

## **An Unbelievable Story**

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*There is no witness so terrible, no accuser so powerful as conscience  
which dwells within us.  
Sophocles*

On the first day of autumn, Poppy delivered a baby boy and a few days later, she died.

The baby was breach and Poppy required surgery. After the difficult delivery, when she and Francis first held their healthy son, those few minutes were the most ecstatic. They named their son Duncan.

The doctor assured them that Poppy would recover with plenty of rest and sent them home. Francis dove into dad-duty, cheerful and hopeful. Despite Poppy's obvious blood loss and exhaustion, she nursed Duncan but, as the baby thrived, Poppy withered.

Heartbroken and mad with grief, Francis viewed his son as a parasite. All his wife's vitality and energy absorbed by the tiny baby's body. Her life given in exchange for Duncan's. After Poppy's death, he relegated Duncan's care to Nana, his elderly housekeeper and her husband Rob.

Never initially bonding with his son, Francis concluded he couldn't raise him. Within a month, he contacted an attorney and filed the appropriate adoption paperwork. When the social worker came to collect the child, Francis hid in his room forcing Nana to handle the transfer. Francis discarded Duncan, like one would dispose of a moth-ridden, old coat.

Francis spent hours in his study, dwelling on why he deserved such misery from the universe. Staring out the window, he imagined each desiccated leaf as a piece of himself, shuddering and dying in the wind. No more cherished moments with Poppy, his favorite when she smiled and blushed as he kissed her freckled nose. Every room in his childhood home they'd renovated together lost all color and felt empty.

Winter came, stealing the evening light. A writer of novels, he stopped writing when Poppy died. Francis wished for death and contemplated taking his own life. However, he didn't own a gun, he assumed poisoning painful, and hanging potentially unpredictable. His favorite uncle, Wallace Baxter, his mother's brother, committed suicide, and he remembered his parent's torment for not seeing the signs.

Extreme sadness turned to bursts of anger. Francis lived in constant misery. The hard wood of his chair seemed intent on digging into his back and the needle-pointed cushion lumpy in places under his thighs. One day, in a fit of rage, he swept everything off his desk. He promptly deleted his emails and his social media presence. All engagements canceled, messages on his cellphone unread, voicemails unheard.

Nothing warmed his icy heart, not even the crackling fire in the hearth. He stared into the flames, mesmerized by the sinewy ribbons that were the color of Poppy's hair, shimmering gold and red. A spark popped and singed the wool rug under his feet. He fantasized about an accidental death by fire, imagining the fibers smoldering, the nearby stacks of books alighting, blazing heat combusting the room.

Many mornings Francis awakened his heart racing, his body soaked with sweat, and his pillow wet from his tears. A recurrent dream plagued his sleep. He slogged through a deep field, his shadow absent. Poppy was always there. Sometimes she silently walked beside him, but mostly she teased.

"Why are you here?" He tried to grab her hand, but she was always out of reach.

"Don't you miss me?" She arched her eyebrow like she had in life, then laughed.

"You left me."

"I died."

"I'm sad." Francis yelled for her.

"Be happy, happy," her voice echoed in the space.

"Don't you see? I can't be happy without you."

"Where is Duncan?" She stumbled as she ran around him in circles. "Duncan, Duncan," she called fading into the mist.

"Please, I need you."

"Stop being so selfish." Poppy suddenly appeared whirling about, exposing her pale legs in her short gray skirt. "You know I can't come back."

"Don't you miss me?" Francis yelled, straining the muscles in his throat raw.

"Selfish, selfish." She mocked.

“I want to die, too.”

“Stop.” Poppy covered his mouth then thumped him on the chest. “Live, Frankie. Live.”

She disappeared.

### **A Friend Appears**

An only child, Francis’s parents died years ago, and he had no nearby family. His main contact was his agent, Maxwell Livingood. For the past twenty years, Max promoted Francis’s career. When no one, even Francis himself, believed he could write full time, Max encouraged him. Max insisted on a face-to-face meeting and though it infuriated Francis, Max prevailed.

