and went back.

“The size is just right.” He rubbed his chin. “I checked upstairs. No broken window. The ceiling wasn’t cut either. Your house doesn’t have an attic or something like that, right?”

I shook my head, so Ton continued. “It seems that the culprit didn’t get in from above. He should get in from this floor.”

“It’s strange.” I tilted my head. Ton nodded.

“Because you haven’t seen the image like this, huh?” He rubbed the broken glass left on the window with his hand. “I’m wondering about this point, too. We used to look around here once but found nothing. Why do you think it is?”

“You said it had to have a condition, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but that condition, what is it?” Ton stepped forward, inspecting the blood stain on the wall.

“I don’t know.” I stared at the broken glass thoughtfully. “It doesn’t feel familiar.”

“Then, let’s start with arranging the culprit’s actions.” Ton said. “First, before the culprit broke into the house, what do you think he would do?”

“Well... broke the glass and got in silently...?”

“Nonsense.” Ton laughed. “He should first cut out the electric. That’s weird. Your house’s electrical lines don’t seem to be cut at all.”

“Dad told me that one of them was down during a storm, but he called someone to fix it up already.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Ton took something from his pocket. “I found a warning of cutting electricity upstairs. Your Dad probably didn’t take it with him. So, it means the culprit choose the day that the electric would be cut, hmm?”

I nodded before asked him.

“Then, the culprit... got into the house, right?”

“He might prepare something first.” Ton shrugged. “Did your house have a camera or some kind of alarming signal?”

When I shook my head, Ton continued. “After preparing, the culprit might get in here. Guessing from your illusion, you weren’t aware of him until he reached your room, right? Can you tell me again what you saw in the dream? Make it clearer. I’ll take note for you so you can concentrate on remembering it.”

I tried to recall my lost memory. I heard someone knocked on the door. I was very scared, but I didn't seem like someone who didn't know what was going on. I was confused.

"I... think I didn't become aware of him."

"Umm." Ton looked at the window. "From the fragments, I'm pretty sure it should make some sound when broken."

"I'm not sure how I was in the illusion, but I think I didn't become aware of someone approaching me. I seemed to be scared, and confused."

Ton nodded. "Where's your father's room?"

I pointed upstairs. "Dad's room was on the second floor. It had the same pattern as mine, but Dad liked to live quietly, so he made it soundproofed. His room in the new house is the same, but I can hear some noise at the door. I just learned that Dad likes to watch video filmed when I was young."

"Video?" Ton smiled. "Your father is rather cute."

"Shouldn't tell you about it," I said playfully.

"Well, it's good anyway. Seem like your father cares about you."

"Yes... he's care..." Ton's words reminded me of what I'd done in the past. I adjusted my glasses with my finger to cover the guilt of my old mistakes.

“So, it means that... your father didn’t hear...” Ton went silent for a while. “And did your room installed some soundproof material, too?”

“No.” I shrugged. “I don’t have any problem with noises. I don’t really like it if it’s too silent.”

“You don’t like silence?” Ton’s eyes became a slit. “Then... what do you like to do when you’re in your room?”

“Why do you ask?” I raised my eyebrows.

“I don’t mean something extremely private.” Ton lifted his hands to stop me. “Well...how about this? Do you like listening to music?”

“I do. I told you before.”

“Oh, yeah.” Ton slapped his forehead. “Do you have an earphone?”

“Sure.”

“Then, I can guess why you didn’t hear any sound back then.” Ton sighed. “And do you think there’s another way to get upstairs from here?”

“No. There’re only the two stairs you saw. No matter which way the culprit got into the house, if he wanted to go to the second floor, he must use the stairs.”

“So, when your father’s room was soundproof, he shouldn’t hear anything. You might be listening to some music at that time as well, but I still think it’s a bit strange. If the light was out, wouldn’t you come out to look?”

“I...can’t remember.”

Ton sighed. This was a lot difficult than he expected.

“Then... let’s think a bit more.” Ton left the kitchen, looking at the stairs. I followed him. “If this is the only way to go upstairs for the culprit, he probably used the stair on your side. There’s no reason for him to idle around. The faster he was, the less chance he would be found.”

Ton walked to the second floor. I followed him until we reached my old room. He knocked the door, testing the condition, before got into the room. I followed him without a word.

“Strange.” He shook his head. “It seems... out of place.”

“Why?”

“You told that the culprit beat on the door, right? If you didn’t hear the glass broken, you shouldn’t suspect anything. Usually, if someone hears glass broken, one should go to have a look. If you didn’t hear and the culprit didn’t see you come out, he should know that people in the house didn’t care about it, so he should just open your door directly. However, you said that you saw yourself getting scared...”

“About the broken glass... even if I didn’t listen to some music back then, I wouldn’t go out to check.”

“Why is that?”

“Well... I told you that my Dad was suck about cooking.” I sighed out of frustration. “He broke a lot of plates. He broke so many that I stop caring about it. It’s been like this for a long time.”

“Umm.” Ton seemed to be thoughtful. “But the culprit still should have known. From everything he’d done up until now, he isn’t an amateur. Everything has been well planned. To miss such a small point like this... it’s impossible.”

“I think it’s possible to forget something small. Like when he sent the messages.”

“Yes. I think that those messages are strange... but it’s not the same about this.” Ton looked at me fiercely. “This is an important point. The culprit must try to limit any encounter to be as few as possible. Allure the prey out without a chance to struggle. I think he wouldn’t miss this point.”

“From what you said, it seems to contradict.”

“Can you recall the images you saw? Something clearer than before?”

I closed my eyes, trying to remember what I saw at that time. I heard door beating, seeing myself shook with fear. I saw...

I saw myself holding a knife.

My eyes opened wide. My breaths rushed. Ton looked at me with worry all over his face. He touched my shoulder lightly.

“Are you alright?” He asked.

“I- I’m alright.” I forced a smile. “I just remember something strange.”

“Something strange?” He raised his eyebrows.

“When someone... beat on the door.” I panted. My voice stuck. I saw myself... holding a knife...”

“You hold a knife?” Ton raised his eyebrows.

“that’s right. It shouldn’t be mistaken.”

“But in the earlier illusion, you said you were stabbed.” His brows are knitted tightly. “It becomes even more contradicted.”

Ton brushed off the dust with his handkerchief before lean me on the wall. He looked around again before brushed off the dust on the opposite spot and sat down in front of me.

“Let me think a bit. First, the culprit waited until the electric was out, broke the glass downstairs, and sneaked into the house. You and your father didn’t hear anything. Then, the culprit beat on your door...” Ton face twisted with thoughtfulness. “The culprit didn’t miss about the threatening jigsaws but missed about banging on the door? And you said you were holding a knife. If you hadn’t suspected anything in the first place, where did you get the knife from?”

I considered the information Ton provided. I was rather certain that the culprit had no other way to get into the house. Everything seemed reasonable, except when the culprit tried to break into my room.

“Everything so contradicts.” Ton shook his head. “I feel like we’re going nowhere.”

“You’re right.” I looked around before lowered my head.

While I was looking down, I noticed something from the corner of my eyes. I looked over there swiftly.

“Maybe...” I whispered.

“What? You can think of something?”

“That time... might not be the same time as when the culprit broke in.”

“What?” Ton scratched his head.

“The culprit might break in first then I could get rid of him. However, he still tried to break in again, so I went to get the knife to protect myself.”

“Where do you get this idea?” Ton raised his eyebrows.

I pointed at the kitchen. “You said the culprit broke the glass without us realizing. However, in my illusion, I saw myself holding a knife, and the culprit was trying to break into my room. So, I can only think that the culprit must be in my room once when I wasn’t aware of him.”

“And where did you get the knife?” Ton asked. “If the culprit ran away, would you follow him to get the knife and went back to your room?”

“Do you have any better idea?”

Ton shrugged. “We’re finding the truth from your memory. There’s no evidence to search for. I can’t help you remember either...”

Suddenly, Ton stopped speaking as if he could think of something. He lowered his head and took a notebook from his shirt pocket before wrote something down.

“What are you doing?”

“Give me some time to think.” Ton said while lifted a finger to stop me.

I sat silently, looking at Ton writing something on the paper at high speed. He wrote, torn a page off, and threw it away. He did that repeatedly for a while before looked up.

“You might be right.” Ton said. “I can think of something now.”

“What do you think of?” I tilted my head confusingly.

“It seemed unreasonable for the culprit to get into your room without some preparation. As I told you earlier, the culprit must prepare himself before getting into the house. What I think important is he must have a weapon and something like a duct tape to stop you from making a loud noise.”

“Are you telling me ... that knife wasn’t mine?”

“As I said, the culprit must come prepared. Did you see how he chased us? He’d prepared such heavy weapon just to corner you. He should prepare a weapon at that time as well, and it was a knife.” Ton rubbed his chin. “But it’s strange. You said you bled a lot but why don’t you have a scar?”

“I’ve been curious about that, too,” I said and lifted my hand to stop him. “In case you have some weird question, I don’t have a scar anywhere else, too. I’ve checked already.”

“That’s right.” Ton shook his head. “Everything seems impossible. I tried to image the scene. The culprit might try knocking your door at first, and you opened it without realizing. Then, the culprit charged into the room, locked it, and did something... but you could fight him off. He dropped the knife. You backed him out, but he kept beating on the door. If it was like this, it means that the culprit hadn’t actually given up. It’s still strange anyway. Since he didn’t have a weapon anymore, why did the culprit try to break into your room again? And why it was you who were stabbed in the end?”

“He might have another weapon with him,” I said. “Like in those psycho movies, he wouldn’t give up until he gets what he wants.”

“That might be possible, but the blood stain is in the kitchen. It showed that you must leave the room after that and met the culprit downstairs, or the culprit dragged you down before stabbed you. Now, what I don’t

understand is why did you get out of the room? How did you survive? What does the culprit want from you and why did he escape before he can kill you?"

"Everything seems... unreasonable," I whispered. "But they're also reasonable at the same time. The culprit still follows me. There are those threatening, and those messages."

"That's what I don't understand." Ton scratched his head. It told me that his severe headache was back again.

"What did the culprit want?"

We surveyed the house again to seek for some more clues but found nothing that was really useful.

I forced Ton to rest. He tried to refuse at first but agreed later. I knew that his body was at its limit.

"I still have questions about the window." Ton said. "Why didn't you see anything about it in your illusion? If your memory is triggered by some condition as I think and if the culprit really got into the house from that way, you should have remembered something about it."

"Have we followed those conditions?" I said. "Maybe it wasn't enough. Maybe there's something more need to be done."

"You told me that your father isn't good at cooking, right?" Ton took out a pencil to play with it. "Has your kitchen always been on that stage?"

“It’s been like that for a long time but probably not this dirty,” I told him. “Why?”

“If the smoke stain is removed, will it be a lot different from now?”

“No. Why?”

“I just remember something.” Ton sighed, looking absent-mindedly at the dark ceiling. “I’ve moved to stay with my sister in Bangkok. I also have to be the one who cooks. My sister isn’t good at cooking.”

“Is that so?” I laughed lightly. “Must be hard on you.”

“But it feels good. I can choose what we’ll eat and cook as I please. Sometimes, my sister cooks. She isn’t good at it, but she is happy to do it.”

“Just like my Dad,” I said.

“And I have to clean up after the mess.” Ton sighed. “But I still feel good. We might have some conflicts, but we’re happy.”

I smiled. I understood well what Ton meant. The relationship between Ton and his sister was like mine and my Dad’s. We might have some conflicts, but we were happy to spend some times together.

“That sounds just like my Dad. He likes to cook, and, in the end, I have to clean up everything. Once he burnt the fish until the smoke covered the kitchen’s window and I had to clean it. You must know how hard it is to remove that smoke stain.”

Ton laughed while leaned back on the wall.

Suddenly, he became silent. He looked at the windows in the kitchen then turned to look at me with a smile as if all of his pain had gone away.

“That’s cool, Dream.” He said. “You just unlocked a condition.”

“Condition? What condition?”

“Come here.” He got up and bore his hand as if inviting. “Let’s clean up that kitchen’s window.”

I followed him confusingly. He took out his handkerchief, spit on it, and started to rub on the window.

“I have only one handkerchief.” He said. “You use yours, too.”

Ton and I used our handkerchiefs to clean the smoke stain on the window. The stain stuck harder than I thought.

Finally, the dullness that had kept a secret for a long time was removed. The fading evening light shone into the house through the broken frame.

Ton looked at his work with satisfaction as if he just finished a masterpiece with his hands. He loved solving puzzles. Every time he could find the answer, he would show his satisfaction proudly no matter how small the puzzle was.

“You... can you remember anything?” He coughed.

“I... don’t remember anything.” I shook my head. “Maybe we haven’t completed the condition?”

“Maybe or maybe not.” Ton said. “I really can’t think of more condition. I might be wrong. This might not be something that can trigger your memory.”

“Then... let’s find something else.” I said.

“I said that the culprit must cut off the electricity before got into the house, didn’t I? It means that the culprit must have a flashlight or something similar. What do you usually use?”

“At my house, we use a flashlight or a candle, but we mostly use a flashlight,” I replied.

“Umm.” Ton nodded. “Last time, I found some used candles in your father’s room. It was useless back then but might become a clue now.”

“Why do you focus on the window first?” I asked.

“Just a feeling.”

“You typically say that we need to use reasons,” I smirked. “Never though that you will believe in a feeling, too.”

“Sometimes, I think that our instinct can be right.” Ton said expressionlessly. “Well, let’s go.”

We walked into Dad’s old room. Ton bent down and extended his hand under an old wardrobe. He took out some used candles from underneath.

“Can you remember something from seeing them?”

I shook my head before continued. “No. No matter how I look, these candles wouldn’t be used by the culprit. Don’t you find a flashlight?”

Ton shook his head. “I’ve searched around and found only these candles. Why do you think they’re not used by the culprit?”

“They had been hidden underneath,” I replied. “How many candles are under that?”

“Quite many. Most of them are small candles like birthday candles.”

“They didn’t belong to the culprit. No matter how careful the culprit was, some candles wouldn’t make anyone suspicious.” I bent down to look under the wardrobe. “Moreover, there’s no way he would think that in the next three years, I would come back to find the truth, right?”

“You’re right,” Ton let out a sigh. “but I think the culprit didn’t use a flashlight.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I found this.” Ton stood up and opened a drawer of the wardrobe. A dull candle holder laid in there.

“I think Dad never has something like this,” I said while glancing at Ton.

“So, it means I’m right.” He picked up the candle holder and cleaned it. “I just guess. You said that your house prefers using a flashlight.”

“But your instinct is right,” I said. “Pretty good.”

Ton rubbed the candle holder clean. He looked at it thoughtfully before turned to say to me.

“I found this stuff since we were here last time but I’ve never imagined that it’ll relate to this.” He said. “Dream, can you go and buy some big candles? The one usually used when the light is out.”

I nodded and left the house.

From the front door, I turned to the glossary shop that was about a hundred meters away. I bought large candles in every color available in the store before went back to the house.

While I was opening the door, my phone rang. I took it from the pocket and looked at the screen to see who was calling.

I hadn’t seen the number on the screen before.

I looked around to see whether someone followed me. After I was certain that I hadn’t been followed, I received the call.

There was only panting sound from the other side. I listened for a while before decided to cut the line.

Before I would press the button, I heard a loud scream. The voice was raspy and broken as if it was that voice didn’t belong to a human.

This scream gave me the same feeling as when I was hunted.

The scream... the death...

I... died...

I cut the line in an extreme shock.

But the scream was still ringing in my ears.

The fear reminded me of the illusion I saw. I dropped the phone on the ground. My body shook. Every muscle went weak.

I tried to take a deep breath, picked up the phone, and ran upstairs with everything I got.

“What’d happened to you? Why are you so pale?”

“I- I...” I tried to force out a word. “When I was out to buy the candles... someone called and... and...”

“Take it slow.” Ton comforted me. “Someone called you and then?”

“I- I don’t know,” I said while shaking my head. “The other end... just screamed.”

“Scream?” Ton raised his eyebrows. “You mean wailing? Something like that?”

I nodded and suddenly fell on the ground. Ton rushed to support me.

“Take a rest.” Ton sighed. “The culprit might plan to corner us. This forces us to find the truth faster. It would be safer to know who hurt you back then but it’ll be useless if something happens to you now.”

Ton brushed the dust of the wall on our backs. I leaned on it and took a deep breath before choked out. Ton sat next to me, looking at me worriedly.

“Or shall we stop for today?” I shook my head before walked straight to where the candle holder was placed on the wardrobe.

“You’ll test it now? I know that the faster we know who the culprit is the better but you don’t have to force yourself.”

I just smiled in reply. He looked into my eyes for a moment before got up forcefully. Ton took out the candles and placed each of them in front of me. He went to get the candle holder before walked back.

“Tell me when you’re ready.” Ton said. “I’ve noticed that every time you remember an image, you’ll behave strangely. It won’t be good for you to see an illusion now... if it’s really a clue, that is.”

I cleaned the sweat on my forehead, breathed in greedily, and slowly nodded.

“You’ll see it now?” Ton raised his eyebrows. “I think we can wait a bit more.”

“That’s unnecessary,” I said coarsely. “Like you said, the faster we know the truth, the better.”

“Up to you, then.” Ton sighed. “It doesn’t matter what I say. You won’t listen to me anyway.”

Ton looked at every candle we had before turned to look at me. He started to explain about the condition.

“The condition should consist of a candle placed in a candle holder, a lit candle, a melted candle, and a recently died out candle. It should base on the color too. I think we have everything here.” Ton said and sighed. “I’ll start from the green one.”

Ton picked up the green candle and placed it on the candle holder. The orange glow shook. Its light painted a part of Ton’s face while another part was covered with the black shadow. He looked at me as if trying to find an answer.

“Can you remember anything?” He asked.

I stared for a few minutes before shook my head. Ton waited for the candle to melt a little before blew it out.

“And now? Can you remember anything?”

I looked at the pale gray smoke floated lightly into the air then disappeared. The absent light reminded me of something missing, but I couldn’t tell what it was.

“Seems like nothing. It’s fine.” Ton took the candle off the holder before replaced it with an orange one.

“This one is entirely possible. It’s a popular color.”

But it was fruitless. Either when the candle was lit or when it was blown out, no images appeared in front of me.

Ton sighed before turned around to choose another candle.

“Candles might not be the clue.” He mumbled. “But we have to try.”

Ton tried every color we had, starting with red, blue, and then purple. It didn’t matter which color it was, my memory didn’t come.”

Finally, we had to face a failure.

Ton took out a yellow candle and placed it on the holder.

“Okay,” Ton sighed. “This is the last one. If it still isn’t right, then I don’t know how to find a clue next.”

Ton placed the candle slowly before lit it. The fire danced brightly in silent. The orange glow reminded me of the sunlight. Sunlight means liveliness and beginning, but now I had to look at the burning light to seek for the start of my death...

I looked at the candle tear dripped down to the base of the candle holder before shook my head. Ton showed that he was bored before blew out the candle again. I looked at the faded smoke thoughtfully. What we’d done this whole day might be as useless as the died-out light. I closed my eyes, feeling tired from the lost effort.

I opened my eyes slowly. Even I didn’t want to recognize the failure we faced, I had to go on.

The second I opened my eyes the image in front of me start to change. I saw the lines of things around me shook. Ton’s image shook

violently as if it was unstable radio waves before disappeared. Dad's room was scattering. The disturbing noise radiated around the place.

The image in front of me became clearer. I heard the wind touched the dried leaves. I heard the cricket sang its song. The feeling was much more precise than any illusion I saw before.

Things around me started to form. Darkness covered the place. Only the soft moonlight shone down to light up the place and revealed where I was.

I stood in the kitchen downstairs where all the nightmares started.

I looked around to search for the blood stain and touched my body to see if there was a wound. The touch I felt was so light.

Suddenly, the front door was opened. A man was looking around before barged in with a candle holder in his hand.

I screamed in panic, lifting my arms in an attempt to protect myself.

The moment he reached me, everything broke. A bright ray beamed at me briefly before replaced with the reality.

I was back to the room I was with Ton once again.

"It seems you can remember something." Ton said. "Are you okay?"

"No." I shook my head. "This time I'm not."

"What do you mean?" Ton raised his eyebrows. "This time you're not?"

“It’s weird,” I told him. “Normally, I would feel frightened even after the illusion was gone but this time there isn’t fear to linger with me. I can also remember everything clearly although what I saw was quite... fuzzy.”

“Good, good.” Ton smiled. “I’m glad that you’re fine but what did you see?”

“I saw a man ran toward me with a candle holder in his hand... That’s all.”

“A man... Candle...” Ton mumbled and picked his phone up to take some photos. “Can you... try to relate it with the illusions you saw earlier?”