On Thursday, he met Max at their club. Foregoing a shower, he changed into a button-down shirt and khakis, neither of which were pressed. As soon as Francis arrived, he knew it was a mistake. A year ago, he would have made an entrance, enjoying the opportunity to be seen. This evening, the piano sounded melancholic, the surrounding conversations cacophonous and jarring. Francis backed away from the room only to have his arm caught in Max’s grip as he came up behind him.

Max directed Francis to seats in the far corner with shadowed lighting from a small table lamp. In the chair, he slouched and leaned his head against one of the wings. His forearms rested on the worn velvet armrests, his legs splayed apart. As soon as the server brought his drink, Francis downed it and called for another.

“My goodness. Sit up.” Max admonished him like a chiding father. “You look like you aren’t trying. Where’s your jacket?”

“You’re lucky I’m here.” Francis answered, his voice low and foreign.

Clearing his throat, Max said, “I’ll keep it brief. Tell me about your progress.”

“Ongoing.”

“Finish a draft?” Max waggled his glass to get the server’s attention.

Francis shook his head.

“Like I said on the phone, I’m very sorry for your loss, but readers want your books.”

Francis waved his hand dismissively.

Another round appeared. The redolence of the smoked orange peel swirling in the dark amber liquid reminded Francis of the first time he met Poppy. They'd met in Seville, Spain, where orange trees lined the sidewalks, littering the walkways with ripe fruit bursting with sticky pulp. His mind wandered, remembering himself, a teenager dragged abroad with his mother, and she with hers. All booked in the same hotel, but neither family aware of one another prior to their chance meeting.

The morning he met Poppy, he and his mother breakfasted in the main dining room. Francis wore his dark navy sport coat that covered a graphic T-shirt he'd slept in. He hid his cellphone beneath the white tablecloth's edge engrossed by the silent video game while his parents sampled the many hams Spain had to offer.

"Put that away." His mother slapped his arm and accidentally knocked his phone to the marble floor. "Go eat." She pointed to the extensive buffet.

Being defiant, he ignored her and remained seated. Reaching for his phone, his fingertips just touched the edge of it.

"Here." A teenage girl scooped his phone from the floor and held it out for him.

Francis lost his balance and fell as the chair collapsed and shot out behind him. The dining room went silent. His mother's exasperated, "Oh my God, please get up," a distant second to the musical laughter from the girl standing above him. He was acutely aware of the extreme heat of his cheeks caused by his embarrassment.

She extended her hand. "Are you hurt? Let me help."

"I'm good." He righted the chair as he stood.

"Yes, you are, and you're so...tall." Her face tipped upwards into his.

She smiled, the blueness of her eyes swallowed him, and he felt a tug of desire low in his gut.

His manners weren't forgotten; they both introduced themselves. Their mothers quickly acquainted and to their surprise, scheduled a get-together over dessert later that evening. That night, Poppy and Francis's first kiss was under a canopy of stars near a flowering orange tree. To this day, the heady scent of citrus caused Francis's heart to beat faster. Once home in the United States, they kept in touch and after separate college educations, they dated, which led to a marriage promising a blissful life that was supposed to last forever.

Max's continued admonishments brought Francis back to the present.

“As your agent, I need your books,” Max said. “As your friend, my advice is that you channel your pain into your work. I bet if she were here, Poppy would agree.”

*The nerve.* The flare of rage began low in Francis’s spine and shot to his head. He slammed his hand on the table and jumped to his feet. With a snarl, he said, “You have no idea what I’m going through, and I certainly don’t consider you a friend.”

“Well, I...” Max sputtered.

Interrupting the exchange, a thunderous voice called, “There he is.”

Through the archway leading into the club, everyone’s attention focused on a large man, his dark coffee brown skin as rich as his deep baritone. He handed his pale gray overcoat to the front door attendant, simultaneously pointed at Francis, and winked like they shared a secret. Again, his voice boomed, “Don’t go anywhere, Francis Barrett.”

As the giant man methodically entered the room, he walked with an uneven gait aided with a cane that attached to the forearm. A *Canadian crutch*, the technical name popped into Francis’s head. The man placed a steadying hand on the door frame, the railing, the backs of chairs. His face was unlined, the skin very dark in contrast with his eyes. Something about his size and the noticeable disability was familiar, yet Francis couldn’t place him.