I stared into his eyes briefly before closing my eyes. I saw myself extended my arms, trying to catch the scattered memory together. I tried to remember from the first time I saw a photo of a clock then turned to look at the rest of the faded dream and illusions. The scattered memory gradually moved forward one another, forming an image as if they were jigsaw pieces creating a story on its own. The event became clearer. The black and white jigsaws were painted with colors like red, green, yellow, and blue. The memory became completed then shone brightly as if it was a masterpiece an artist left behind before he parted the world.

I walked closer and extended a hand to touch it with admiration. The bright light gradually faded away and revealed the secret that had been hidden underneath.

Suddenly, the added colors disappeared. The intricate lines shook before broken into fine pieces. The big picture shook violently. I stepped back and watched the change happening in front of me.

The image from the colorful jigsaws turned completely white before blasted off fiercely. The pieces darted at me, cutting my skin and made me bleed until my blood ran dry. My bones started to break. My skin peeled off from the body. I screamed on the top of my lung with fear.

Stop...

Or...

Die...

My eyes opened wide. My breathings were short. I looked at my arms. The feeling of being cut still remained as if I'd actually died.

“Are you alright?” Ton asked.

“I- I’m fine.”

“You say you’re fine, but I don’t think so.” Ton scratched his head with annoyance. “I shouldn’t let you force yourself, especially when I knew that you’ll be like this.”

“It’s fine, really.” I smiled lightly. “This time I didn’t face something scary. Believe me.”

“Really?” Ton squinted his eyes. I knew immediately that he didn’t believe me. “So... you remember what you saw?”

“Not quite.” I adjusted my position. “But I... when I tried to put my memory together, I found that I can’t do it. When I tried to think, everything just scattered.”

“Scattered?” Ton lowered his head. “You always say that you can’t remember these illusions well, right?”

I nodded. Ton raised his head slowly.

“You can’t put the images together. You feel frightened when you saw them. You also can’t remember them.” He mumbled. “Maybe...”

Ton moved his face close to mine. His eyes looked at me with worry before shaking his head.

“This is not good.” He whispered.

“What do you mean?”

Ton looked up slowly. His lips barely moved.

“You’re running away from the truth.” He said. “You don’t merely avoid thinking about it, but you’re trying to suppress it, running away from it... It makes you forget about what you’d saw. You might be... too scared. So, you deny its existence. That’s why you feel pain every time you’ve been trying to think about it.”

“Am I... really like that?”

“It’s possible,” Ton said. “but we can’t be one hundred percent sure. I just think it up.”

“If it’s really true,” I lowered my head. My stomach flipped. “Why am I like this?”

“I don’t know.” Ton said. “You might face something so terrible that you don’t want to remember it. The culprit might... hurt you more badly than we’ve thought or maybe... the truth we’re looking for is far worse than we’ve anticipated.”

Ton’s words just made the uneasiness inside me worse. The truth I’d been searching for might be a lot worse than I’d expected. Maybe I should get rid of this curiosity. Maybe I shouldn’t know about the secret that had been hidden. Perhaps accepting the culprit offer might be the best choice. Turning back and live a life in ignorance might be the peace I deserved.

Ton sighed. He looked far away with dark expression.

“I’ll say thins again, then.” Ton announced. “You can back off now when you haven’t yet to known the truth. The culprit threatens you exactly for this purpose. What are you going to do now?”

I stared into his eyes to search for an answer hidden in them. Now, I didn’t know what I should do next. Maybe Ton’s expectation might help me to get the answer, but his eyes were empty and gave me nothing.

I closed my eyes and thought about everything that had happened. We'd tried hard. We had to face so many obstacles and fears, bearing the threats and evil thoughts. We'd achieved so far. Should I give up now when we were so close to the truth? Was leaving the truth to live in a fake happiness something I really deserved?

I open my eyes slowly. My mind sank into darkness. When I raised my head to look at Ton again, his eyes still demanded an answer from me.

I forced a smile lightly, letting the war inside my head to continue.

Suddenly, I thought of the decision I recently made, thinking about Ton's supports. If I threw everything away now, we would get only the emptiness.

After a long fight, the internal war finally ended.

I would never give up. No way and no matter what.

Ton looked at me and sighed before closing his eyes. He probably knew what my decision was.

"You probably can't let it go and give up." He said. "But I won't feel good if anything happens to you."

"Don't worry." I smiled weakly. "You know that I won't lose."

"Good." Ton said seriously. "But if that strange condition of you gets worse, I'll stop you myself."

I laughed dryly. I had to accept that, without him, I wouldn't survive up until now.

Ton was looking out the window. The sun had left the sky, and the moon came to replace it along with the million stars. They shone brightly on the dark sky as if a large cloth decorated with golden freckles.

“Let's go home.” Ton said. “At least we don't leave empty hands this time, right?”

Ton supported me up and brought me to the door. I looked back to Dad's old room thoughtfully. When I was in that room, some dark feeling appeared inside my mind, but I couldn't explain what that feeling was.

While we were about to leave the room, the front door was opened. Ton hovered to look downstairs before pushed me into a corner of the corridor lightly.

“What's now?” I whispered. He lifted his finger to his lips before stepped back.

I poked my head off the stairs a little to see who was downstairs. A man I'd never seen walked into the house before turned around to the door. There was only one shadow by the door. I stared hard, waiting for this mysterious man to walk inside.

He stepped inside the house and looked around before looked upstairs. I couldn't see his face in the dark. He was talking with another man who came in first before closing the door.

The voice I heard was familiar.

I heard Bill's voice.

Bill looked around carefully before sat down on the old sofa. Another man sat opposite of him. Both of them were silent for a long time before Bill broke the silent.

"Why do you call me here?" Bill asked.

"You should know that you're causing troubles for us?"

"What trouble? What had I done wrong?" Bill sounded unsatisfied.

"You followed your ex-girlfriend." Another man replied. "You should know that she knows our secrets."

"And why does that..."

"Shut up!" Another man interrupted him. "The last time she called the police, didn't you learn some lesson? It's good that we're aware of it in times otherwise we'll be in jail now."

Bill gritted his teeth. Another man sighed.

"You're my friend, so I help you." He said. "But there won't be another time, got it?"

"Yeah, yeah."

“Don’t yeah me.” Another man’s voice rose a bit. “Moreover, you started to play too rough lately. Don’t you think that she will tell everything to the police?”

“She’ll call the police again? For what?”

“You have a lot to be reported.” Another man said. “If she can remember about that time, I can’t help you anymore. I warned you already.”

If I could remember about that time? What was the secret Bill had?

“I know. I know.”

“If you’re arrested, we’ll be involved, too. You don’t want us to be in troubles, do you?”

Bill sat still. Another man sighed sounded fed up.

“You’ve probably done something stupid again.” He mocked. “This is the last warning from me. Stop threatening or following her. I heard you actually hurt her and almost kill her. She is safe because of that enemy of yours, right?”

Ton moved closer to me. I tried to listen to what the other man said. I couldn’t hear them clearly, but I felt that he was a part of the truth I’d been searching for.

“Shut up already.”

“I’ll shut up if you keep your words. I’ll warn you again. Stop bothering her. Okay?”

Bill put his hands in his pant pockets. His teeth gritted loudly.

“I take it you’ve understood.” Another man smiled. Bill looked at him with annoyance.

“It’s time.” Another man looked at his watch. “We’ll meet here again on the next Tuesday, at seven. Got it?”

The man stood up and left the house.

Bill got up and looked around for a moment before followed him outside silently. I’d never saw him like this.

After the door had been closed, Ton turned to look at me.

“What were they talking about?” He raised his eyebrows. “It sounds like it’s the same thing we’ve been looking for.”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. I was worried that Bill would actually involve with the truth I’d been searching.

“You’re right.” Ton sighed. “What else it can be other than the same thing?”

I shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. This thing got more and more complicated. Everything seemed fake.

It was as if nothing in my life was real.

Ton got up and brushed the dust of his shirt. He looked at me with worry.

“And about him harming you. That he said you almost die.” Ton said.

“Do you think it was when he tried to beat you with the hammer?”

“I don’t want to think that anyone I know is the culprit,” I said. “It’s uncomfortable to think that everybody is my enemy.”

Ton sighed before touched my shoulder.

“I might not understand this very well.” He said. “But I know that you’re uncomfortable, and that’s the reason we should find the truth as soon as possible.”

I nodded lightly. He looked at me worriedly.

“I think we’d better leave.” He tried to smile to comfort me. “Let’s think what we should do next later.”

I nodded lightly again.

We walked downstairs. Ton stopped in the middle of the house and looked around thoughtfully.

I followed his eyes with yearning. If it was possible, I wanted this place to had nothing bad happened. However, the harder we tried to find the answer, the closer we were to the truth. No matter how much I wanted to refuse it, the truth remained true and no other way else.

This house was where everything terrible began.

Ton turned around. He walked over to the door, twisted the knob, and pushed it opened. I followed him before turned to look at the house again.

Ton looked at me with understanding. He followed my eyes before spoke.

“You probably feel troubled.” He smiled gently. “It’s obvious how much you love this place. If my house has something terrible like this happened, I’d feel troubled, too.”

I smiled at him before turned to look at the kitchen again, thinking of my Dad’s cooking skill. He caused me many troubles, but I’d been happy to spend some time with him.

The moon moved by the gravity. The golden glow shone inside, showing the beauty remained in this house for us to admire.

I closed my eyes with a smile, letting the yearning to soak up my soul.

I followed the rising moon that got closer to the window and admired the beauty of the night.

I wanted to look at this house in a way that it remained beautiful.

After looking at the moon for a long time, I turned back.

While I was turning to Ton, I saw a light at the corner of my eyes.

Suddenly, I heard someone cried.

I turned to that voice so swift that Ton looked at me with confusion.

The cry disturbed the silent. I glanced at the source of that voice. My heart beat fast. Every hair on my body rose.

This time, the reality didn't disappear, but my fear was bloomed inside my chest.

Among the cry and the moonlight, I saw a shadow of someone silently laid down on the kitchen's floor. The shadow was painted with the gentle glow of the moon.

He turned to look at me slowly and expressionlessly.

While I was looking at that shadow, another shadow rushed out of a wall before sat down beside the lying shadow. It shook lightly as if it was crying.

I looked at both shadows for a long time without moving. It was like there was a curse forcing me to watch the tragedy playing in the front, forcing me to be aware of the sorrow running through both of them.

While the crying shadow hovered closer to the shadow laid down below, the shadow on the floor slowly lift both hands as if asking for its life. Some liquid dripped down both hands.

Both shadows froze up in that way before disappeared into the moonlight, leaving the fading truth behind.

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Both shadows faded away, the reality remained in front of my eyes.

I stood still for a while before fell down. Even though this time I wasn't frightened by the illusion, my feeling toward it was far stronger than it'd ever be.

I could feel the sorrow and the loneliness...

As if the crying shadow was... me.

Ton rushed to support me. He brought me to the sofa in front of the kitchen and sat down beside me.

I looked at him tiredly. Ton shook his head before whispered into my ear.

“Don't say anything. Just rest...”

I breathed in greedily before let it out and leaned back a bit, trying to put the images I saw together.

But everything was the same.

I still refused the reality...

“Don't force yourself.” Ton said. “Rest first. Don't overdo it.”

“I'm all right,” I said with a raspy voice. “If I don't think of it now, I might forget it again.”

“Stop it.” Ton lifted his hand to stop me. “I know you won’t listen to me but this time I have to force you. You’re not looking good.”

“It’s really fine...”

“It’s obvious you aren’t.” Ton unbuttoned my jacket slowly. “Let me take your jacket off, so you can breathe easier.”

He took off my jacket and put in on the sofa on the opposite side.

“Why do you always wear long sleeve?” Ton raised his brows.

“That jacket...?” I paused a while. “Since I broke up with Bill... I feel... I don’t feel comfortable around men.”

Ton looked at me as if finding an answer.

“When I went out with him, I was... beaten up.”

“Bill hit you?” Ton shook his head before walked back to sit beside me.

“At first, Bill was a good boyfriend.” I forced a smile. “Not long after we went out, he became to be the person he is now.”

“Oh.” Ton nodded understandingly. “So, you dress up to cover yourself so that men can’t touch you directly?”

I nodded slowly. Ton rubbed his chin before asked again.

“Then, why do you seem to be fine with Max and me?”

“I won’t feel good only with men I don’t know.” I paused. “If they don’t touch me or pressure me, I’ll be fine, too.”

I supported myself up and leaned on the sofa, looking through the window absent-mindedly.

“You don’t have to do it now.” Ton said gently. I shook my head.

“I’m fine, really.” I smiled before looked at the window again. “When I looked out through the window, it was at the same time that the moon was aligned with the broken glass.”

I swayed to the right a little. My head rested on Ton’s arm.

“After that... I saw two shadows. One was laid on the ground. The other... was crying.”

“You... can remember what you saw?”

I shook my head. “I can only remember it but like every time... I can’t put the images together.”

Ton nodded in reply, so I continued.

“But this time, something changed.” I looked up. “I remained in the reality when I saw the illusion. I could see you, and I didn’t fear of the image. I didn’t feel that I was rejecting the image I saw, but I felt...”

I coughed lightly before continued.

“I feel uncontrollably sad... I don’t know whose shadows were there, but I felt that I was the crying shadow. I feel that it was me.”

“You think you are one of the shadows?”

I nodded. Ton rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Strange.” Ton said. “Normally, you would see exactly where you were but this time you didn’t. Moreover, the reality didn’t disappear when you saw the illusion as well.”

Ton took out his notebook and wrote something down.

“But I don’t understand. Why didn’t you see this earlier?”

“I think... it’s because of the moon.”

“The moon?”

“Yes,” I replied. “When I saw the illusion, the moonlight fell on both shadows. After the moon had moved passed the window, everything disappeared.”

“Umm.” Ton mumbled. “I understand that, but it’s still strange.”

“Why?”

“You said... the crying shadow might be you?”

I nodded. Ton lowered his head and scratched it.

“When you look at the house’s photo, you said you were lying on the floor and was stabbed.” Ton knocked the pencil rhythmically. “But this time you were crying and sat beside someone lying on the floor.”

Ton wrote something more in the notebook before torn off the page.

“Do you think it’s possible that both images were from the same event?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “But I think that’s impossible. When I saw myself stabbed, I lay down, soaking in blood, in my Dad’s room. The image I saw the moment ago happened in the kitchen.”

“If that’s true,” Ton said. “It means that you were stabbed later. You were crying for someone, but why did you run back to your father’s room?”

“I don’t know.”

“Another question.” Ton spun the pencil in his hand thoughtfully. “When you sat there crying, did you have a knife in your hand?”

I moved my eyes around, trying to remember the illusion earlier, then shook my head.

“Hmm.” Ton mumbled. “This is getting stranger and stranger.”

Ton leaned back on the sofa. He looked around the house before got up and went into the kitchen. He brought his phone out and took a photo of the window reflecting the moonlight into the room.

He looked out the house thoughtfully. The moonlight bathed on his face. I looked at him silently. It was obvious that he was worried.

Suddenly, his eyes went wide. He turned to look at me briefly before ran back to put everything in his bag.

“This is impossible.” He mumbled.

“What’s the matter?”

Ton raised his head to look at me as if trying to find an answer before looked down and continued to pack his things.

After he finished, he pulled me off the house.

On our way back, he didn't say anything.

16

“Mr. C was first sent here because of his malice actions. On the surface, he seems to be a man with an ideal purpose, but you could never understand this man’s thoughts.” Doctor A smiled, inviting the other party to ask him a question.

“Why did he send here?” Doctor B asked.

“Can you guess?”

“Schizophrenia?”

“I’ll keep the answer with me for now.” Doctor A smiled. “What I was interested in this patient is his background. He had a good job. He was a man full of public conscious. You can’t imagine that a man like him can do something wrong, but he did.”

Doctor B nodded to let the other man continued.

“He likes to tell his stories to me over and over again. He chose to study Psychotherapy because he’s seen hundreds of people end their lives because of loneliness. So many people have problems but have nowhere to go, no one to lean on.” Doctor A stared directly into Doctor B’s eyes. “He insisted that he chose to be a psychotherapist to fill the holes in those people’s hearts. I admire him for this.”

“That’s good.” Doctor B noted something on the paper.

“But an action usually comes from reason. What do you think is the best motivation for him to choose this path?”

“I think seeing people suffering should be enough.”

“You’re not wrong.” Doctor A smiled. “But for this case, it doesn’t like that.”

Doctor B raised his eyebrows. “Does he want to be accepted?”

“No.”

“For some benefit?”

“Still not right.” Doctor A laughed lightly.

“Problem from the past...”

“You’re getting close.”

“I don’t know the answer.” Doctor B shrugged. Doctor A laughed.

“Problem from the past. That’s close.” Doctor A smiled broadly. “But it mainly wasn’t his problem. It’s more like the problem of someone he loved.”

“Someone he loved... his girlfriend?”

“I can’t define the relationship between him and that girl.” Doctor A shook his head. “But I know that he loved that girl deeply. It doesn’t matter in what form of love. Losing her was his motivation to choose this career.”

“Please continue.” Doctor B nodded, inviting the other man to continue speaking.

“He told me that he used to have a childhood friend. He and the girl used to sneak out to play together often. Up to this point, it sounds like a normal wonderful life, but it didn’t.”

Doctor A leaned back. His eyes stared absent-mindedly in the air.

“After reading this patient’s medical history, I learned that he grew up with family’s conflicts. He and his mother often came to the hospital with bruises covering their bodies. You probably know the cause.”

“Domestic violence...” Doctor B’s voice was a little sad.

“Yes.” Doctor A smiled lightly. “And of course, this problem came with alcohol and drugs. I later learn that his father used to visit the hospital I used to work to heal his liver. He drank himself to sleep. Sometimes, he even used heroin to avoid the hardship of his life. However, this is the interesting point. What do you think he used drug and violence for?”

“From what I often see, I guess he was pressured at his job and might have some problems with gambles.”

“Yes and no.” Doctor A tilted his head a little while laughing. “Yes, for the problem about his job, but he didn’t have any problem with a gamble or debt. Let me ask you another question. What made us us?”

“What do you mean, Doctor A?” Doctor B raised his brows.

“I mean what I said.” Doctor A smiled. “What made us the person we are today?”

“The upbringing.” Doctor B answered.

“Correct.” Doctor A snapped his fingers.

“But that’s not everything.”

“No, it’s not everything.” Doctor A nodded. “Genes, experience in schools, events that affected the mind violent are all involved and, sometimes, it’s that person’s nature. What do you call that?”

“Basic Instinct.”

“Yes. Sometimes, we can’t understand some people. They are born with certain character traits that can’t be found in the same environment. We also can’t explain why they do what they do, but these people are a minority.” Doctor A said. “The most important factor is, as you said, Doctor B, the upbringing. Mr.C’s father had grown up in a bad environment. He used to be abused and was bullied by the children his ages. That’s the source of his violence and weakness. He grew up to be a man without self-admiration. So, what was his choice in the end?”

“Abuse weaker people.”

“That’s right.” Doctor A nodded with satisfaction. “He chose to vent out his frustration on his wife and child. He could feel that he was still someone when he hurt his boy and the woman he loved. He felt that in doing so, his lowly self would become higher. He felt that he was still a decent human when he could show his power.”

Doctor A was silent for a while. Doctor B took note on the paper.

“But what’s interesting is if the factor you said is really the right one, why do siblings with the same genes, grow up in shared environment, face similar experiences, choose a different path of life?”

“It might be as you said, their natures are different.”

“Yes, they’re different.” Doctor A leaned forward. “And I still haven’t told you what factor makes two people’s perspectives different. It’s like when we hear the same words but define those words differently. Why is that?”

“Sometimes, I don’t think we can understand something like that.” Doctor B replied.

“Why do the children with similar upbringing have different perspectives?” Doctor A was silent shortly. “Allowing yourself to do something wrong as you wish is easy, but it need a lot of bravery to get out of that circle, and most people are too weak.”

Doctor B nodded while he was writing down on the paper.

“It’s an easy principle. Sometimes, we don’t want problems in our life, not every problem can be seen as a challenge. Family issue is one of them.” Doctor A said. “If you go and ask both children, ‘why do you choose to live your life as now?’, what do you think the answer will be?”

“I don’t know.”

“I want you to guess.”

“The answer probably is... because he grows up like this, so he just does it like this.”

“Correct.” Doctor A snapped his fingers again. “It’s easier to push the problem to others. It’s even easier to let yourself flow with how the social wants to paint us. We don’t have to force ourselves. We don’t have to go out of our comfort zone. However, that’s what I’ve been wondering about. What if we always follow the expectation of our social and environment? Where will they bring our life?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer.” Doctor B nodded.

“Yes... it’s a difficult question to answer.”

“And about your case?”

“You can’t wait to listen to the story of my patient, huh?” Doctor A laughed. “As I told you, my patient grew up in a violent environment, but that isn’t the reason he chose to scarify his life for others. For Mr.C, the main reason was his neighbor.”

“How does this have anything to do with what we’re talking about?”

“My patient believed that having the same experience made him and the girl understood each other.” Doctor A said. “They often sneaked of their houses to talk. They liked to share their problems and things in their lives. When we share the same experience and understanding with someone, the

relationship will grow faster than usual. You probably have tried to tell a story to someone so that they'll reply with, 'yes,' 'that's it,' or 'me too,' right?"

Doctor B nodded. Doctor A continued.

"Mr.C tried to maintain his suffering so he could feel that he helped lighten her burdened. However, for the girl, the problem she faced was what forced her to end her life."

"That's the reason Mr.C chose to be a therapist?"

"Yes." Doctor A nodded. "He thinks that his friend's death is his fault, so he tried to help others to lessen his guilt. He chose to advise and heal patients who were children and teenagers rather than adults because of the loss in his childhood. You should have guessed which group of patients he was the most dedicated to."

"The girls from her age."

"Yes, and more importantly, the more a girl looked similar to his friend, the more he would sink into their problems." Doctor A closed his eyes briefly before asked a question. "Now, can you guess why is he sent here?"

"Obscenity."

"Yes." Doctor A smiled.

"Why did Mr.C choose to do that?"

"Sometimes, we look at thing around us with a different perspective. The longer the time passes, the more different we look at that thing." Doctor

A lowered his head a little before asking. "From what I told you, you should know now what my patient's illness is."

"No, I don't know."

"No." Doctor A shook his head. "You know the answer very well."

17

I picked up the phone in the middle of a lonely night.

Suddenly, I heard a scream. It was a cry of pain and sorrow.

I hung up immediately.

After I was hunted down, my life began to change.

I awoke frightened every time I heard a noise: the sound of switches turning on and off, the wind blew on the window, or even Dad's light footsteps. I often dreamt of a telephone placed in front of me ringing, following with the sound of beating on the door. Among the chaos, I could only hide under a thin blanket, waiting for him to get close to me.

The night was no longer a peaceful time for me. I woke up in the dark from fear.

I despised the birds singing, and the light shone into my room. I hated when I had to leave the house. After the accident, this was the only safe place for me. Every time I stepped out of the house, I would hear whispers and was extremely nervous every time I saw someone. I didn't know which was the reality or an illusion anymore. I felt him followed me everywhere.

My life would never be safe again. Not anymore...

The only time I felt comfortable was when Ton walked me home. However, after we came back from the old house, Ton seemed to change. He

seemed like he had something in his mind all the time. I could only look at him from afar and felt guilty that I'd pulled him into this trouble.

The happy time was short. The moment Ton's back disappeared was the time the nightmare began. Every time I opened the door, I felt someone's eyes on me. The cold ran down my skin. My hair rose. The feeling remained even after I was in the house. If I couldn't find the truth as soon as possible, I would never be happy again. The rest of my life would be caged inside the loop of despair. Every breath would be full of hopelessness.

I hated to live my life like this. I had been fed up with this useless life.

The extreme despair led me to seek for death.

When this life didn't worth living, then I... I...

I put the knife on my throat. The hand holding the knife shook with fear. I took a deep breath before started to press it down.

If I couldn't live happily again, this life would be worthless. If I had to sink in this never-ending despair, I should die.

I should just die.

I hold my breath, closing my eyes tightly before pressed the blade harder. Blood started to seep out and dripped down my neck. A tear slowly broke off my lids.

The second I would cut my throat, I heard a familiar whisper.

“Because I’m your Dad.”

“Are you ready, princess?”

My eyes opened wide. All of my strength left the body. My hands started to loosen, and the sharp knife dropped on the floor. The sound of metal hitting the ground resonated throughout the room. I fell down slowly and started to cry in silent.

After I had cried until I had no tear left, I observed the handle of the knife under the moon light. The handle had some letters crafted on it. I looked closer and ran my finger through each of them slowly.

T O N

Ton.

I hold up the knife with the yearning in my mind. Ton gave me this pocket knife when we went back at the old house. He wanted me to use it to protect myself.

But I chose to use it to end my life.

I fold down the blade before hold it to my chest. The cool touch started to spread. Ton must be sad to know that I used his gift to harm myself.

I hold the knife tightly. Tears ran down my cheeks. He always tried to help me... but I... I...

Suddenly, my phone rang. I looked at the screen slowly, wiped the tears from my face, and put the knife in my pocket before received the call.

“Dream, this is Ton.” Ton said expressionlessly.

“What happened?” I asked, trying to suppress the shaking inside my heart.

“I have something important to tell you. Can I go over to your house now?”

“Now?” My eyes opened wide with surprise. “But it’s very late.”

“This is important.” His voice became more serious.

“It’s something that can lead us to the truth.”

Ton walked into my house without saying a word. He looked around sharply as if he was trying to find something.

I closed the door before walked over to him.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

Ton remained silent. He lowered his head a bit before walked up the stairs. I followed him confusedly.

While he was on the stairs, he glanced at the photos in the frames that placed on the shelf beside the stairs. Most photos Dad chose to put there were the pictures of him and me when I was young. Only a few was the pictures of the whole family. I usually walked pass them without paying attention, but when I looked at them now, I felt pain inside.

Sometimes, we were so busy with living our lives until we forgot about dream, love, and happiness in the past. I was one of the people who lived along the current in the society. I forgot the young me that was once full of vital and love. I'd already forget what I used to dream of.

After we were in my room, Ton sat down by the low table. He looked around the room blankly before turned to me.

"Dream, let's play the Milk Jigsaw."

"What?" I raised my eyebrows. "Didn't you say you have something important to tell me?"

"I'll tell everything while we're playing the game." Ton said. "And can you bring the photo album over here? The photos on the stairs, too. We'll need them."

I did as Ton said with confusion. I took the photos off the frames before headed downstairs and brought the photo album. Dad took it out to look the other day.

Why did Ton come here? What was his plan? I thought. And the thing he told me that would lead us to the truth, what was it?

I walked back into the room and put everything on the floor. Ton nodded at me before spoke.

"Sat down. Let's start the game."

I followed his words confusingly, picking up a white piece while glancing around the board before putting it down precisely.

Ton looked at the board briefly before putting a piece down. He turned to the album and opened it. He looked at each photo carefully.

“Can you tell me now?” I said. My voice tainted with annoyance. “Why are you here?”

Ton stared at a photo before lifted it up.

“Have you seen this photo?”

“I have,” I said while putting a piece into its place. “Every photo you choose I’ve seen them all, but none can ignite my memory.”

Ton nodded slowly. He closed the album before took a puzzle piece and placed it precisely.

“Before I start, I want you to promise me one thing.” Ton said expressionlessly. “I want you to listen to me silently and answer only when I ask. I’ll answer your every question after I’m done speaking.”

“Okay, I promise.” I nodded, feeling a bit irritated That Ton made a condition. He’d never been like this. It revealed that this was something crucial as he claimed.

I didn’t feel good about this.

“I told you before that you seem to reject your illusion, right?”

“Yes,” I replied. “When you asked me, I couldn’t describe what I saw. I felt like there was something blocks me from my own memory.”

“Umm.” Ton nodded. “And you said you don’t remember that anything occurred in the illusion actually happened? Can you remember your last day in that house?”

“I remember. I think I can remember all important events in that house.” I answered. “But I certainly can’t remember everything happened. I asked Dad about whether someone had broken into the house. He said no.”

“Have you felt strange when thinking about some of your past?”

“No,” I said while placing a piece on the board. My mouth opened slightly to ask out of my curiosity, but the promise I gave Ton stopped me in time.

Ton sighed and looked up at the ceiling. His eyes were full of concern.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“Can you remember about the wasp in front of that house?”

“Sure.”

“If you believe that it’s a wasp, you’ll walk away from it.” Ton said. “However, in reality, it’s just a small insect that could never harm you.”

Ton lowered his head a bit and picked up a puzzle to place on the board.

“It reminds me of a professor. He was a genius psychiatrist but instead of using his knowledge to heal people’s minds. He chose to use his skill for the science of psychology.” Ton sighed. “It’s a shame that such a genius had to leave this world early.”

I looked at Ton, feeling the pressure rolled off his body.

“This professor believed in a new psychological theory. He claimed it’s something that will change the world.” He said. “He once quoted the person invented this new theory, ‘if we lie to ourselves in a controlled environment and add some faith properly. Then, keep doing it despite the uncomfortable inside our minds. We can get everything we want’. He said it can be used with everything. It can change a simple belief into the truth.”

He adjusted his position and looked at me uncomfortably.

“I’ll ask the last question.” He said.” Dream... have you ever remembered something wrong?”

I nodded, so he continued.

“And how does it affect you?”

“It made me doing things in the wrong way.” I raised my eyebrows.

“Yes, it makes you doing things in the wrong way.” He repeated.

“And if you believe everything wrong, where will this situation lead you to...?”

Ton lowered his head a bit. My instinct was whispering that what he was about to say was the truth that I shouldn't know.

It would change my life forever.

“What are you trying to say?”

Ton sighed. He closed his eyes and mumbled something to himself.

“After that day... the day we went to survey that house together, I think of something.”

He moved his face closer to mine. Both of his eyes were shaking.

“Dream... you said none of your memory was missing, you're not wrong.” He said. “You haven't forgotten anything. About you refuse some of your memories, too, you don't refuse them by trying to forget about them.”

“You... what do you mean?”

Ton lowered his head. The heavy feeling weighted down both his body and mind. When he looked up, his eyes revealed that his faith was shaken.

“Dream...” He whispered. “Your memories are fake...”

18

“Fake memory?” Doctor B asked with surprise.

“Yes.”

“But as far as you told me, it sounds like the symptom of schizophrenia.”

“At first, I thought that too.” Doctor A rubbed his chin. “But from testing concentration, logic and reason relation, and other several tests, everything is in standard rate, so I had to cut that symptom out.”

“What had he done... to those girls?”

“From his working background, he was an exceptional and motivated therapist. However, not long after that, his guilt changed into something else. It becomes the thought we see as disgusting.”

“Lust.”

“He calls it love.” Doctor A smiled. “Many times, when we’re in love, lust will follow, and that’s the beginning.”

Doctor A paused a while before continued.

“He started to use his psychological skill to manipulate those girls to do whatever he wanted. He played with them as if they were toys. Play with them with force. He played until each of them broke, or he got bored with her.”

“And how did he escape?”

“Many girls had weak minds. Just some threatening or leading words were enough. I told you that Mr.C was brought here because he was charged with obscenity, right? However, what happened after that was a bloodbath.” Doctor A turned his head to a side. “After he played with a girl until he was satisfied, he would get rid of her with malice methods. You might be wondering why killing with disgusting methods would make him happy. The scar his family left on him started to reveal itself again. He became a reflection of the man he hated the most.”

Doctor B watched Doctor A for a while before continued writing on the paper.

“Your eyes tell me you disgust my patient, right?”

“I don’t have a right to disgust any patient.”

“I know how you feel.” Doctor A smiled. “But I want to ask you something. Why do you hate him?”

“Doesn’t it normal to be disgusted and condemn such action?”

“I can’t change your mind.” Doctor A laughed lightly. “Anyone knows about this case feel the same as you. For me, I think they tell the story of Mr.C a bit harsher than it actually is. It’s probably the same for most gossips.”

“What do you want to say?”

“I just want to ask you that you’re disgusted by his actions because they’re really disgusting.” Doctor A leaned his face close to Doctor B. “Or, actually, you can’t accept the difference. You’re a psychiatrist. You understand that he was ill, but you still look at him with such weird feeling. I want to ask you that you see him strange because you don’t understand him, or do you see him strange because he wasn’t the same as you, or because he was different from what the social expects him to be? That’s why you think what he had done was wrong... because of these reasons?”

“You win.” Doctor B raised both hands between his face.

“Thank you for understand what I’m talking about.” Doctor A smiled.

“And how is your patient now?”

“He’s dead.” Doctor A replied. His voice was a bit sad. “After he realized that he’d done something terrible, he decided to end his life.”

Doctor B nodded. Sometimes, silent was the best reply you could give.

“If you were in the same situation as his, which way would you choose?”

“Me?” Doctor B rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I can’t answer.”

“You can simply tell your opinion.”

“I don’t want to tell my opinion on this subject.” Doctor B shrugged. “I think I don’t really understand it. I might be able to give you an answer, but if I have to face the real situation, I might do otherwise.”

“That’s a safe answer. I like it.” Doctor A laughed. “I want to admire his choice, but, this is between us, for me, I think it’s too sad that he died like that.”

“I understand.” Doctor B smiled to console him.

Doctor A paused briefly before continued. “Let’s get back to our topic. I want to ask you again. What do you think is the most reliable thing?”

“My answer is still the same. It’s our self. I think the story you told me is just too far from the reality.”

“It isn’t.” Doctor A shook his head. “It’s closer to us than you think.”

“Can you give me an example?” Doctor B said while tapping the pen on the table.

“Have you read self-help books? The ones that want you to tell yourself what you want to be in front of a mirror for 30 days, and after that, you’ll become a new person?”

“I have.”

“A person told me that lying to yourself purposely and methodically can create a new character for yourself.” Doctor A leaned back. “It’s a tool

that can give us everything we want, isn't it? However, looking for the other perspective, I think it's also a dangerous tool."

"Why do you think that?"

"If the one who uses this tool isn't us?" Doctor A tilted his head a bit.

"If the lies are from someone else's mouth? For example, I'm repeatedly told by everyone in this world that I'm the person I am not. If I listen to them long enough, what will happen to me?"

"Your character will tend to change as you're told."

"Exactly." Doctor A smiled with satisfaction. "If it's like that, how can we believe in ourselves? If our beliefs and our memories are not the right ones, where would it lead our life? And something we called 'self,' what exactly it is?"

"What you're saying is indeed interesting. However, to be told by everybody in the world repeatedly like that is impossible." Doctor B raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, it's impossible." Doctor A smiled. "But as I told you, it's closer to us than we think. Sometimes, your memories or beliefs don't have to be fake. You just know or believe in wrong information or having a few people repeatedly tell you that. Can you be confident that that information won't get back to harm you?"

"I understand." Doctor B noted down on the paper before smiled.

Suddenly, the bell rang. Doctor B looked at his watch before turned to Doctor A.

“Time’s up.” Doctor B smiled. “Thank you for your time for giving us this information. We have to move to the next step.”

“Bring it on.” Doctor A rubbed his chin. A light smile decorated his youthful face.

19

“What do you mean... that my memories are fake?”

Ton rubbed his forehead. His expression was worried.

“It’s as I said. Your memories are fake.”

“Fake?” I smiled dejectedly. “What does that mean? Fake? This is going crazy.”

“Yes, it’s crazy...” Ton glanced at me. His eyes were fierce.

His seriousness scared me. If it was as my instinct told me, the truth was far worse than I’d anticipated.

“And how do you know...? Why do you think that my memories are fake?”

Ton looked up. He leaned back as if trying to avoid something.

“I listen to everything you said. Everything seems to contradict.” He looked aside, trying to avoid my eyes. “When I think about the wasp that day, if we go out of the box, everything will be reasonable.”

He looked at the ceiling blankly.

“I feel weird since you denied the illusion you saw. At first, I thought you just scared of something.” Ton said. “The answers are yes and no. You scare of something that actually happened. However, it can’t confirm that your memories are fake.”

He placed a white puzzle on the board swiftly.

“What make everything contradicts is you. You said you can’t remember participating in the events of your illusions, but you can recall your past and tell what’s happened to you.” Ton glanced at me slowly. “More importantly, after the culprit sent such specific messages and we saw some evidence in that house, it’s confirmed that your illusion had actually happened. Such specific information matched with the images you saw. It’s impossible that it’s a mere prank from some psychopath. The culprit must share the same memory like yours.”

“Then, why... why do I have fake memories?” My voice started to shake.

Ton looked at me hesitantly as if he thought he shouldn’t make me any more worried.

“According to what I’d studied, you might be harm or faced something that hurt you deeply. Sometimes, our minds would find a way to press down those memories to survive. In your case, you might forget that you were hurt or...”

I gulped, feeling as if there was a lump in my throat.

“All of your memories might be wrong.” Ton knitted his eyebrows. His expression was serious. “In that case, it will be worse... a lot worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a lot worse because... it’s normal that our memories might be inaccurate.” He explained. “You might remember the color of a flower you saw earlier wrong, or you might remember the time wrong when you have to do something boring. What is the worst of the worst is... we can’t prove that what you know... which one is a truth and which one is a lie, including your illusions.”

I stepped back. I didn’t wholeheartedly believe what Ton said even though my mind didn’t dare to refuse them.

“I know that it’s important for you. You have to know the truth.” He paused a while. “And it’s very important that you had to connect everything together on your own.”

He took the notebook from his pocket, flipped through it swiftly before handed it to me.

“If I didn’t note it wrong, it should be like this.” He said. “You read it and tell me whether you can connect the situation.”

I took the notebook and read Ton’s notes, trying to connect everything I saw from each illusion. A long time passed, but it was fruitless.

“I... can’t.”

Ton nodded as if he’d expected this. He took the notebook back and put it away.

“Fake memory is something that is hard to remedy.” He said. “We don’t know which memory is true or false. The nature of human’s brain makes our memories inaccurate.”

The silence blanketed the room. I could feel the cold touch on my face. Ton looked at me with worried before continued.

“I don’t want to make you worry, but this is important for you. You need to understand what and who you are.” Ton paused before continued.

“When we see something, our brain will process it and make it easier to remember, leaving out the trivial details. This process makes us able to remember things, and, at the same times, it makes us remember thing wrong.” He took a piece and looked at it absent-mindedly. “If nobody is in the same events with you, when you remember something wrong, you will never know what the truth is.”

Ton moved the white piece in the middle of the board. His eyes looked far away.

“Even when you can find someone to confirm what you see, it might not be necessary to be true because a human is a human. Everyone’s memory can be wrong.”

“When someone remembers something wrong... doesn’t that person feels strange? Doesn’t it possible to be aware that something isn’t right?” I

asked, not because I wanted to know the answer but because I wanted to run away from what I was, who I was.

Ton shook his head. “It’s more than that. What do you think is the most reliable thing for us human?”

I was silence, trying to find the meaning of this question.

“It’s our self...”

“And why do you think we believe in our self?”

I shook my head. Ton used his finger to move a puzzle in the middle of the board in a circle.

“Because we believe in our memories... This is the reason.” He said. “If we don’t believe in what we see, learn, and remember, what else can we believe in?”

I said nothing. Ton looked at me as if he knew what I wanted to ask.

“Yes, there might be an exception. One might believe in a god or someone we admire.” He closed his eyes. “But the beginning of such belief still comes from the same place.”

He looked up. His eyes showed the thought that was deep inside.

“Our beliefs are from what we know, see, or touch.” Ton said. “Because we believe it, we can remember it, and because we remember it, we believe in it.”

Ton's thoughts were deeper than mine. We human created our faith from information, experience, and feeling we'd been through. It didn't matter whether we could remember it or not. We might be unable to remember it clearly, but deep inside our heart, we keep that experience with us, waiting for it to resurface.

We might forget it, but it didn't disappear.

It was hidden in our every move.

However, what if our experience was wrong...? Where would our life end?

"You probably meet some kids that believe in God because their parents do. The teaching was stuck in their memory. It can be on the surface. It can be at the bottom of their mind." Ton said. "Or when we believe that someone is a good person or not. We believe that from the memory and feeling we've kept inside. We believe in things because of the memory we have, whether it's right or not."

If we believe in our self because of our memory, then what about when our memory was fake?

Could we still believe in our self then?

And what if what I'd known about myself was all lies?

Could I still be the same person I was?

“And... what do I have to do...” Even though I was scared, my subconscious demanded me to remain strong. “How can I regain my real memory?”

Ton hesitated a bit before answered.

“I don’t know.” Ton shook his head. “In a psychological way, there’re many theories claimed to help, but many people also reject them. They are too risky.”

“I have nothing to lose,” I said. “I just have to try.”

“I know only a way, but it’s too dangerous.” He said. “It might cause your condition to worsen. There were many cases regarding this method. Its effects... are far worse than you can imagine.”

I looked at him determinedly and placed a white puzzle on the board. However, no matter how I showed him that I was strong enough, Ton could look through me.

“You seem to want to risk.” Ton sighed. “But you’re still uncertain.”

I forced a smile. My stomach ran wild. Ton looked at me briefly before asked.

“You probably have something to say.” He stated. “This is your problem. You have the right to say, so just say it.”

“I...” I was silent briefly. “If my memory is fake, I maybe... maybe not someone I’ve always been. I might be unable to remain who I am, then... can I still believe in myself?”

Ton looked at me before stood up. He walked over to sit beside me and pressed himself on me as if we were lovers.

“What do you think it makes you the person you are now?”

I mumbled shortly before replied. “My body?”

“And if I have a transsexual operation or cosmetic surgery?” Ton pressed himself harder.

“You... are still you.”

“And what make you the person you are?”

I tried to separate away. My face was burning hot from the rushing blood. My heart beat so fast as if it was about to jump out of my chest. I thought that was the condition of my fearing of men like I often experienced, but it felt... different.

“A- Ah... H- habit.” I started to stutter.

“And if my habits change? Let’s say, if I become gentler, more sweet-mouthed, What will you do?” He pressed himself a bit more.

A torrent of thoughts tumbled inside my head. I felt the image in front of me started to blur. The only sound thundering in my ears was my heartbeat.

“And about the memory,” He said as he leaned his face closer. “Let me ask you more. If I can’t remember things I’ve done from yesterday, or remember my friend’s name wrong, will I still am the same me?”

I nodded confusedly. My thoughts broke. Ton smiled faintly before continued.

“I can’t give you the answer.” He laughed gently. “When others look at me, they won’t look at me in the same way. Who can see me as the person I really am?”

He stepped back, giving me some space to feel safe. I took a deep breath, trying to reclaim my conscious.

“Logic might be necessary.” He said. “But the feeling is important, too.”

He patted on my shoulder lightly. He looked at me. His eyes were full of confidence.

“You might not believe it. The others might not believe it, but I believe it.” He said. “No matter what, you are who you are.”

The pressure that was there moments ago disappeared. The atmosphere in the room became cooler and lighter. We looked at each other for a while and let words from our hearts communicated, letting the silence to sing its song.

I smiled with realizing.

Ton smiled gently in reply. He took a few steps back before asked me casually.

“You don’t seem to be so stressful.” He said. “Do you want to take a rest first, or should we continue now.”

The illusion broke. It felt like what happened a moment ago was just a dream, but his touch was there. His gentleness was there. His warmth was there.

Ton was the same Ton as always.

“I- I’m ready now,” I replied.

“Okay.” He went to take a pencil from his bag and torn some pages from his notebook. “This method is a bit risky, but I’ll be careful.”

He gave me the paper and the pencil. I adjusted my glasses and looked at him questioningly.

“Write whatever you can think of.” He said. “Maybe there’s something hidden in the message.”

I took the paper and placed them in front of me, staring at the faded blue line on the pages. Picking up the pencil, I tried to write some words that I could think of.

“You don’t have to force yourself to think.” He said. “Just write whatever comes into your mind. You don’t have to care what the message will be about.”

I closed my eyes briefly to relax before started to write every message running through my mind. They were trivial things, from what I liked, what I've done, or my precious memories. I even wrote about some small private matters. Even though everything I wrote seems useless, they might become some valuable information for us.

I handed the paper to him to show that I was done. Ton took the paper to read for a few minutes before looked at me again.

"I try to connect what you've seen." He explained. "I don't think this isn't any of use."

Ton handed the paper back to me. I let out a big sigh before glanced at what I wrote. Each word wasn't connected. Each message was like a piece of broken glasses. When a mirror broke and turned into tiny fragments, it could reflect only small parts of the whole story that were unable to be fully understood.

Suddenly, I noticed a message that was different from the others. I shoved the paper back at him and pointed at the middle of the page.

"This... what's this?" I asked.

"What is it?" He scratched his head.

The middle of the page was left almost blank. Only two words were written there.

Knife. Thick blood.

“Knife?” Ton said. “What do you think it means?”

“I think...” I said. “It means the weapon the culprit used to harm me at that time.”

Ton nodded before continued asking.

“And why do you pay attention to the word ‘thick blood’?”

“I can’t remember why I wrote it,” I answered. “But it might have some meaning. When I wrote, I let out every word I had in my head. What I don’t understand is why the word knife and thick blood were written next to each other.”

“Well, I don’t know either.” Ton shrugged. “I want to know, too.”

He looked at the paper thoughtfully, turning the paper around to look for something. We completely forgot about the Milk Jigsaw on the low table. The bigger puzzle was enchanting both of us.

Ton stood up and sat down repeatedly. He looked at the paper all the time. I stared at the words, trying to find the connection. However, no matter how hard I tried, the only thing I received was silence.

We became silent for a long time. I felt strange that Ton hadn’t tried to exchange his opinions with me. These words probably had some significant meanings from his point of view. He stared at them as if his thought was sucked into space at the middle of that page.

I stood up, brushing the dust off my pants before heading to the door.

“Where are you going?” Ton raised his brows.

“Bathroom.” I smiled in reply.

I closed the door silently and headed to the bathroom, looking hard into the mirror hanging on the wall. The dark feeling floated into my heart.

The reflection showing in the mirror might be me.

But it wasn't me...

What if everything I knew was just a lie? What if everything I remembered was just some illusion?

Then, could I still be the same me?

Could I live as I should live my life?

Or was I someone else's replacement? I didn't actually exist in this world and was a mere character someone created. I was only someone's lie.

I... I... am me... Yes, I... No... I... Yes... No... No... No...

No!

...

Who... am... I...

Ton might believe it, but a belief was different from the reality. If what I was and knew weren't real, then who was it standing in the mirror?

Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it?
Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it?
Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it?

Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it?
Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it?
Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it?
Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it?
Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it? Who was it?
Who was it?

Who... am I...?

I looked at the mirror absent-mindedly for a while. My nerves were numb. My conscious was fading. I slowly dug into my pocket and took out the pocket knife before pointed its tip at my throat.

I slowly moved its tip on my skin. A drop of blood seeped out slowly.

So fresh... So relax... why did death give such relax feeling?

It didn't matter. It was useless to think about it.

Goodbye... Ton. Goodbye... Dad.

Goodbye... me.

Suddenly, my mind was shocked back from the abyss. I heard the sound of beating the door on my side coming along with a familiar shout.

Ton broke into the room with all his might. He charged toward me, grabbing my wrist fiercely with one hand and used another hand to knock off the pocket knife I was holding on.

“Moron! I didn’t give you the knife to do something like this!” Ton roared. I looked at him surprisingly.

All of a sudden, he held me so tight that it was hard to breathe. I struggled to free myself but wasn’t successful.

“What are you doing...?” I asked with a whisper, but Ton remained still.

We let the time flew by. The heat from Ton’s body slowly seeped into mine. I let him hug me like that. It was a bit uncomfortable but also made me feel safe at the same time.

“How did you know...?” I broke the silence.

“When you smiled,” Ton whispered. “I realized that you’re still stuck with it. I also saw the knife pocket in your pants, so I followed you.”

Ton held me tighter before whispered.

“If you’re sad, then cry. You don’t have to hold it in.”

“I’m not sad...”

“I know that you’re sad right now. Don’t lie to me.”

I looked at Ton for a second and asked.

“Do you think... I’m... still the same me?”

“I told you so,” Ton smiled. “Even though the others won’t believe, I’ll believe you. You’re still the same you.”

I looked into Ton’s eyes and smiled while the tear ran down my face.

That was right. No matter how much I'd changed, I would still be myself.

Within the stopped time, we comforted each other under the starlight from the sky.

No matter what happened. I would still be me.

20

After that day, I hadn't seen Ton again.

He was absent from classes for over a week. I tried to contact him several times, but it was useless. Nobody knew where he was. If I had to guess, his strange sickness probably was too painful for him to go anywhere. I wanted to visit him, but I'd never known where he lived.

His disappearance was the worst thing happened to me.

I often sat in the library alone, trying to avoid everyone I knew. I didn't see Bill wait for me in the university again. Max came to classes as normal. However, my instinct told me that I wasn't safe if I stayed around him.

The mysterious calls became more frequent using different numbers. I tried to avoid answering the calls. I could feel that the monster was getting nearer than it used to be.

I started to get confused between the reality and the illusion, feeling that people walking on the street tried to hurt me. The real culprit still stalked me, but fear made everything in this world seemed terribly scary.

I tried to contact Ton. I intended to visit him, but when thinking about the mysterious man that kept stalking me, I gave up the plan. The culprit

might choose to harm Ton when he was weak. What I should do was to lure the culprit away from him as far as possible.

Every day after classes, I would take all the photos related to my memory to look and find the answer. Was there a way to connect my memory together, unlock the hidden secret, and finally end this nightmare?

The more I thought about the false memories, the more I suffered from the fact that everything I knew was a lie. My thoughts broke into pieces from time to time. Various emotions thundered inside my mind. I saw letters written with blood, saw a body stabbed in the middle of the chest, and heard painful and sorrowful screams. Every time I had the strange condition, I told myself that I was still the person I had always been. No matter what inside my brain was a lie or not, I was still me.

Since Ton started to be absent, I missed him almost all the time. It felt like something was missing in my life. Ton was the only friend who told me everything. He was the one that made my life now worthwhile, fading the scars that stuck deep.

But now I felt something wrong that I couldn't put into words. It was an unreasonable fear.

I felt like I wouldn't be able to meet him again...

I was in the library, as usual, trying to connect the messages I wrote with the photos I had in my hand.

I tried to write every message I could think of on a blank paper, but this time, not a useful word appeared. I sighed from tiredness, confusing with what was going on now.

There were three possible culprits: Max, Bill, and Ton. I wrote the reasons that might make them the murderer with an uncomfortable feeling. Each of them had shared some good memories with me. I didn't want to suspect any of them.

I wrote the reason that Ton might be the murderer first. Ton was the only person knew everything happened to me, but I couldn't think of any motivation he might had to harm me.

And Bill... Bill was a violent man. We used to argue a lot. The most important thing was about what he talked with his friend in that old house. Everything seemed reasonable. Bill might have a case that he wanted to hide. He involved with much illegal stuff. Bill had the heaviest risk if I knew the truth. If this was the case, then why did he keep following me? Threatening me made him more at risk with the police. Another thing that I didn't understand was why he'd changed his approach. He used to threaten me openly but now he tried to cover himself.

Max was the least, and at the same time, the most suspicious person. He used to live in the same neighborhood with me and had more chances to harm me. However, I didn't understand his motivation. Max didn't have a reason to hurt me. He was close to me, so he had more risks. If something unusual happened, the neighbors would immediately realize that something was wrong. He might use my trust to get close and harm me, but that would definitely be bad for him. I didn't think that he would miss this point.

Max was suspicious in many ways. The image he drew that day and the illusion of the young Max I saw during the time I was checking the old house were good examples. Max might have something to do with the truth, but what was that?

While I was writing the murderer's motivations, I heard a familiar voice called me from the next table. My hair rose from the shock.

"D- D- Dream," Max called me with a smile. "L- l- long times no see."

I looked up and gave him a forced smile.

Max left his table and sat on a chair opposite my seat. He placed his hands on the lap, having both arms close at his sides.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"J- j- just thinking that we haven't met so long." He laughed lightly.

"W- w- what are you doing, Dream?"

“Nothing.” I put the paper away in my bag swiftly while looking at the watch. “Umm... I have a class this afternoon. I have to go now.”

While I was about to leave, Max snatched my wrist. He squeezed it tightly with a smile.

“T- t- today your faculty doesn’t have a class in the afternoon.” The force on my wrist made me weak. The fear of men rose inside me again.

I had never be scared of Max like this before. What had happened to him?

“I- i- if you’re free, w- w- why don’t we go find something to eat together?”

“I- I’m not hungry.” I tried to pull my arm free, but it didn’t budge. Max was still smiling, but his eyes were full of hatred.

It was as I suspected. His actions were not normal.

I nodded in defeat. My muscles were out of energy. Max smiled and pulled his bag on his shoulder. He adjusted his vest a little before led me off the library.

He took me to the cafeteria and placed the bag on a table before turned to talk to me.

“Y- y- you go first.” He smiled. “I- I- I’ll reserve the seat here.”

I forced a smile before walked away. His action, his words, and his smile might look the same, but deep inside something had changed. His

expression was cold as if his face was covered with an ice mask. His evil eyes told me that if I tried to run away, I would die.

Did Max really be the culprit?

I bought soda and turned back to the seat with chaotic thoughts. Max welcomed me back with a smile.

“D- d- don’t you eat something?” He asked.

“I’m... not hungry.”

He placed his bag on a side, took a sandwich from the bag, unwrapped it, and took a bite.

“Don’t you go to buy a meal?”

“Y- y- you don’t want one. I- I- I’ll skip one with you.”

“I’m... on a diet. You don’t have to follow suit.”

“I- it’s fine.”

We sat in silent for a moment. While I drank my soda, I noticed that Max sneaked a peak at me from time to time. This was the first time I scared of Max as an opposite sex. The atmosphere around him reminded me of the killing intent the culprit exuded when he chased me.

Max could be the real culprit.

After a long silence, Max finally spoke.

“I- I- I haven’t seen Ton recently. W- w- where does he go?”

“I don’t know.” I tried to act normal. “He didn’t tell me anything before he’s absent.”

“I- i- is that so?” He said. “T- t- that’s a shame.”

He bit down the whole sandwich, munched roughly, and swallowed it down.

“Y- y- you seem very close to Ton.” He said. I could see immediately that he was upset. “I- I- I see you leave the university with him every day.”

“It’s not like that.” He observed me that much? What else did he know?

He took a water bottle from his bag and drank in irritation.

“Sometimes, I want to...” He said. His stutter simply disappeared.

I backed away before realizing. My instinct was screaming inside my mind.

Something was about to happen.

Max’s eyes opened wide. He mumbled something to himself. His lips moved rapidly. His breaths apparently became shorter and faster. His mumble became gradually louder and more aggressive. I grabbed my bag. My ankles were tense. I was ready to run away.

“W- w- want... Want. Want. Want. Want. Want.” His eyes slowly moved up. His hands squeezed the water bottle tightly.

I slowly stepped back. My lips were trembling with fear.

When we were young, Max would always listen to me and comfort me when I fought with Dad. Every time the darkness covered my life, Max was the one who pulled me out.

However, Max now... No, the man in front of me was no longer Max I used to know.

Suddenly, he squeezed the plastic bottle hard. The sound of pressing plastic rang the air. Water dripped from the tearing on the translucent plastic before sprayed out as if it was a broken pipe.

People around us stared in shock. I bolted out, avoiding the rain of hatred. Max panted. His face was as red as a ripe tomato. He looked at me with fogged eyes, but the emotions that clouded his vision disappeared in a short period.

Max was back to normal.

Max ran over me with worry. He tried to give me some space to make me feel safe.

“A- a- are you alright?” He asked.

“It’s okay.” I shook my head. “Thanks for asking but I have to go now.”

I walked away without waiting for a reply. While I was about to leave the university’s gate, I looked back at the cafeteria’s entrance. A skinny man

was looking at me with sad eyes. I saw him waved goodbye before turning the corner.

The sky was getting dark. The thunder was screaming throughout the sky. I ran into the shortcut, trying to speed up my steps. Both eyes looked straight. I wanted to get home as fast as possible. It was the only place in this world that could make me feel safe.

Droplets showered. Some hit the ground directly. Some were swept away by the wind. Dried leaves flew into the air then fell back down. The dried leaves reminded me of the first time I'd lost someone in my life. When my grandmother passed away, I could only hold her hand and looked out the window. A dark leaf fluttered on a branch. It seemed like it was ready to fall at any second. The second my grandmother slept forever, the leaf dropped.

Since then, dried leaves became the symbol of death for me.

I ran through a crossroad and turned right into an alley. If I passed another road with a phone booth on the corner, I would arrive home safely.

I ran with everything I had, rushing forward as if trying to run after something. I saw an invisible finished line in front of me, extending my arm to grab on the freedom that didn't exist.

When I was running past the phone booth, my body froze out of a sudden. A cold feeling ran throughout my nerves. The atmosphere became gloomy. The wet smell turned into the metal smell of blood. The cold wind

swept the dried leaves to stop in front of me. The wind sounded like a scream from people who were gone forever.

I heard a whistle sound from behind. The phone in my pocket vibrated violently. The chaotic mind immediately went blank. As if I was on strings, I took out the phone to receive the call.

A loud pant was on the other end. I heard the sound of a footstep and the whistle getting nearer. Coldness ran deep through my bones. The depth of my mind was screaming in fear.

Warm breaths touched my nape. A black shadow stopped behind me. A wraps voice of the monster was heard both from the phone and as the whisper that rang my mind.

“I’m now right behind you...”

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I looked around while my brain tried to find a way to survive. My chance was nigh, though.

The only thing I could do now was run as fast as possible.

The fear had unlocked every physical limitation. My body balanced very well even on the slippery road. I rushed forward without waiting a moment.

However, hope would remain hope. It was entirely different from the reality revealing in front of me.

He dashed at me, turning around the corner to stop right in front of me and took the hammer from his back before swung down hard.

I jumped back. The cement ground broke into pieces. The hammer's stuck deep on the ground too close to my feet. If I were to delay my decision a second more, my life would have ended.

I tried to concentrate, got up from the ground, and ran to the left. He turned to look at me leisurely, placed the hammer on his shoulder, and quickly followed.

I tried to find a way that could lead me home, but he blocked me at every turn. It was obvious that he had learned the ways around here thoroughly.

He closed my every way out.

I ran through the rain with him entailed, crossing the stone bridge over a small canal that led me to the unpredictable future.

My only thought was that I must survive... I had to survive!

I threw myself into a desert road, running as far away as possible, but he was still hot on my heels. I sped up, but it was useless. The hammer was swung my way harshly. I ducked the hit before forcing myself to run further.

I ran until I was out of breath, feeling like my lungs were about to burst. Looking back, he followed behind without a hurry. No sigh of fatigue was seen.

I kept running without knowing how long time had passed. The dark cloud was like a closing curtain used for signaling the end of a show, but this was not a show. This was a real life hidden by the heaven. Only he and I were aware of it. Only he and I preceded this play.

I ran until I reached the innermost corner of a building. My feet had brought me to an unknown place. I took a chance to rest briefly while looking around, surveying where I was.

The gate frame was decorated with a metal rainbow. Its colors had been faded by the time and nature. The Ferris wheel was towering. Its bright colors were replaced with rusty stain.

I looked around to make sure that I wasn't followed anymore and tried to find a place to hide. While I was looking around for the hiding place, I heard the whistle sound from far away and frantically ran into a small house nearest to me.

The sound of water dropping resonated throughout the building. The cold wind and chilling fog blanketed the place. I moved around slowly before hit with an invisible wall.

I got up in a daze, fumbling around to feel the thin air in front of me. Something stood between me and my escape route. Suddenly, the whistle sound rang throughout the house. I tried knocking on the invisible thing stood in the front and looked around frantically at the same time. After a round of surveying my surrounding, I came to realizing that I had brought myself into a very dangerous place.

I was caged in a mirror house. A mad man holding a deadly weapon was on my back, and a maze built from hundreds of mirrors was on the front.

I hurried and turned to the left path, fumbling around with my hands to find the way out. The maze's wall consisted of both the clear glass and the mirror. That meant it was impossible to know where I was heading to.

When fear gripped one's heart, the brain would arouse all five senses to work at its limit to look for the danger that lurking near. I heard footsteps, water dropping, breathing, and the whistle sound from every direction. My

eyes were sharper than usual, which got me confused between the real thing and the illusion that intertwined in front of me. My skin became more sensitive to the cold. It made the atmosphere scarier. My nose and tongue could smell and taste the reddish rust stuck around.

His footsteps still echoed in the air.

He could be anywhere.

I moved slowly, trying to make my own footsteps as light as possible. My right hand touched a clear glass in the front to feel the way. I turned to the right hesitantly. The whistle was getting closer and closer. It was a warning that my time was running out.

Suddenly, I saw a black shadow ran passed me and immediately turned around. My breath stuck in the lungs from the sheer fear.

There were only water dropping and emptiness.

The glass house reminded me of one time when I was young. Once, I asked Dad to play in a glass house. Dad nodded nonchalantly. I cried out with happiness before ran into the glass house without realizing what was waiting for me.

The confusion between the illusion and the reality trapped me in the place. I tried to ask for help, hitting the glasses to signal that I couldn't get out.

However, nobody came to my rescue.

I felt like I was caged in a tiny box. My reflections and the invisible exit were in every direction. I tried to run into the clear glass in front of me many times, hoping to find a way out of there safely.

In the maze, there was only silence and the pressing atmosphere. I sang to make myself feel better, but it made everything worse instead. The singing echoed in the house. Only myself was there to hear it. It was as if there was another one of me who was staring at me and planned to replace me.

I was eaten inside out. After caged in the maze for a long time, my senses started to distort. When loneliness took place, the despair revealed itself. A lot of images from my life rushed through my eyes before disappeared as if they were broken into pieces.

That was the first time I experienced the extreme fear.

After locked inside for a long time, I saw a large shadow gradually headed closer. I frantically ran and hid behind a mirror close to me.

The dark shadow moved slowly. The footsteps echoed within the glass and mirrors around. I closed my eyes tightly, praying for it to pass me as fast as possible.

Suddenly, the footsteps stopped. I heard panting got nearer, and a shadow blanketed on me. I closed my eyes tighter, moved away to put some distance between me and the shadow. I knew that it was getting closer from the sound of the breath and the dark that was moving under my eyelids.

Please. Please don't hurt me. I could only pray in my mind.

Suddenly, my fear was gone. I felt the warmth on my head. A rough hand was stroking my hair gently. I slowly opened my eyes, staring at the light that shone passed the large shadow with a familiar feeling.

Dad smiled at me gently. His hair was messy. His shirt was soaked with sweat. He pulled me into his embrace before dropped sitting on the ground.

After Dad had realized that I was gone into the glass house longer than usual, he rushed inside, disregarding the shouts from the staff.

After he had found me, we both stuck inside the glass house until the staff came to take us out. While we were waiting, Dad and I sang songs together happily.

The event on that day had a happy ending.

However, the fear stuck inside my mind.

And now, that fear came back to hurt me.

I could keep running now because the fear from being hunted overwhelmed the old fear. The little girl stuck within the maze was crying inside nonetheless.

I kept fumbling the way, listening to the footsteps and the whistle from time to time. I ran away without any confident. Until I was at a dead end.

I touched the mirror in front of me before turned back to the same way I passed. When I was leaving, I hit a clear glass hard.

I looked at the glass. It had many cracks. Some shaping edges had blood on it.

Blood dripped down from my forehead and dropped on the floor as if someone spraying paint from a brush. I looked around in confusion. I was certain that I had walked through this path.

Then why did the path I was standing now seem different from before?

The cold spread. My eyes shook. The maze confused my sense of directions. I was lost.

I looked at the blood on the floor worriedly. If I headed forward, this blood would help the murderer to reach me. I had to do something with my wound.

Suddenly, a man in a black rain coat stood still behind me.

My nerve was fried. My body was tense as if I were a stone statue. He walked over to me leisurely, whistled in haunting melodies.

I closed my eyes tightly, counting the steps that were getting closer.

Five...Four...Thee... Two... One...

He stopped close to me. I closed my eyes even tighter, feeling the heat that was getting near, trying to avoid the death crept toward me.

He lifted the lethal weapon over the head before swung it down hard.

The second the hammer was swung down, I heard glass broken from somewhere far away. I slowly opened my eyes and turned to the source of the sound.

He disappeared. There was only my reflection in a mirror behind.

This place drove me mad. I took out a damp handkerchief from my jeans and tied it on my forehead to stop the bleeding before continued walking.

Suddenly, a black shadow rushed passed. I tried to take a deep breath to calm down. What I saw and felt a moment ago was just my own imagination, what I had to do now was to find a way to get out of here.

However, my courage was completely shattered when the mirror behind me broke.

What I saw earlier was the warning from my instinct. Now it was real.

He brushed the mirror's flecks off the rain coat. The black mask was hiding a disgusting smile. I screamed from fear when he rushed at me, preparing for the kill.

The second I regained my composure, the deadly weapon was already coming on me. I charged at him swiftly before squeezed myself passed his side.

I ran through the broken glasses. He followed, swinging the hammer around to make more room. The shattered glass was like the showered ash in remembrance of the dead ones. I kept running until I hit a clear glass in front of me. I turned to the other way at the same moment that the hammer hit the glass that stood between me and my freedom.

He closed my way out. I had to find another way. I ran and ran without knowing what was waiting ahead.

Suddenly, the glass on my left shattered. He rushed out swiftly before hit my rib severely with the hammer. I flew stuck in a narrow space between glasses on the right side. The broken glass cut into my back until it bled. I tried to claw escape, but it was useless.

I was cornered.

The last thing I saw in this life was the reflection of my last breathings.

I looked for an escape. Broken glass had made many ways, but they were too small for me to get through any of them.

The sound of breaking glass was getting near. He swung the hammer aimlessly as if a child was breaking things to vent out his anger. However, what he was doing was a lot cleverer than that. He crashed only the glass that would block his movements and, in the same time, cornered me and closed my ways out.

I backed away. My back pressed on the mirror that was standing between me and the outside world. He took each step with confident. The prey he hunted so long finally had no way to go.

“Finally...” His voice was rasp as if it belonged to a monster. “I found you.”

His face was covered with a hygiene mask and a sunglasses. He used his left hand to brush my face. His breath was short as if the breathing of a lustful animal.

“You refuse to take my offer.” He licked his lips. “In this case, I have to tame you nicely...”

He kept the hammer on his back and used one hand to squeeze my face so that I couldn't turn away from him. His other hand moved down to unzip his pants that were hidden under the rain coat. He gradually pulled the coat up, revealing the disgusting meat pulsing in tune with the heartbeat. I looked at the disgusting meat moving out of the pants in detest.

I tried to resist, but it was useless. The fear of the opposite sex had sucked my energy dry. He pressed my wrists down tightly, licking his lips in pleasure before yanked off my shirt and pants harshly. I screamed for help even though I was doom. Sometimes, the world would show its cruelty for us to see. When we were in the depth of despair, it would step on us by watching us break adoringly.

The disgusting meat became larger. It twisted up and down as if a person jumping in glee. The mysterious man sneered and moved closer.

He was about to push that disgusting meat into me.

He was getting nearer, and nearer, and nearer...

I struggled in desperation. No matter how hard I tried, this was the last lesson of my life... It was the end that I truly couldn't avoid.

It ended now... Yes, it truly ended now...

No...

No... it didn't... It couldn't end like this. I wouldn't... allow it... to end like this.

I screamed out loud and regained my lost energy. I twisted and kicked him hard in the stomach. Even if I couldn't go back safely, even if my effort would be in vain, I would never give up. No way!

Suddenly, my hope lit up again when my hand touched a metal bar laid next to my head.

I gathered every drop of energy at my arms and hit the wrench at the heartless murderer with everything I had.

I squeezed my eyes shut and hit a few more times before swung the wrench at the mirror on the back. Rain poured in from the outside world and hit my skin harshly. Though it was hurt, it was the sign of my freedom.

I dropped the wrench and ran away from the deserted amusement park without looking back at the body that laid silently on the ground behind me.

I pushed hard at the house door with my half-naked body. Dad was cleaning some food stain on the floor in a good mood.

“You’re home... What!?” Dad shouted from the shock.

“Dream, what happens?”

I ran up to my room, tore off the remaining clothes and threw them in the garbage before rushed into the bathroom. I opened the shower at the strongest level, letting the water clean every filthy thing on my body.

No, it didn’t disappear. The feeling from that disgusting meat didn’t disappear. What had happened stuck with me. No matter how harsh I washed myself, it didn’t go.

I used the sponge to rub on my skin. No matter how hard I scrubbed, his touch remained. I screamed in desperation before dropped down on the floor, letting the water flow passed my body.

After I had finished bathing and dressing, I ran to the bed and covered myself with the blanket, shutting myself off the dirty world.

I sat under the blanket shaking as, treating as a metal shield that could protect me from all thing nasty. However, I was very well aware that... this world no longer had a safe place for me.

Suddenly, a tear dropped. I cried out loud like when I was a little child, letting out all the pain inside, the bruise from the hurt, the conflicts I had with Dad in the past, and the loneliness I felt when Ton wasn't right beside me now.

He used to tell me that if I was scared, I should just cry, doing everything my way.

Because I was me.

I was still the same me.

I cried until my tear ran dry before got up on my weak legs. I rubbed away the tear with my shoulder before went to wash up in the bathroom. Then, I heard someone knocking on the door. Dad was calling me loudly, worried traced in his voice. I hurriedly walked to the door, twisted the doorknob slowly, and cracked the door open.

“What’s wrong with you?” Dad asked flutteringly. “Why do you come back in that state?”

I was silent, just thinking of it made my body shook.

“Are you...” he shook his head. “This is too much. I’m calling the police.”

Dad went downstairs, called the emergency number before turned to smile soothingly at me. I followed him down in silent.

“What’s the name of your ex-boyfriend again?” He asked. “I won’t allow him to do this again.”

I was silent for a while before whispered my reply.

“It isn’t Bill...”

“Then, who is it...?”

“I... don’t know.”

Dad rubbed his forehead before looked up at me. His eyes glittered from the water inside. Since I could remember, he hadn’t once cried in front of me. I still remembered the day mom died very well. He had lost someone so precious, yet he didn’t cry. However, now, he was showing his weakness, as if he were a baby that was snatched away from its mother.

Suddenly, he stepped forward to hug me. I looked at him with surprise briefly before closing my eyes. If he was sad, he should let it out. Letting me see his weakness strangely made me feel safe.

I probably needed someone to share my fear... someone that could feel what I had to face and cry with me. That probably was it.

I slowly smiled with tears soaking my face. We let out our pain and shook the fear off our hearts.

After we had cried until our tear ran dry, Dad and I sat down on the floor and smile at each other.

“You’re feeling better now, Dream?” He smiled. “Do you want to tell me what exactly had happened?”

I looked around before turned back to Dad. He raised his eyebrows in question. When he was about to say something, the doorbell rang.

“Who is coming now?” His voice traced with annoyance. “Let me see the door first then we’ll continue this talk.”

I closed my eyes, trying to suppress the urgency inside me. The fear was still there but, at least, crying with Dad helped me feel better. I opened my eyes slowly and took a deep breath to calm myself.

Suddenly, I heard Dad shouted frighteningly. I got up and dashed to the door.

A man was standing in the heavy rain. His face and body were soaked in blood. He looked into that house blankly. Those loathsome eyes moved slowly before stopped at me.

Bill looked at me with empty eyes.

At that moment, I immediately knew that the nightmare and the reality were one. I hadn’t woke up, and the nightmare still continued.

There wasn’t a safe place for me anymore.

I pushed the door closed harshly. Dad looked at me in confusion.

“Dream, what are you doing?” He raised his eyebrows.

I turned to look at him. My eyes were wet with tear.

“Him...?” His voice was low. “He hurts you?”

I slowly nodded and closed my eyes tightly.

Bill... was the one who hurt me. He made me sink into the endless fear. Because of him... it was all because of him.

Dad looked at me with comprehensive eyes and let out a big sigh before spoke.

“I know I shouldn’t let him in.” He shook his head. “But I can’t let someone injured out there as well. After treating the wounds, I’ll call the police.”

I looked at him briefly before stepped back from the door docilely. Dad opened the door. He looked at Bill with fierce eyes. He bowed in thank before stepped into the house.

Suddenly he fell on the ground. Bill tried to get up but fell again. Dad sighed before went to support him and led him to the living room with the first aid kit.

He sat Bill by one side of the walls then crouched down in front of him. They looked into each other eyes for a long time before Dad broke the silence.

“How did you get these wounds?” He raised his brows.

“I- I don’t know... I really don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I... can’t remember anything...” Bill lowered his head.

Dad sighed, looking at me before shook his head.

“Why are you here?” He asked. “You should go to the hospital.”

Bill looked at me before lowered his head and whispered.

“As I said, I... I don’t know... I can’t remember.”

I stepped back a bit and wrapped my arms around myself. He was lying. No culprit would confess his guilt easily.

“Let me tell you bluntly.” He pointed at him in warning. “After you stop bleeding, you must resign yourself to the police. You’ve tried to hurt my girl so many times. I won’t let you off anymore. Understood?”

Bill lifted his head briefly before lowered it down again.

Suddenly, the light went out. Dad looked around before got up and went upstairs.

“I’ve warned you.” He turned to say fiercely. “When I’m not around if you hurt Dream in any way... I won’t spare you.”

The thunder was screaming in angry. I heard raindrops hit the windows around the house. The darkness from the cloud came back and forth, switching with the light from the thunder. The atmosphere in the room was eerie. I could feel something dangerous lurking around the place.

Bill panted heavily. I heard that people who lost blood would try to breathe harder to make up for the blood loss. Only his breathing could make me shake. I recalled that disgusting meat between his legs, aiming at me. The rough touch. The unsightly veins. Those images stuck with me.

Bill looked at me with blank eyes. Both of his hands were hidden inside his jeans. I stepped away instinctively.

“You... what do you want here?” I gritted my teeth.

“Dream...” Bill muttered. “You have to believe me. I... can’t remember anything.”

“Why should I?” I retorted. “Why do I have to believe someone who hurt me and even... even...”

A tear slowly ran down my face. I turned my face away, trying to hide the weakness inside.

“Dream...” Bill said gently. He stepped closer, opened his arms to hug me. I brushed his hands away before wrapping my arms around myself tightly.

“I... I’ve done something bad to you?”

“You’re still lying... You’ve hurt me... make me scared all the time.”

“I... did?” Bill took a small step back. “I- I- I’m sorry. I’ve never mean to hurt you. I really haven’t.”

“This is an apology?” I gritted my teeth hard, trying to contain my tear. “The way you try to harm Ton and me... That’s called you don’t mean to hurt me?”

Suddenly, Bill fell down. His hands covered his head in an attempt to apologize. He kept his head down without even glancing up. I loosed my arms a bit, looking at him with empathy for a brief moment.

Maybe Bill... wasn’t the real culprit.

No... those wounds... It was impossible that Bill would be innocent. Impossible.

“Get up...” I whispered. Bill remained still.

“No... I won’t get up until you believe that I’m truly sorry.” Bill said. “I’m sorry... for everything. About that I tried to hurt Ton and you. About that I couldn’t be a good lover for you. Everything... everything.”

I’d never see Bill like this. Usually, Bill cared only himself. He’d never bent down or suppressed himself for anyone. If anybody tried to shake his belief, he was ready to hurt that person just to save his stand to the end.

Bill... might really change.

No... no way. Bill had hurt me so many times. He hit me. He made me scared of the opposite sex. The worst thing was he'd destroyed the trust I once gave him completely.

"Just get up," I demanded. "I don't want to see your face again."

Bill looked up. His eyes shone with tears. He got up, brushed the dust off his pants, and walked closer to me.

"That's something I can't do for you." He said. "Since we'd broke up, I can't forget you. No matter how hard I tried, I just can't forget you."

Bill touched my arm lightly. I shook off hard to send him the signal that I still didn't accept his apology.

Bill looked at me with a twisted face briefly before lowered his head.

"I'm sorry..."

"I won't accept your apology. Never..."

"What do I have to do that you will forgive me?" Bill asked. "I'll do anything just so I can talk to you again... like we used to be."

"It ends. There's no more of that."

Bill lowered his head and whispered something.

"I... since that time, I felt like I couldn't control myself. It was like something possessed me."

Suddenly, Bill gripped my arms tightly. I pushed him hard. Bill's touch made me feel weak, but I had to keep my dignity. I wouldn't allow him to hurt me one-sidedly again.

"I love you..." Bill gripped my arms harder. "I can... never... forget you..."

Bill tilted his head a little. His mouth opened slightly, and he moved his face closer. His breath touched my face. I tried to push him away but didn't have enough strength. He was too strong for me to deal with him alone.

At last, he was still the same...

No matter what... I wouldn't trust him again.

No way.

Suddenly, his blank eyes shone brightly. He looked at me in confusion before stepping back. His eyes were wet before he whispered.

"I'm... sorry."

His actions were so different from the way I'd known. It was as if he was a different person from the brute who had been disturbing me for years. My heart was filled with an indescribable feeling. The weakness made him look fragile. The hidden savage made me feel threatened. I was both feel sorry and hate him at the same time.

Suddenly, the siren was heard. Bill looked out the window before rushing through the door. He turned to look at me swiftly before ran away.

The rain poured down hard. His soaked back gradually disappeared in the dark.

After Dad had finished fixing the light, he and I talked to the police.

They took note of the information we gave, interrogating more about our history and other problems regarding the case then they left.

I sat there silently with Dad to deal with the shocking fear I received tonight. I'd never face something so extreme in my life. Staying with him made me feel calm.

After I had felt better, I walked back to my room, then dropped myself on the bed, letting the silence to soothe my heart. My eyes became heavy. My heart became light. I fell asleep before I realized it.

When my conscious was sinking deep into my mind, I heard some familiar call. I opened my eyes slowly and looked at the clock hung on the wall.

I jumped off the bed. The tiredness made me sleep for two hours straight. After regained my composure, I heard a familiar sound. I looked around to find where it was from.

My phone was vibrating. I picked it up and checked the number on the screen.

I didn't know that number, but the structure of the number allowed me to know that this call was from another mobile phone. I was hesitated shortly before answered it.

"Hi, Dream. How are you doing?" The voice from another end spoke.

"Is that Ton...?" I asked in a light voice.

"Yes, it's m..."

"Where have you been?!" I shouted. "I called you so many times but you didn't answer at all!"

"Sorry, sorry." Ton said in a relaxed voice. "My illness resurfaced. About the phone, when we were running away from the psychopath, I broke it. I change to a new one and change the number, too. My old number was a bit hard to remember."

"What about the classes? Aren't you going to be forfeited from the exam absenting for too long?"

"Don't worry." His voice told me that he was smiling. "I reported everything to the professor."

"It's good then." I signed in relief. It felt good to hear his voice again.

"Sorry that I hadn't walked you home lately." He said. "You don't have a problem?"

I thought about what happened when he was absent. My life turned into a nightmare. The culprit disturbed me all the time. I had to run away from the hunt. The worst of it was that I was almost raped by a psycho murderer.

Even though everything was harsh, it was to confirm how important Ton was to me.

I couldn't live without him.

"It..."

"What'd happened?" Ton asked.

"Let's wait until we meet." I replied. "I don't want to talk about it now."

"I understand," Ton said. "But I think we should talk about it here and now."

"Why...?"

"During the time I was absent, I felt I was followed," Ton said. "I don't know who it is, but I think it might relate to your case."

"My case?" This was what I fear the most. Ton was already involved in my nightmare.

The signal was broke briefly before completely disappeared. I checked the phone before spoke.

"Hello?"

“The signal isn’t good.” Ton said. I heard him fumbling with the phone. “For your question earlier... Yes, I think the culprit already know about us. We must find more photos. From my note, I think we still don’t have all of them.”

When Ton explained to me, the signal started to broke again before went off.

“Why does the signal so bad today?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” Ton replied. “Let’s concentrate on what we’re discussing.”

“If we still don’t have all photo, it means we have to go to that house again?”

“If it’s necessary, we will.” He said. “And I think I might find a way for you, the way that can help you to regain your memory but it’s not completed yet. When I finish, I’ll...”

Suddenly, the signal broke again. I heard screams and screeching sound from the other end. The sounds were mixed together into some high pitched and harsh sound.

The scream became louder as if someone was torturing to death. My head stung hard. My brain felt like it was about to burst. I closed my eyes tightly from the pain.

The confusion went on just briefly before disappeared.

The eerily silent was back.

I opened my eyes slowly, looking around in confusion. Everything went back to the peaceful state as if the scream I just heard was unreal.

The moment I lifted my head up, I heard a light knock on the window. I turned to look at the window, searching the source of that sound blankly.

Suddenly, fear gripped my heart. When I looked up, a dried leaf fell from a large tree beside the house. It was the confirmation for my intuition.

Falling dried leaf represented the end of life.

Everything would end when death came to you.

I looked at the dried leaf before looked back at my phone. Ton's line was gone.

After that moment, I'd never met Ton again.

23

Two days later, I received the news of Ton's permanent departure.

His sister said she found her brother's body swayed in the air. His neck wrapped with a thick rope. His eyes were blank. He went to a faraway place without looking back at the persons he left behind.

Ton was gone... He was indeed gone.

His relatives didn't convince that it was a suicide, but the evident from the police confirmed that he'd ended his own life. No trace of fighting. No mysterious fingerprints or anything out of place. Everything was where it should be.

Nobody understood why he did it. Ton was a joyous man and beloved by anyone he met. He had the ability to charm people and was full of love, and ready to give those love to others in gratitude. He had everything a person would need. There wasn't a reason for him to end his life like this.

However, it did happen. Nobody could deny this truth.

A simple funeral was held in a desolated temple. Ton's family wanted to mourn over the person they loved in peace. They didn't want any disturbance, but I was invited to the funeral.

I headed to the funeral immediately and prepared myself for the ceremony as proper as possible. When he lived, I hadn't repaid him for what he'd done for me in any way. I had never expected that he would be gone this fast. The only thing I could do was to say thank you over and over again to the body laid down peacefully in front of me. I wouldn't be able to see his smile and hear his laughter anymore.

Although Ton was gone, my tear didn't drop. There was only emptiness in my mind. No trace of sadness or pain in there.

There was nothing in there...

While I was helping to prepare the food for the guests in the funeral, Ton's sister walked to me. She smiled sadly before offered her helping hands.

"You are Dream?" She asked, looking at me briefly before nodded to herself.

"Ton talked about you a lot." She said. "He often told me about you and laughed. Ton had a lot of friends, but I'd never seen him so happy like that before."

"Yes." My mind was completely white. She looked at me with a smile again. Her eyes were red and puffed. Ton probably was very close to his sister. His early departure would leave a large hole in the life of those who remained behind.

It wasn't just his life that stopped. He also snatched away something important from people attached to him.

"You probably don't feel like talking, too, hmm?" She laughed lightly. I lowered my head in embarrassment. I shouldn't make her suffer more from my action.

Suddenly, her eyes changed. She bent down to scoop the rice soup into a bowl and placed it on the tray beside before spoke.

"I've never believed that Ton committed suicide." She said. Her voice was angry. "We've been together since young. We'd been very close. He told me everything. Before Ton died, he smiled and laughed like normal. I'm sure that he wouldn't commit suicide."

Her words reminded me of the lost signal when we were on the phone. It wasn't strange that the signal would lose, but I was certain that it wasn't a coincident either because, for the culprit, he was the most important key that could end everything.

"I don't think that he committed suicide, too," I said.

"There should be only you and me believe that." She smiled lightly. "Mon and Dad think Ton killed himself because of his illness. You probably saw it when Ton got a headache. The doctor said it was caused by his mind and Ton might be secretly stressed out, but I know that wasn't the reason. Ton was strong. He wouldn't anything like that."

Guilt overwhelmed me. I might not be the person who held the knife, but the truth remained true. Because Ton was involved in my mess, he died.

I was the murderer who destroyed his life.

It was me...

After we had finished serving the food, Ton's sister and I joined the praying with the others. When the funeral ended, Ton's coffin was moved to burn in the crematory located further away. The relative looked at the black smoke permeating the sky. They were saying goodbye to their beloved silently in their minds. The cry overwhelmed the area. I looked at the smoke scattered around the sky, but my face was dry. Not a drop of tear was on my face. Not even sadness was shown. However, I heard a cry resonated from within my heart. That girl was crying in my place. She stole all tear and sadness away from me.

I lowered my head, refuse to see the smoke floated higher.

I didn't want to accept that he was dead.

If my memory was fake, at least, I wanted to believe that he was still around and didn't go anywhere.

I still prayed for him to be around.

I still...

After the funeral ended, I walked to the bus stop to go home. I wanted to get out of this place. I didn't want to witness anyone else's sorrow.

While I was waiting for the bus, Ton's sister walked out of the temple. She sat on the seats placed behind and waved for me to sit with her. I shook my head, but she was determined.

"It's tiresome. Let's sit." She said. I let out a big sigh before sat down next to her.

"Don't you go with your parents?"

"No, Dad and mom drove back to the house in the countryside while I took the bus to our house in Bangkok."

"Is that so..."

"It seems like you know my intention." She laughed. "Very well. I want to talk with you, Dream. I intend to take a detour before going home."

"What's the matter?"

"I just want to know about Ton." Ton's sister lowered her head. The long brown hair fell down, covering her shoulders. "I want to know how he was when he stayed with you. I want to know him in the way that I hadn't known him."

"I..."

"You don't have to tell if you feel too pressured." She smiled faintly. "From what Ton told me, you probably very close to him."

"It's okay. I'm just... a little tired."

She looked at me briefly with a strange smile.

“You know? Ton might be lively, but when he just started the University, he was stressed about blending in the social as well.”

“Really?” I replied weakly.

“It’s true. Ton had so many friends in high school, but when he went to the University, he told me he felt alienated. He might befriend with a lot of people in his faculty, but he didn’t feel that close to anyone.”

I lowered my head, trying to think of the first time I met Ton. He always came to read and play the Milk Jigsaw in the library alone.

I just know that... Ton was lonely, too.

“And you know what? Not long after he complained to me, Ton came home all lively like he used to be. He smiled all the time until I had to ask him the reason.” She laughed lightly.

“Why?”

“Ton said that he met a friend who shared his interests and that he would prepare more fun games to play with that person.” She smiled. “Guess who that person was.”

I was silent for a long while before shook my head.

“I... don’t know...”

Ton’s sister smiled in reply and lifted her head to look up.

“Dream, you don’t have to hide it from me. I saw that you didn’t cry when we burnt Ton’s body.” Her tears started to drop. “You don’t have to

bear it. If you're sad, just cry... because we love him so much. That's why we are sad... doesn't it?"

I looked at her before looked down again.

If you're sad, just cry, you don't have to keep it inside.

Ton...

Suddenly, I cried loudly. My tears streamed down in a torrent. My body felt so heavy as if it was pulled down by the gravity. I'd never cried this hard before.

Ton's sister smiled at me. She opened her arms before pulled me close. I looked at her with the wet eyes before putting my face on her shoulder.

We cried together.

After our tear had dried, Ton's sister used her handkerchief to wipe away the tear before turned to ask me.

"Who do you think to do this to Ton?" I was shocked by her words. She asked without the slightest hesitation.

"You... know about it, too?"

"Ton didn't tell me about it. Don't worry." She smiled. "But I heard you talked with him, and I used to look at Ton's notebook."

"Ton's notebook?"

“The one Ton always carried around. You should have seen it.” She said. “I don’t understand what he wrote much, but it was enough to know that it relates to you.”

While we were talking, a blue bus came to a stop. She walked to the bus before turned to call me.

“Let’s go to my house. I have something to show you.”

Ton’s house was a one-storied small house. The room located next to the entrance served as the kitchen and the living room. On the left side of the kitchen was the bedroom for the siblings. Both rooms were separated by a thin wall and equipped with a bathroom each.

Ton’s sister headed to get an apron hung on a metal bar on the right wall, then she turned to ask me.

“What do you want to eat, Dream?” She asked while putting on the apron and tied a knot on the back.

I refused, but she insisted on cooking a welcome meal for me.

“Then... garlic pork stir-fried is fine.”

She smiled and headed to the kitchen. Turning back, she looked at Ton’s room before walked into the kitchen.

She wanted me to go into that room? I asked myself.

The appliance clanging was loud. The smell of oil permeated the air. I looked around hesitantly before made up my mind and opened the door.

Ton's smell was inside as if he'd never left the place. His belongings were arranged neatly. I walked inside, recalling everything we had together.

Ton used to live here? I thought.

The Milk Jigsaw pieces were scattered on the bed. I sat down and picked up a piece. I played with it in my hand, missing him. We always solved these puzzles in the library together. I usually teased him, and then we would place a bet on who could put more pieces correctly. He always won.

I moved the piece around, trying to find the right place to put it in. Ton always said that the principle of the Milk Jigsaw was to complete it outside in. The frame we made would bring us to the answer on its own.

I spent a long time to finish it, remembering the times when we laughed together after we completed the puzzle. Looking back, I had never solved the Milk Jigsaw even once. This game probably not suited me.

I looked at the furthest wall. Ton used needles to pin news pieces and photos he took from the house there. On the table next to the wall were a notebook and a pile of eraser scrap. I walked to the table, brushing the scrap down the bin with a bitter smile.

He helped me until the last second.

After cleaned off the trash, I sat down and hold the notebook for a while before opened it.

The notebook was packed with messy handwriting. It was one of his characters. He always summed up his thoughts and every story in a blink before wrote them down. For me, they looked like the secret codes the secret agents used for communicating. What strange was that I could understand them.

I flipped through the pages slowly, absorbing every thought he had. I still wanted to feel the time we spent together for as long as possible. Even when everything ended, just some short moments to sink in the remaining memories could sooth me.

While screening through the letters, I found a message that was written with a pencil harder than the others.

“For Dream,” He broke the line a bit. “I still can’t find the perfect solution, but I want you to link everything with something you like. You might be able to regain your memory.”

The date he wrote below was the day he died.

I flipped to another page. The page after that was empty. I turned back to read what Ton wrote again and again. My certainty grew. I knew the truth that was hidden behind.

Ton didn’t mean to commit suicide.

The message he wrote let me know that he planned to meet me that day before his line was cut. He told me that he would explain the solution that would help regain my memory to me. Anyone looking at the future would never stop at present.

But why the police didn't find any trace of the struggle or any evidence that would lead to the culprit?

While I was contemplating about his death, Ton's sister walked into the room and called me.

"Dream, the food is ready." She said. I got up abruptly before spoke in a low voice.

"Sister, Ton didn't commit suicide."

"What?"

"Ton didn't commit suicide," I said firmly. "I just found the message he had written for me before he died. He had called me before the line was cut. He told me that he had something to discuss with me after he felt better. Someone thinking of the future like that wouldn't commit suicide."

I handed her the notebook. She shook her head before pushed my hands back.

"It's not necessary. I already know that." She said. "I just want someone to believe the same thing as I do. It's a bit lonely to be the only one who believes that."

I stood still for a moment before headed back to the table, placed the notebook down where it used to be.

“You don’t have to return it.” She said. “Take it with you. Ton wanted you to have it.”

She walked to stand beside me, trusting Ton’s notebook in my hand.

“Thank you...”

“It’s okay.” She smiled. “Ton wrote for you to read. If it was left here, I think he would blame me. So, you keep it.”

I put the notebook in my bag. Ton’s sister looked at the completed Milk Jigsaw before she spoke.

“Take them back with you.” She suggested. “Ton told me that he often played them with you. Ton played them since he was young. It was his favorite game.”

“Is it really okay?”

“Don’t worry.” She said. “I might be a bit lonely not seeing them. Every time I see them, I always think of the times Ton played them.”

She placed her hand on her chest.

“But you probably are very lonely without them.”

I bowed my thank before put everything in my bag. Suddenly, the kettle sounded. She looked outside the room before turned back to me.

“I know that it’s time.” She smiled. “But before you leave, do you mind having a meal with me?”

After the meal had ended, I bid farewell to Ton’s sister and left. She walked me to the door and sent me off with lonely eyes before went back into the house.

I took the bus home for the safety reason. The culprit could be anywhere. He might be able to get rid of Ton but what he really wanted was me, and he wouldn’t stop until he got what he wanted.

During the way home, I thought about what Ton wrote. The truth might appear if I linked them to something I liked. What was it that Ton wanted me to use as the key to unlocking my memory?

Suddenly, I knew what Ton meant. I opened the bag and took a jigsaw piece out of the box. This jigsaw was the answer.

The first rule of solving the Milk Jigsaw was to place it outside in. The frame we made would lead us to the answer on its own.

I stared at it thoughtfully until I arrived home. Dad was reading a newspaper downstairs. Waiting for his only daughter to come home safely.

I smiled at him before ran to my room. His eyes kept followed me while he sighed tiredly. He probably felt that he couldn’t understand my thought anymore.

I put the bag on my bed and took the white pieces out from the box. I opened a drawer and took the photos Ton gave me to place in order.

It might work.

I opened the notebook, looking at the meaning of each photo and arranged them chronologically. I might be unable to connect everything together. That was all right. What Ton left behind would lead me the way.

I created the puzzle's frame by put the photo of the door knob on the further left and the photo of the house from a distance on the further right. I place the images of the candle and the window in the middle. I didn't know the sequence of these two events, but I was sure that they happened together.

The left out the photo was the image of the clock. I didn't understand what it meant. What the sound of the clock I heard really meant, I didn't know.

I tried staring at the photos, but nothing happened.

I separated the photos used as a frame from the images in the middle to highlight their importance. However, no matter which way I tried, the puzzle wasn't solved.

I looked at the image of the clock. This photo seemed not to hold any particular meaning, but it also could be the most important key.

I placed it together with the images of the candle and the window before arranged the three photos in a vertical line.

The order of the photos in the middle was the candle, the window, and the clock.

The puzzle was still dead locked.

I rearranged the order by put the candle on the right. The window was in the middle. The clock was on the left.

Nothing happened.

I let out a big sigh before tried rearranged them again. This time I placed the candle in the middle, the window on the left, and the clock on the right.

Still, nothing happened.

I let out another sigh tiredly. If putting a jigsaw together didn't help me to regain my memory, then what was the key that could help me to solve the mystery?

Suddenly, I remembered the memory game I played with Ton. He told me that if I made up a story for something I wanted to remember, I could remember them longer and more precise.

I read Ton's note to remember the meaning of each photo as much as possible before turned to look at each image again. I tried to make up a story from every image to link every event together. The images gradually merged into one picture.

I closed my eyes briefly to absorb the thoughts and slowly opened my eyes to look around, checking whether I was still in the world of reality.

Everything was the same. Nothing changed.

I sighed with exhaustion, dropping on the bed bonelessly. If the solution Ton had come up with couldn't help me to regain my memory, I didn't know which method would work.

Suddenly, I heard knocking on the door. Everything around me changed in a blink. Every photo connected together as if they were a roll of film that was revealing a stream of stories.

I was back to my room in the old house again.

I saw myself walked to open the door. Suddenly, a man in a black jacket rushed into the room with a knife in his hand. He roared fiercely, ordering me to lie down on the floor and took off the disgusting meat.

While he rubbed the detested meat all over my body, I pushed him away and was able to grab the knife. I chased him off the house and locked the door.

I ran back to my room as fast as possible, trying to find my phone to call the police. However, he had taken my phone with him.

I heard the sound of footsteps, door beatings, and window knocking. Everything happened just briefly before stopped. His scream might stop, but the silence scared me even more.

I left the room, pointing the knife in every direction before went downstairs. I guessed I was worried about Dad.

At downstairs, he stood still as if he had been waiting for me. The moonlight shone through the window in the kitchen. I pointed the knife at him, trying to chase him off the house again.

Suddenly, he dashed toward me and then everything went dark.

The story ended here. I didn't hear any cry. I didn't see the man with the candle holder.

I hadn't seen my death.

The story hadn't yet to complete. I looked at the photos that were arranged in order.

The story still needed a bridge to link everything together. The pictures I had now weren't enough for solving this puzzle.

I had to go to that house again.

I put the jigsaw pieces and the photos away in my bag and changed into my pajamas. In the bathroom, I washed my face before stared at the mirror with the eyes full of resolution mixed with fear.

Tomorrow was the fated day. The truth would be revealed.

Even though I was scared, I had to survive and came back to uncover Ton's death, and for myself.

I had to end this for everyone.

I used a cloth to dry my face, looking at the mirror to repeat what Ton said to me again.

The smooth skin. The fine nose. The large round eyes. The gold mixed with black hair that was the symbol of my past rebellion. Everything looked me... The same me.

And I was still me.

24

I wrote a diary to record my memory and review my life.

Human believed in fate and destiny. However, looking at the other side of the time, we couldn't believe that the future was set. I was one of the people who had no faith.

I asked myself if I had done this, where my life would be, and if I hadn't done this, how my fate would change.

I could only ask myself, and I got only silence as the answer.

I stood at the house's door, staring absent-mindedly at the result of my decision.

Thick blood covered the wall. The moonlight shone on the body laid down motionless on the floor. Dad's breath was light. His head had a large wound caused by hitting with a hard object.

In those seconds, I could only think and rethink about what I'd done. If I chose to forget the reality, would Dad be as he was now?

However, time was like a single way road that you couldn't turn back. Everything happened in this world was real.

I chose to go back to that house to find the last photo for regaining my memory.

But what I got was emptiness.

It showed that my choice was in vain. Worse, I had involved the person I hold dear into this nightmare.

I might be able to come home safely that night but the peaceful moment scared me in a strange way. Now I understood why.

The moment I regained my conscious, the reality crashed at me. I hurriedly went to Dad, supporting him up with dropping tear. He opened his eyes slowly. His breathing was as faint as the fading fire. I hold him before laid him against a wall.

While I was calling the ambulance, a dark shadow crept closer without me noticing. When I turned around, I suddenly lost my conscious.

During the time I lost my conscious, I could only ask myself that if I chose to throw the reality away, where would my life be?

However, only times could tell the truth. What had already happened couldn't be changed.

The only thing I could do was to feel guilty and asked questions.

If only I were...

If only...

25

The music woke me up from the dream. Darkness covered the place.

I looked around confusingly. The orange glow shone from the room in the front. Someone's shadow was moving on the wall. He was looking up, took a deep breath, and lifted both hands high, crushing the fingers on the shadow of a piano that was next to it.

The music resonated throughout the place. My eyes followed the sound. Up from where I was sitting was a wood frame of a dome ceiling. Behind me was an open space that could lead to downstairs. A large pile of metal bar was down there. A chair covered with brown stain was next to the pile.

Blood stain...

Suddenly, I regained my conscious. My body adjusted to the tune of fear. My heart was hitting my chest. My breath shorted. I tried to get up, but my wrists and ankles were tied down with a steel chain.

Where was I? How could I end up in this place?

The music thundered along with the violent emotions. The shadow on the wall performed even more viciously. The notes rang through my ears

hastily. They were full of bitterness and confusion. This song frightened me strangely. It was the fear that held some familiarity in it.

I heard this song before.

Suddenly, the song stopped. The man's shadow stood up. He stared at the wall for a while before walked to a corner of the room. The sound of metal hit the wooden floor was loud and clear. I knew immediately what was in the hand of that man.

He picked up a large hammer, lifted it on his shoulder then walked to the other side of the room and dragged something out. With every step he took closer to the door, the shadow on the wall grew bigger.

And that meant the death was creeping closer.

He left the room slowly. The wooden floor screamed in tune with his footsteps. The dark shadow became larger until it covered the whole room. He stopped by the door, staring at me with blank eyes before turned off the light in the room.

Only darkness was around me. I heard something dragged on the ground. Closing my eyes tightly, I tried to press myself with the wooden pole on my back.

Suddenly, every sound became silent as if the time had stopped. We were in the dark, hearing only the sound of the air in our ears. His shadow moved in the dark. I couldn't know what he planned to do next.

He lifted his arms before threw something at me. That thing laid on me, coated with sticky fluid. It reeked of rotten smell. I shrieked and kicked myself away from it.

In the darkness and the utter silence, an orange glow was lit. A dark shadow covered his face. He moved closer, kicked that thing out of his way.

Light from the candle destroyed a part of the dark. The moment that that thing went away, I knew the truth that I'd sought for so long.

Eyes rotted. Mouth and nose were full of white worms. The body skin was bruised from the extremely harsh torture. The head was crashed. Bits of the brain was left dry in the skull. The body was degrading, permeating the area with the stench.

That was Bill's corpse.

I turned to look at the culprit immediately. He smiled while moving the lantern close to his face. His cold eyes reflected the light as if it was the fire from the deepest abyss.

"Max... you..." I backed away. "You killed..."

"He knew too much." Max turned to look back. "Can't let him off."

His stutter was completely disappeared as if he was a different person. The air surrounded him was chilling like ice flecks eating at flesh and bone. He turned back to me and smiled.

I closed my eyes, trying to calm down. I was scared, but now I didn't have Ton with me. I had to be strong.

"You killed Ton." I watched him fiercely. "Everything... was your doing."

"Nonsense." Max shrugged. "He didn't die because he was crushed, did he?"

I bit my lips hard, refusing to accept the truth that was revealing in front of me. Max... the childhood friend who gave me hope when I was in troubles. That gentle young man was the same person who killed him.

Max killed Ton.

"Why don't you have any wound?" I watched his head. His black hair was sleek. "I hit you rather hard."

"You mean this?" He opened his vest. Around his right rib appeared many large and small bruises. "When you hit me, you didn't even look."

"A- and the hit wound on Bill's head?" I tried to stay back.

"That wound?" Max looked at Bill's dead body for a while before used the hammer to hit his head into pieces. "I did it. Think of it as a repayment for when he hit me."

"Why do you do that?" My voice shook. Tear started to brim on my eyes.

“Why?” He smiled coldly, pressing the hammer on the corps leisurely. “Because he wanted to help you. He wanted you. Like when he went to see you at the University. He wanted you so much that he let himself hurt you. If I remember right, there was a rumor that he went to disturb you and Ton there.”

“Help me... what do you mean that Bill tried to help me?”

Max licked his lips. His eyes were full of lust. “When you escaped from the fun park, he tried to stop me from following you.” Max knocked the hammer with his hand. “So, I hit him, and hit, hit, hit, hit, hit, hit, and hit! Hit until he was a mash. He tried to run and follow you even when he couldn’t remember what happened. It seems he loved you so much, huh? But he should know that you are mine.”

Max pushed the hammer on the floor. He leaned forward, placing his chin on his weaved hands.

“After he ran away from the police, I dragged him here.” His eyes moved around. “Before I killed him, I just think of something fun, so I tried to interrogate him. I wanted to know how much he loved you and he told me everything. You should have seen it.”

He laughed out loud, laughing in a voice so high that it was disturbing.

“Before he died, he cried and said that he was sorry he used to hurt you. He kept repeating that he didn’t want the relationship between you and him to be stuck like that. So, he hurt you badly, so bad that you almost die. He hit your head hard, but you can’t remember that. He had kept it a secret because he felt guilty and disappeared from your life for some times.” Max twisted the hammer playfully before continued. “He also said that he wanted to apologize to Ton and your father for what he had done. That’s quite pathetic, don’t you think?”

Finally, the truth was revealed. The words Bill said with his friend that day. The ambiguous words he said at my house. Because Bill forgot what had happened and still on the detention, he didn’t dare to go to the hospital. He wasn’t aware of what he had done. The only thing he could remember at that was... me.

Even though Bill had done a lot of bad things, what he tried to do for me was genial. He purely loved me. This thought made me ashamed of myself that I couldn’t repay the love he gave me.

“His story should end here.” Max’s emotion changed abruptly. He seemed to enrage and disgust by what he’d said. “I think I’d warned you that you shouldn’t try to find the truth anymore but you haven’t obeyed. I’d offered that we should stop it and live peacefully together again but you... still...have... not... obeyed!”

that I can't control myself but you refuse me. I can't accept it. I can't. I can't... No. N- n- n- n- n- n-no. No! So, I... I...."

I lowered my head, shaking it lightly. I didn't want to know the truth anymore.

"I- I- I played that song for you... I- I want you to look at me." His words became stutter briefly before turned back to normal. "I know how much you love the piano. I've heard you play it every day. I- I- I just want to impress you. I want to show you that we're similar."

He looked up. His eyes moved around fast before screamed out as if his body and his mind didn't belong to him anymore.

He pulled at his hair until it became messy and lifted the hammer above his head. His bloodshot eyes stared at me. That wasn't the eyes of someone who was obsessed with love. It was the eyes of a murderer who was ready to end the life of his prey at any time.

"I don't want to do this... I really don't want to." When his whisper ended, the deadly weapon swung down hard.

My body froze for a second. My instinct told me to step back, but I instead pushed myself forward, pushing him down when he lost his balance.

The hammer's weight and my push caused him to sway toward the open space leading to downstairs. The collapse of the metal pile was loud. I

hurriedly stepped back into the room to find a place to hide. Before I left the door, I looked at Bill to say thank you for the last time.

A brown piano stood in the room. I looked around to find somewhere to hide. Suddenly, I saw a metal cutting machine on the floor. Its blade was covered with rust but its sharpness still there.

I looked at it frighteningly. My mind drew dreadful images to remind me that while fear would help me to survive, courage was also important.

I headed to the machine without hesitation, pressing a button to start it. The blade spun in the speed that human's eyes couldn't comprehend. Rustic scrap flew in the air. I watched the spinning blade, seeing my arms and legs being cut off my body. Blood splurged as if a fountain in tune with my heartbeat. I shook my head to get rid of the bloody imagination before extended my hand forward.

When the chain touched the blade, it sparked. I stepped back a little, took a deep breath, and pressed the chain on the blade harder. The speed and the force caused my arms to sway. I had to control the blade well. Otherwise, it would be the end of me.

I pushed the chain on the blade harder, trying to control my arms to be still. The spark burnt my skin, but I couldn't spare my concentration to anywhere else, not now.

The metal chain moved into the blade as if it was a melting butter. I tensed both arms with everything I got, pulling the string straight so that the blade would stay away from my wrist.

Three. Two. One...

The second the chain was cut, muddle thoughts ran through my mind. I let out a small shriek without realizing and threw myself out. I covered my face with both hands before I was aware that I was safe.

I looked around to make sure that Max didn't catch up with me just yet then continued to get rid of the chain on my ankles.

Suddenly, I heard the air shift beside my ears. Blood immediately rushed to gather at the lower part of my body. I glanced to a side. The wooden floor was crashed until the fiber was shown. The tip of the hammer sunk in the ground firmly, waiting for its holder to swing it around again.

"Ah, miss."

The wood crack sounded from behind. I turned around slowly. My muscles tensed. The image of crushed brain replayed in my mind. If Max hit slightly more on the right, that hammer must be stuck in my head now.

Max pulled the hammer of the floor before sneered at me. His face was soaked in blood. His left leg was twisted as if it didn't belong to a human. However, I knew that nothing could stop him. Only my death would do.

I screamed before rushed off the room. What awaited me was the space that opened to downstairs. In the middle was a small wood bar that linked both sides of the wooden floor together. The moment Max swung the hammer at me, I threw myself into thin air and grabbed that bar tightly.

When I was about to drop myself to the ground below, Max hit the bar severely. I was shocked to let go of the bar and slid through the floor shortly before I could get up and kept running.

I ran to the front door, trying to pull it with everything I got. However, the lock was too strong for me to break it. I couldn't break out of here by myself.

Max jumped downstairs with ease. He started to whistle some melody while knocking the ground rhythmically with the hammer. I hurriedly turn to the room on the side without knowing whether it was my escape or a dead end.

In the room stood a small closet and a double bed. The bed cover was full of spider web and dust. I racked my brain to use everything I saw to create a new escape route, but no matter how hard I thought, the possibility of my survival was zero.

The whistle moved near. I frantically looked around before decided to hide under the bed. Even though I was aware that I couldn't escape, a human

need something to depend on. It might be a useless attempt, but it made us feel safe.

Max walked slowly and stopped at the door, sweeping his eyes throughout the room to find his escaped prey. He looked slowly and checked the room carefully. I hold my breath to avoid attracting his attention and prayed for him to leave.

Max walked around the room for a while before stopped at the double bed. He stared at the wall before turned back.

The whistle became gradually faint along with the sound of the hammer.

I laid down on the floor a moment longer to be certain before slowly crawled off. I tried to move as light as possible. Max might be still around. I couldn't afford to relax.

I tiptoed off the room while looking around. The wall downstairs covered with so many white pieces put together to serve as a long board. On that board, pictures of someone died in multiple ways took most of the space. Every picture drew with simple, like a baby's drawing. That might be the ways Max thought up to kill me specifically.

I heard his footsteps from upstairs. This was the best chance to escape. I walked carefully to a large window on the right side. The exit was ten meters away from me, but I felt as if it was thousands of miles away.

My heart pumped blood throughout my body. Sweat slid down my back. I sped up my steps before dashed forward with everything I got. From the upstairs, Max definitely couldn't catch up with me. This was the last moment of the nightmare. I gathered every ounce of my energy I had left to grab on the freedom in front of me.

The moonlight shone on my hands as if the outer world was trying to communicate with me. The chill wind of the night traced my golden hair. I was sure that the nightmare was about to end at this moment. I really believed that.

Or at least that was what I wanted to believe...

Suddenly, the ceiling crashed down. Wood spec and dust floated around the room. Within the floating dust was the monster that had been hunting me.

His whistle was like he tried to whisper into my ears that he would never stop until I died.

The hammer cut through the air fast. It hit right on my shoulder. I screamed from pain before crawled outside. Max followed slowly, licking his lips in lust.

I scrambled away from that building, while Max kept follow me leisurely. He was a hunter who was playing with his prey. For him, my torment was the seasoning that made the prey tasted better.

Max lifted the hammer high in the air before he hit my leg. The sound of cracking bone pierced throughout my body.

“You really don’t know how to give up.” He said before flipped me over to lie on my back. “Play time is up. You’re not a good girl at all, and I need to teach you properly again. I’ll tame you. You must follow my orders. You must love me. Y- y- you... you! Must love... m- m- me.”

Max straddled on me. He threw the hammer away, using his sharp nails to tear my cloth into pieces. I tried to resist, but his strength was far beyond something I could deal with.

Was this really the last moment of my life? Would my life really end like this?

Yes. I couldn’t escape. No matter how much I tried, I couldn’t run away from him.

But I wouldn’t die like this... no way.

“Why...?” I asked in a small voice. “Why do you do this...?”

Max’s hands stopped from caressing my body. He looked at me with hesitation before replied.

“W- w- why? B- b- because I love y- y- you.”

“You think you do something like this...and you’ll get my love?”

“I- I- I...” Max stopped as if he was uncertain of his feeling. He started to scream before pulled at his hair roughly until they fell. I tried to

escape when he lessened his hold, but my body suffered too many injuries to go anywhere far enough.

Max's madness didn't last long. He took deep breaths while arranged his hair neatly before pressed me to the ground. I stared at him, trying to force myself to withstand the fear that was trying to possess my mind.

"You think you can escape if you distract me?" He smiled. "Impossible. No way. You're mine now. Mine. Only mine. Only mine. Only mine. Only mine. Only mine. Only mine. Only mine. Only mine. Only mine."

He zipped downed my jeans before moved his face to that part. My body shook violently with fear, but I had to stay strong. It was the only way to remain myself.

I was still me.

"You... are mine... mine alone." He said with the voice filled with lust while lifted himself up.

I gathered my strength to support myself. The broken bones in both legs pierced through the flesh. I gritted my teeth, using both arms to get up and rushed at him. While he was losing his balance, I delved into my pants and shouted.

"No... no way!" I screamed and took off the pocket knife. The sharp tip stabbed into the left part of Max's chest, cutting off his major vein.

Max looked at his chest in shock. He stared at me with sorrowful eyes before fell down.

As soon as Max dropped, the moonlight shone at the large clock embedded at the top of the building. Its arms pointed at the number twelve, indicating that the new day had begun.

Suddenly, the images from my memory rushed through my mind, but they were too broken for me to understand.

The only thing I knew was that the truth wasn't like what I had understood.

The last piece of the jigsaw I had been searching for wasn't in the place I left.

Max was the last piece of this puzzle.

While I was deep in thought, I noticed the blade that broke off its handle. The blade that took Max's life buried deep inside his body, leaving only specks of memory behind.

I looked at the dark sky. The moon might be half hidden behind the dark cloud, but its beauty never faded away.

It was like the memory of him. He might be unable to come back, but he would never go.

Ton... he protected me until the last second.

26

I looked out the window, staring at my own house from the different view.

“What’s wrong, Dream?” A voice of the boy was from beside me.

“Why do you sit here absentminded?”

“I fought with Dad.” My voice shook.

“You fought with Uncle?” Max raised his brow.

“Yes. Dad is unreasonable and selfish.” I rubbed my eyes before hugged my legs again.

“He isn’t like that.” Max smiled. “He means good and just a bit too strict with you.”

“That’s not true.” I shook my head. “He was angry and just vented his anger on me.”

“Come on.” Max sat down next to me. “No parent thinks like that.”

“There is. That’s my Dad.”

Max smiled. He looked at me before lifted his face up to the sky.

“What are you smiling for?”

“I’m thinking how to make you feel better.” Max turned to smile at me. “I know! Why don’t you come to sit in my house? It’s really hot outside. Let’s go in together.”

“Umm... Okay.” I whispered.

Max stood up, brushing the dust off his pants before ran into his house. I stood up slowly and followed him.

In the living room, a brown piano stood there. On the opposite of the sofa was a black television. Next to the television was a large aquarium, a starfish lied still at the bottom with the fish swam around the water.

The living room had many decorations. The armless sculpture, a fruit oil painting, and Max’s crayon drawings were hung on the wall. However, what interested me most was the brown piano on the right of the television.

“You play piano, too?” My eyes sparked.

“Umm, yes.” Max scratched his face.

“I play it, too,” I said. “But I’m not good at it.”

“Oh, well, is that so?” Max smiled. “Then, shall we play together?”

“We can? Really?”

“Of course.”

Max walked to the piano, brushing the dust off the keys before pressed down to invite me. I ran to him excitedly, jumping up the chair to ready myself.

He moved closer to me, pressed a few notes to test the sound.

“I’ll play the cords. You play the melody. If you want to play any song, just play it.”

I nodded, took a deep breath, and placed my fingers on the keys. Max knocked four times for the start before pressed a cord.

Even though I played that song with inharmoniously but it was the most beautiful song I'd ever heard. Max turned to smile at me before playing backup. I laughed innocently and played along with his notes.

That was the best time I ever had when playing the piano.

After we had finished the song, he left the chair and walked to a door.

"Where are you going? Why don't we play some more?" I asked.

"I want to play more songs with you." Max smiled. "But, Dream, my time is up."

I jumped off the chair, staring at Max in confusion.

"Why is your time up?" I tilted my head innocently.

Suddenly, the whole house crumbled away. The tiled floor was replaced with a vast meadow. Fragrant and petals floated in the cool wind.

"Max, look. There's a meadow. Let's play house."

"I want to." Max shook his head. "but the time is up."

Suddenly, flowers in the meadow withered. The floating petals turned dark before dropped to the ground.

"What you're seeing is me in the past." Max forced a smile. "But now... I'm no longer exist."

"What are you talking about? I don't understand."

Max walked to me. He held my hand with a sad smile.

“I’m glad that I can talk with you like this again.” His tear started to drop. “But this is the last time.”

I lifted my head to look at him. No tear on my face. There were only confusion and deep sorrow in my heart.

“I like you.” Max smiled. “From that time until now, this feeling has never changed.”

Our linked hands started to loosen up. Max waved goodbye when the dark around him began to crumble away.

“Goodbye, Dream.”

I waved him goodbye, watching him faded away.

“Goodbye... Max.”

27

I woke up in a white room. The white curtain shuffled in the wind.

The last thing I could remember was how Max tried miserably to stop me that night, trying to holding me back.

That knife stabbed right through his heart, but Max refused to stop. He followed me crawling in torment. His face paled from blood loss.

“Dream... Why... w- w- why don’t you accept me?” He screamed with a hoarse voice.

He extended his hand in front. His eyes reflected me in the distance.

The arm that tried to grab something out of reach began to lower. His breath caught and then faded away. His eyes fluttered closed as if a child in his mother’s embrace.

Max was gone... to the eternal sleep.

That image made me feel sorry for him. No matter how disgusting his actions were, those terrible moments couldn’t erase the image of a young man who cheered me up when I was down.

I looked out the window. A tear slowly ran down my face. I couldn’t explain the deep feeling I had. I didn’t know whether to hate or to forgive him...

It was so... bitter and painful...

Suddenly, I heard someone coughing from the bed next to mine. Dad pushed himself up, struggling to lean his back on the bedhead. Dad's head was wrapped in a bloody bandage.

"Dad!" I shouted while wiping away my tear.

"Don't worry about me." He smiled. "It's not that bad. How about you? Are you still hurt?"

I tried moving a bit. Suddenly, my face twisted with the pain that ran through my body.

"It seems you're still hurt."

"But I'm okay now." I smiled to avoid making him worried. "But who took me here? I can't remember anything."

Dad watched me a while before sighed.

"After I regain my conscious, I called the police. They sent me here before went to search for you. They told me they found you crawling on the road far away from town. They told me that at that time you looked... awful."

I recalled myself crawling through the road asking for help. The bone stabbed through my flesh. My body was full of wounds from the attempt of escaping. My strength fading along with the dying life force.

The long road was like a never-ending path. I was in the middle of a vast space void of people. I crawled forward without knowing what waiting

for me. I had no idea where my life would end. I just kept crawling further. My mind expected only the continuous breathing.

However, that strong mind couldn't stand the extreme hardship. My face started to pale from blood loss. The world became dark with the fading strength. I kept crawling still, but my body was finally at its limit.

The whole world disappeared in a blink.

But I survived.

We sat silently for a long time. Dad probably wanted me to rest after facing such terrible event, but my heart couldn't calm down. Some truth still hadn't been revealed, and I had to know.

"Dad." I called him softly as if I was whispering. "Actually, you know everything, right? About Max. About those photos."

Dad looked at me in surprise before letting out a sigh. He shook his head while spoke.

"I shouldn't keep it away from you." He said. "I thought it would be better if you knew nothing. Thinking that just reporting to the police should be enough, but I was wrong. My selfishness brought you into trouble."

"Don't blame yourself like that."

"No, it was my fault." He said firmly. "I refused to tell you about it because I want you to be free of any worry. It was a terrible event, but if you insist on listening, I'll tell you. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

I nodded.

“If you want to know, I’ll tell you then.” He sighed. “First thing, you once asked me whether our house had been broken in before. Yes, it did, and just like that you already know...”

Max was the beginning of my nightmare.

He let out a sigh again.

“That night, when the electrician came to our village, Max broke into our house.”

He leaned back. His eyes looked far away.

“I knew of this only after everything ended.” He said. “He might come to steal something when we weren’t aware. I’m not sure about that, but after the light had gone out, we came downstairs to check the switchboard before left to our rooms. When Max broke in, I didn’t hear him.”

Dad’s room was soundproofed. This might be the reason he didn’t hear when Max broke in.

“I probably went out to buy some candles when the light was still dead. If I didn’t remember it wrong... I guessed that was the time Max started it.”

I understood now why I didn’t suspect anything when I heard someone walked around the house. Max probably broke in when Dad went out.

“You came back and found me stabbed, right?” I asked.

Dad looked at me blankly.

“No, it wasn’t like that.” He paused a while. “Max didn’t stab you.”

“What...?”

“Actually, the one holding the knife was you.”

Suddenly, the puzzle was completely solved. The truth rushed toward me. Every image linked together as if white pieces formed up an image on their own.

The soaking blood didn’t belong to me, but it was the one’s I killed.

The cry and the scream were the sound of torment. The pure hands were robbed away and replaced with evil.

The man rushed in with the candle holder was my Dad. He came to rescue me.

The clock I saw was the time I killed Max. Both arms pointed at the twelve. The time Max had once died.

Images from my memory moved at the moment the blade cut Max’s heart into pieces was the last key.

Because I already killed him once.

“After I arrived home, I saw you sat on the floor crying. When I walked closer, I saw someone lied down in a blood pool. When I turned to look at you, I saw your hands covered in blood.” He lowered his head a little.

His face was full of stress. “When I tried to talk to you, I found that you couldn’t remember anything.”

An innocent couldn’t bear killing someone no matter how much hatred or anger one had. The blade that stuck into Max’s chest was the last straw that had separated between life and death. When it was cut, I dropped into the deadly abyss without turning back.

I was the murderer... who killed my best friend.

I killed Max.

“At that time, I thought he was dead, so I hurriedly moved away from that place. Actually, I didn’t move here because of my job, but I don’t want you to remember that place. That house... had only bad memories. If you stayed there, I’m afraid what you’d done might become your sin. I don’t want it to be like that. I want you to be happy. I want you to forget everything and start over.”

His eyes began to get red. His jaw shook and was tense. He tried to withhold the tear that was about to drop.

“At that time, I thought Max was dead. I thought you’re safe, but he followed you here. I tried to be careful, but at last, I was the one who failed...”

I connected the story Dad told me and the event from the images. Max didn’t disappear because he had some problem with his family. He left

the village to let his guilt faded away. He planned to act like a disappeared child to avoid any conflict. Max always tensed up when he met my Dad because he was worried that the truth would be revealed.

Both he and I were in the stage that we couldn't let the world know the truth. He was the person who tried to kill me but got killed instead, and I was the prey who killed her hunter.

"It means... he'd always be so nice to me because... they're all the act?"

"I can't tell you that." He shook his head. "We can't know how someone else thinks."

"I... understand..."

I lowered my head. My eyes were wet from the sadness that pressed upon me. I didn't want it to end like this. I lost everything this time.

I lost everyone I loved. I had nobody left.

While I was deep in the dark thoughts, Dad called me. His eyes were damp. We stared at each other, exchanging our pain.

Dad tried to get up. He walked over to hug me. The warmth spread inside my heart.

"Don't be scared, Dream. We're safe now..." His tear dropped on my shoulder. "I promise... I won't let you face something like this again."

Surprised, I stared at him before hugged him back. My tear ran down with a smile of the new beginning.

I hadn't lost everything... I still had someone who loved me by my side.

It was okay... No matter how terrible the things I'd faced, but now...

I was safe.

28

I wrote the diary after had neglected it for a long time.

Dad often said that I used to be very smart but now that talent disappeared. I had to suffice my short-life memory with this diary.

After the police found Max's body, Dad and I had to answer so many questions. I chose to tell the truth but kept what happened in the past and what Bill'd done with myself.

His death wouldn't be worthless.

I told the police that Bill was killed because he tried to help me. The knife in Max's chest was the knife I carried with myself for protection. The police investigated the case a bit more before concluded that I'd genially tried to defend myself.

This case was silently closed.

But everything was like Dad said. I could no longer live in this house.

Dad looked at the house we lived for three years. He bid it farewell before drove away. I looked in the back mirror, seeing the house became smaller and faded away like fading memory.

Even though our new home was far away from people, I was happy with what I had. I wasn't ready to face anyone who knew about my past. The terrible things might not happen again, but my heart was far from whole as it

used to be. The only thing I could do was to wait, waiting for the wound from the past completely healed.

However, I would never forget about everything that had happened no matter what it was.

It had been two years since but I could remember everything like it was just yesterday. The only difference was that the pain was so much duller now.

I often visited Bill's and Ton's graves. The ashes were kept alongside each other as if they had finally made up.

I looked at their photos when they were alive with deep emotion. For Ton, he was the one who fulfilled my life. For Bill, even though he had hurt me a lot, even though his good deeds couldn't erase his sins, I chose to look only at his bright side.

I placed the photo of me in the academic gown in front of their urns, praying for them to be in the place they wanted to be. I could repay them only this much.

For Max... I really wanted to look at the good things he'd done for me. I really couldn't tell if they were just his acts, but I wanted to believe that what he had done for me were genial. I wanted to keep him as a good memory, not a rotten wound.

Because everything ended now... There was no reason for me to be tormented like that again.

Because I was me...

Sign. Dream.

After I had finished writing, Dad opened the door and came in with some drink and snack. He placed the brown tray on the low table, poured the tea pleasantly and headed to me with a curious look.

“What are you doing?” He asked. “Writing the diary? Why Ton’s name was more highlighted than the others’?”

“N- n- nothing, Dad.” My face was bright red.

Dad laughed. He grabbed my head and pressed it on his chest. His other hand rubbed my hair that was turning black.

“Come here.” He said while dragging me to sit beside him. “No matter how long the time passed, you’re still my little girl. Let me play with your hair a bit more.”

I struggled from embarrassment before turned to hug him. He smiled while rubbed my head gently.

“I’m glad.” He said. “I’d thought you might be depressed after something like that happened, but my girl keeps smiling and laughing. I’m really glad.”

I was silent, letting his words to sink into my heart.

He looked at me with adoration before whispered something. I couldn't hear what he said, but it didn't matter. Because I had him, I could be here now.

I pressed my face on his chest. Both arms wrapped around him tightly as if it was a promise that I wouldn't make him sad again. He smiled and was humming a song he used to sing for me when I was young.

I didn't have to be painful with my life again. I received the peaceful life I'd always wanted. Everything terrible made me stronger. Every good memory taught me to be gentle. Everything made me here and now.

I would never forget what happened or the people that had safe my life.

I would never forget...

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“Summarize that case for me.” The big man ordered in a low voice.

The doctor in a sleek white gown flipped through the document before shook his head.

“Got nothing?” The man raised his brow. The doctor sighed.

“Not exactly nothing but he believes the same.”

“What did he say?”

“When I wanted to test his concentration, he asked me, ‘Are we competing in counting numbers backward? I won’t lose.’ I smiled at him and replied, ‘I can never win you.’ He didn’t seem to notice anything.”

The large man nodded sympathetically.

“Well, you must be careful. He used to be a genius, but it’s exactly because of that he is dangerous.”

The doctor nodded before reading the document thoughtfully. He definitely wouldn’t give up on this patient.

Suddenly, the alarm went off then every light went dark.

I dream of her often... she was the only person who truly understood me.

Her hair was a golden glow when touched by the sunlight. She always smiled and laughed with me. We were happy together in the beautiful days and sad together on the bad days.

She was the most important person in my life.

We understood each other deeply because she and I had to bear the same torment. Every time her father hurt her she would run to me and dispensed her feelings with me. When I was hit, I would do the same thing.

Our hearts connected.

However, the dreadful events went on. The root of the evil still remained. When she grew up, her body developed into the puberty. It was the time that her father realized of her worth more than before, and the new nightmare began.

She always came to see me covering in bruises. Her lips broke and bled from the hateful treatment. Her legs usually had bloody evident from that lustful beast. I felt pain every time I saw her in such state. Finally, I decided that I had to do something.

She never even once asked me to help. She always came to me in tears before left with a smile, but I knew. I knew that her heart was full of bitterness.

I decided to depend on the law. I told her story to the police. However, when the police came, her father welcomed them with a smile and treated them really good. After the police had done their job, they called me and gave me a warning, telling me that reporting a false case was wrong. If I did it again, I would be punished.

After that day, her father tortured her even harsher. She ran away to see me less often. Sometimes, her father would come to threaten me. He tried to do everything to keep her away from me, but I wouldn't give up. No way.

If the police wanted an evident, I would find an evident for them. I used a camera to record every anomalous action of that beast. Every disgusting action. Every lustful breath. I recorded everything. I would shame him until he could no longer turn back to the society. He must be in despair from the condemnation and the disgusted stares. This world would never have a place for him anymore.

After I'd done gathering the evident and cut the video to avoid ruining her name, I sent everything to the police. I might be charged for obscenity, but that wasn't important. If she was saved from that man, it would make me happy.

Everything went according to my plan. That man was arrested and lost on the court. Not long after he was sent to jail, I heard good news.

He committed suicide in the cell, in the place that would lock away his evil soul forever.

However, there was always a shadow within the light.

After the media had played with her stories, her smile faded away. She tried to avoid people because she felt ashamed. She might be the victim, but she also was the main character of those detestable scenes. Of course, the media would choose to make the story even more disgusting to increase their profit.

The added problems made her decided to end her life.

Even now, I still see her screamed again and over again. Her death circles around my mind without an end.

I am the one who let go of her.

I am the one who caused her death.

Her death was my sin. After that, I always blame myself. Because of me, she was ashamed. Because of me, she died.

However, within the sorrow was a sprout of goodness. Her death made me decided to help the others. I decided to be a psychiatrist to help people who had problems like hers. I vowed in front of her ash that I wouldn't let anyone be painful like her again. I had worked hard until I was on the top

of my career. My theory was published and became the primary reference in many classes. I'd helped so many people from the hands of the demons that the laws couldn't reach. My life became the life that I had desired. I was happy with what I was doing.

I felt I was free. I had paid for the sin I'd done, or at least I thought I did...

However, the good and the bad aren't numbers. They couldn't be balanced out. No matter how hard I tried to make up for my mistake, I always felt that the success I had was far from what it should be.

I sank deep in this endless circle. Sometimes, I tried to help people until I got involved in their personal matters. Many women had similar problems to her. So, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I made the persons who harm them pay their prices. This time I wouldn't let anyone be ashamed again.

However, looking from a different point, I realized that I'd walked the same path I made a mistake in the past. It was worse even.

I started to use a camera to watch those beasts' movement. However, every time, I would be enhanced with the life of those women who fell prays as if I was looking at some beautiful plays. Worry turned into adoration. Adoration turned into possessiveness. Those women were no longer someone

I wanted to help, but they were preys that I snatched away from the losing hunters.

I am a child from an abusive family. When I look back at myself, I realize that I had absorbed the darkness into my heart.

I have become a monster I used to despair.

Sometimes, even though we understand what we are, we're too weak to do anything about it.

I sought my preys, played with them a little before got rid of them. I had done it often enough that I got myself arrested and was sent for the therapy.

Yes, that story isn't my patient's story. It is my story.

However, getting into the therapy was my plan, I'd fooled everyone I met so that I could avoid being in jail. After that, the only thing I had to do was waiting for the right time.

The doctor who took charge of me proposed using the interview technique to check for the root of my personality, and if they could fix up the problematic thinking system. They pretended to treat me like I was a psychiatrist as usual. I made them believe that I hadn't recovered from the illness. Then, when they were numb with the way I was.

It was the time I would get out of there.

After I had exchanged information with my personal doctor, I sneaked off to disturb the alarm system to cause some confusion. I used a patient wandering around there as bait. I created the image to make him seem to be a dangerous person so that everyone would concentrate on him. As everyone knows, the mind of a patient isn't that stable. When the staff tried to detain him, his fragile mind was shattered. He went wild like I expected him to be. During the chaotic time, I escaped from that place. When everything went back to normal, I'd already gone.

But that wouldn't be enough for them to stop chasing after me, I had to completely disappear.

I tore off my clothes, cut my hand, dropped some blood on the clothes, and left it on the railing as if I fell dead. Then, I ran away as far as I could.

They looked at what I left behind in confusion. They couldn't locate me. I had hidden away for five years so that my name would be on the list of the disappeared persons.

Finally, I was free.

I faked my identities; the name, surname, and the educational background to start my new life. I completely erased my old self before started what I had been doing again.

I had to find a new prey to suffice the hunger in my heart.

After wandering for a long time, I finally found my new prey, but this girl was different from the girls I had conquered.

The golden hair when touched by the sunlight. The large eyes. The white skin and the bright smile. The image of this girl was just like her... as if she was still around. As if she had never left me.

But I wouldn't allow any mistake like before. This girl was the most precious treasure I'd ever found. I had to have her. No matter what I lost, I must have her.

It might be my luck because the time I met her was the same time she had problems with her father. A teenager is an age with a fragile heart. The more problems they had, the easier it was for my plan.

I bought a house in that neighborhood and went to introduce myself to her family. She welcomed me with a friendly smile. As expected, her father didn't want to see me, and that was the way I wanted it.

I tried to gather information from talking with her, building trust so that she would choose me as her savior when she had any problems. I collected general information and personal information from her and her father. Sometimes, I would secretly take photos from her father's diary to use as backup information to create my credibility. If I couldn't find some needed information, I would use some other means to make my story trustworthy.

Choosing a pray was the most important factor. Her father was a solitude man and didn't have a sibling or relative that would come to mess up with my plan. His strictness affected her lifestyle as well. If my plan were successful, nobody would suspect my background again.

I tried to interact with the others in the neighborhood as less as possible to avoid having them remember my face clearly.

In my plan, I was someone who shouldn't exist in this world.

After I had all information I needed, the last thing I had to do was to wait.

I cut the electric lines of some houses, including mine, and sent the photos from a distance for the electricians to come fix it. I also reported about the pressing that the problem occurred during the night. Not long after that, they sent people in the area to fix the problem, and that was the beginning of my plan.

Before that, I stole some emergency appliance and surveyed the area to increase the success rate of the plan. I wrapped a cloth around my hand before broke a window to get into her house. Her father's room installed with sound-proofed material to lessen the sound from outside. If the sound of something broken was heard, she might be too familiar with her father's clumsiness. It wasn't that strange if she didn't give it a thought. Then, I broke

into her room with two knives and another gun. One knife was for me. The other one was for her.

I knocked the door of her room before charged inside, trying to scare her before intentionally dropped a knife there. After pretending to be unable to fight her, I ran away with her mobile phone. I was rather certain that she would be too scared to drive me out to the street. Even if she did that, I already had a second plan.

To be sure, I knocked the door of her room to drive her paranoid to the top, making the sound of footstep around the house before waited in a dark corner.

As expected, she was too scared to do anything. Her father was the first person that stepped out of his room. I swiftly hit him before switched our clothes and used some black clothes to cover his mouth and eyes, and tied up his legs and hands. Then, I used another knife to threaten him, warn ing him not to uselessly struggle. I told him that if he struggled, the knife I was holding would be pierced through his body. The dark makes us unaware of what is happening around us. The unknown makes us scared. He stayed still submissively. The last thing I had to do was to lure her off the room.

I made her scared and used her habit to my benefits. She always cared about the others. No matter how much she hated someone, she would always

worry about them if they were to need help. I knew of this from disguising myself and pried the information of her bothering ex-boyfriend.

After she had left the room, the first thing she saw under the moonlight was an intruder who twisting around suspiciously.

And that was the time the piled up paranoid in her mind did its job.

When her father heard the approaching footsteps, with fright, he charged at her.

When the culprit charged at her, her paranoid forced her to react to survive.

The blade stabbed right in the middle of his heart. Thick blood dirtied the place. She stood still, looking at the death in the front with a broken heart.

She..., a girl who always lived a normal happy life, had become a murderer. She killed her own father in a blink.

When I heard her scream, I ran in hurriedly with a candle holder in my hand. I wanted to create an unclear image to increase the confusion in her mind. She stared at her father's pale face before turned to look at me. I hugged her swiftly before whispered in her ear.

"Do you want to forget it?" I asked.

She looked at me in blank before slowly nodded. The condition was now completed.

I took her to her father's room to create the desired atmosphere.

This was the most important step.

However, my plan was ruined.

The door burst opened abruptly. The unexpected factor had appeared.

Max, the boy living next door, was looking at me in shock. He knew everything immediately after he saw me.

He tried to leave to go for help, but I wouldn't let him do that. I caught him fast before tied him up, using a cloth to cover his mouth to prevent him from making a sound. Then, I took him in the ritual that was about to begin.

After I had laid her on the bed, I took off a pocket watch and swung it to bring her under my control.

This was the time that her mind was at its weakest so I could change her thought or her memory as I wished. However, I wouldn't be able to completely change her memory if she didn't want it.

But now it was her wish to change it.

The desperate sound from the boy who watching his beloved changed made the whole ritual more satisfying. I gradually erased the images of her real father from her memory. I swung the clock back and forth until she was completely hypnotized before blew out the candle.

Both arms of the clock pointed at twelve.

She reborn in the second that the new day started.

After she had fallen asleep, I moved the boy to a deserted building before came back to the girl in the morning.

The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes was me in her father's clothes.

“Who are you?” She asked me with a blank face.

I moved my face closer and gave her the warmest smile this world ever had.

“It's me, Dad, Dream.”

Her brain couldn't bear the pain from what happened, so it escaped by creating the twisted memory. My job was to create a crack for the brain to put a reasonable memory. Her father's face was replaced with mine. She didn't suspect anything because, when she still remembered everything, my image to her was a brother who came with warmth and happiness. She didn't question what I told her in any way.

I got rid of her father's body by crunching his bone into powder and chopping his flesh into a mash before threw them away. I erased every evidence except the blood stain on the wall. I couldn't do anything about it, so I let it be like that.

I moved away from that place as soon as possible. From the information I gathered about the photos she had searched for, she saw the image of herself being stabbed in her memory when looking at the picture of

that house from a distance. It was because she saw it as the whole picture of her terrible memories. The brain had fed false information so that she wouldn't feel guilty. She believed she was the victim.

While I drove away, she looked at the old house longingly. We ran away from that area, leaving the house behind until it couldn't be seen.

For that boy, I didn't want to kill him. Killing will cause too many troubles shall it to happen. So, I chose to torture him in with various methods, forcing him to forget before forced a fake memory into his brain.

At first, he tried to plead for his life and resisted with everything he had. Every time he did that I would use the more severe method to torture him. What I wanted to plant into his mind was fear. When he was scared, he would do everything I said.

After a period of extreme torment, I saw some interesting reaction. He started to dim down and followed my orders submissively. His character severely changed. Fear traced in his every movement. I gradually decreased the severity of my punishment. At the same time, I inputted the information I wanted him to believe to prevent the police to track me down.

The false information, if insisted long enough and repeated often enough, a new believing would be born.

Max was my masterpiece.

He became a doll that was ready to do anything according to my will.

After I had released him, I let out a rumor that he ran away from home because he had some problems with his family. The bruised body and the suffering mind of the boy made his mother a victim of the society without realizing.

I'd hired a homeless to live in the house I used to stay and ordered him to make it as clear as possible that he was my relative. He'd done his job well. He made everybody in the neighborhood believe that I'd died because of a terminal illness. I had him recreate the image of my face in people's mind so that they wouldn't be able to mess with my plan later. This was the reason I avoided meeting people since the beginning. However, I was unable to change everyone's thought, but it was the nature of rumor that some information might be wrong.

About the blood stain, I covered it with the smoke before told my employee to start a rumor that the house was haunted, using the belief of Thai people to create fear. After that, the house was unable to be sold and became the place to trade drugs for the girl's ex-boyfriend.

After he had completed his job, I got rid of that man. He was the only person who could confirm my identity.

The girl and I moved into a new home. I tried to be a good father, but I also chose to keep some bad habits of her father to create the familiarity.

Moreover, human always felt at ease if they met someone who wasn't overly perfect. I chose to act as normal as possible.

I tried to listen and repay the things she'd never received from her old father to make her trust me. The most important thing was listening to your prey. I tried to look out at the information and listened to her to plan for the unexpected.

I used information from the diary that her father left behind to live a life he had. You might think I had a miserable life but, for me, owning her was what made me triumphal.

I always took care of the photos that might cause problems, pretending to burn them to the deceased wife. I knew that when I was destroying the evidence, she secretly watched me. I had to put up a play to deceive her.

For the lost memory, I usually repeated it to her continuously. I placed the photos where she could see them clearly to control the way of her memory. I refused her old memories and replaced them with the memories I wanted her to have. This made her uncertain of the memory she had. After I'd done that, she believed she had a problem with her memory and started to write a diary to cope with it, and that became another valuable source of information for me.

Everything went as planned, she became the young woman I wanted her to be, the white pieces I'd put together before added colors however I like.

If I had to say, everything wouldn't be this successful if she hadn't wanted it.

I didn't lie to her. She had been lying to herself.

She was my most perfect theory. She was the proof that if you lied to yourself with enough control and drive, a new character would be formed.

She became my ideal girl, a reflection of the woman I loved when I was young.

I wanted everything to be like this... forever...

However, the unexpected did happen.

My theory was destroyed because her memory hadn't been completely replaced. She reacted to those photos. The memory might be wrong, but it could lead her to the truth.

I had to make a new plan with the variable I had in my hands.

Max, Bill, and Ton. They were the variable I chose.

Max was a young man who was tortured until his mind was broken. As I said, his heart was exceedingly fragile. So, I pushed and controlled him to work in my place.

For me, Bill was just another pawn that would make my replacement worked better. He was a good distraction that would make my daughter confuse.

Ton... this kid was interesting. I admire his intelligence. He made me confused a few times, but I think that what made everything, even more fun.

But my plan this time was risky. I had to watch it carefully. After she had chosen to pursue the truth with the help of that boy, I used words that would arouse Max, forcing him to do what I wanted.

The reason I could use him because I could see the uneasiness in his eyes when my daughter took him home with her. Even though he couldn't remember me, he still subconsciously scared of me, and I used his fear to control him.

I was obvious that he had fought between his old character and the character that was forced in by me. Being tortured was similar to a child being violated by his father. He absorbed the violence he received from me. His actions were the reflection of my actions. The pictures he drew were from his subconscious screaming from the suffering he received from me at that time.

He was truly my replacement.

Using Max might have some risk but I already had a second plan in case things didn't go as I expected.

After he knew about her determination to seek for the truth. He believed was the culprit she was looking for. Of course, that was through the information repetition from me. His memory was mixed up with what he saw that night. This part was rather risky, but I woke it up and was able to make him believed it finally.

From my daughter's note, he started threatened her by sending mysterious messages. He was the one who put those Milk Jigsaw pieces on my house's wall to present the offer as I wanted. I changed it a little after he ran away to make it more specific before did the same to the other houses to avoid the police to pay particular attention to our family. What I really wanted was some witnesses. I needed people to know about this disturbance as many as possible. I wanted to make use of it in the future.

I went back to that house to cover the blood stain with the smoke again. This time was to make her felt suspicious. I used her and Ton's careful attention to my benefit. I was sure that my daughter would go to seek for the culprit when she knew that he was still around and recently tried to erase the evident. Max's threatening and breaking in the house was the encouragement for her. Everything was necessary for my plan.

Her determination was what had caused her pain.

While she was seeking the truth, I'd done a small experiment. I tried to 'tame' her. It was to make her realized that I was the person she should

seek for. Knowing the truth meant suffering. When she knew who I was, she would immediately know who killed her father. Every time I ‘tame’ her, she would choose to forget the truth and turned to look at me with warm eyes again. She did that so she could hide the worse truth. She decided to stay with the lie to avoid the pain.

‘Taming’ her had a little side effect. She often had nightmares or saw strange illusions. Those illusions were the truth that was twisted and added more flavor by her own worried.

Lying to herself was her only way to survive as a human. So, she took good care of this lie.

What surprised me was Ton. He was too close to the truth for me to let him go. I had to do something.

But if you think that I killed him, you’re wrong. He was the one who ended his life.

While he was about to give the information to my daughter, I disturbed his signal and contacted him. I called him anonymously and made him an offer. The offer that he couldn’t afford to refuse.

I offered for him to die with the information he had in exchange for his sister’s safety. I made him knew that who had been waiting for his sister. He asked me whether he could trust me. I could break my words anytime.

I used his cleverness to answer his question. He was well aware that killing someone now would get me into trouble. The police might pay more attention to that bloody jigsaws case, and then I had to face complications. He also knew that I didn't want to hurt Dream. Dream was more important for me to destroy this plan. He knew that I had to do what I promised. So, he accepted my offer.

For me, killing without dirty my hands was a lot more satisfying.

What he didn't know was that living might be worse than dead.

I watched my daughter closely, especially when Max took his actions. When Max was about to 'tame' my girl, I offered her my help when only when necessary. I placed a wrench for protecting herself and went home. I used a cloth to dry my umbrella to cover where I was at that time.

Everything Max did was to create fear. Human, other than having faith in the good, also believed in his own fear.

When my daughter knew that Max was the culprit, she absolutely believed it.

I tried to avoid the police's suspicions by hurting myself, making they believed that I was a victim, and also making my daughter believed that Max was the real culprit.

When everything ended, my plan was completed.

The police recorded our case. It was the evidence that it had actually happened. The media reported about this case a bit. It was enough for me. This fake story I created had become a page in history.

I have created a permanent fake memory for her. No one is able to confirm it for her anymore, and she will never suspect of who I was.

Between the clear truth in front of you and the faded memory, which will you choose to believe?

After my plan had completed, I insist on continued to ‘tame’ her. Her body was in my control. I used it repeatedly until it was ruin.

The best thing is she has been willing.

Her life from now on will be in torment. I can use her to quench my thirst. Nobody can tell her the truth. Nobody can help her, including herself.

Her life will sink into this loop forever.

Our life is something from our own decisions. It what turns the good into the bad or turns the bad into something beautiful. That night, if the boy decided to ignore what he saw, letting the girl faced a terrible fate alone, his life might not end up so miserably. If she chose to face the truth, she might have a different future. Her life might be ended in my hands immediately, or she might be able to walk on a brighter path.

However, she didn’t...

Because every choice is painful, so she chooses the less painful way.

Without knowing that it would be the forever nightmare to her.

My hand caressed her golden hair with a smile on my face. She pressed her face on my chest with a happy smile. She believes she is safe.

Yes, she is safe...

Nobody will take her away from me now.

I lower my head a bit, whispering my mind to her.

“You’re mine alone...”