Max asked, “Do you know him?”

“I’m not sure.” Curiosity replaced his anger, and Francis felt oddly comforted by the large man’s presence.

The man tipped his head to the bartender as he tapped a cautious path. When he reached them, a server appeared.

“Bring me a bottle of champagne and three glasses.” The man smiled and pointed his finger at Francis. “Cool it, son. Sit down and behave.” Within a minute, each man had a glass of golden liquid bubbles, and the bottle was thrust in an ice bucket beside them.

“A toast to friendship,” he held his glass aloft, “for if you die with one friend, you’ve lived a full life.”

“Thank you, but I don’t recall having met?” Max said.

“You’re correct, but Francis has known me for a long time,” the man said.

“Well at least tell us your name.”

“Entertain me,” the man pointed at the filled glasses. “Let’s be grateful for the moment.”

Francis and Max obeyed. They raised their glasses and drank.

“Ah, champagne. A bubbling celebration for the soul in love,” the man said.

Francis’s eyes widened as he choked and coughed. He recognized that quote. He’d written it for a character.

“Remember now?” The man’s bright white smile dazzled.

“Dr. Jerome Lucas?” Francis wheezed as he regained composure. “You’re not real.”

“As I live and breathe.” Dr. Lucas chuckled, a deep rumbling, “I came to help a friend.”

“I’m sorry. I’m at a loss.” Max scratched his head.

“Dr. Lucas is a noted psychiatrist,” said Francis.

“You didn’t tell me you’d seen one. I suppose, it’s warranted.” Max returned to his normal convivial tone. “I’m Maxwell Livingood. I’m Francis’s…”

“…pimp.” Max’s shocked expression caused Dr. Lucas to chuckle. “A bad joke. I apologize. Yes, I know who you are, Maxwell Livingood, Publishing Agent.”

*Must be stress.* Francis couldn’t believe his eyes. *I’m losing my mind.* Dr. Lucas was the protagonist in the first book he had published. Jerome Lucas, MD was a single man who lived in a crime infested city. He mostly treated troubled kids and their families. Max had not been Francis’s agent when the book came out, which was why he didn’t recall this particular character.

Before Francis and Poppy were married, Poppy read the draft and suggested having a young drug addled patient commit armed robbery at a convenience store near the good doctor’s office. Buying lottery tickets at the time, Dr. Lucas was shot, hence the disability.

“Get your phone out, Max.” Dr. Lucas gestured for Francis to come closer. “Take a photo of me and my friend here. I bet he’d like to preserve this moment.”

Seconds later, Max droned on remarking what terrific cameras cellphones have nowadays. Dr. Lucas poured the rest of the champagne in their glasses.

“After this, you should head home. You need rest. You’ve got a long weekend in store.”

“I don’t understand?” Francis said.

“Visitors.” Dr. Lucas held up three fingers, “There will be three. They’ll take you on an adventure or two. Try to think about others and not yourself. Live a little.” He produced a worn leather wallet. “What’s a bottle of good champagne cost?” He fished out three-hundred-dollar bills and tossed them on the table.

The big man hauled his frame forward and using the chair arm and the cane, he hoisted himself to standing, “I’ve thoroughly enjoyed my time here. But I’m an old man and I’m tired.” He embraced Francis. “Maybe, the next time you write a story about me, I’ll have a lady friend to keep me warm?”

At a loss for words, Francis nodded.

“We’ll see each other again, very soon.” Dr. Lucas’s deep rolling chuckle made his entire body shake as he turned and slapped Max on the back. “This guy is not so bad.” With a tip of an imaginary hat, he shuffled unsteadily towards the foyer and in less than a minute, he was out the door.

Francis returned home to a huge jar of cookies and a note from Nana:

***Don’t forget, Rob and I are leaving in the morning for our beach vacation. There’re meals to pop in the oven. 350° for at least an hour. Fruit and veg in the crisper. Rob stocked the wine cellar.***

She’d drawn a heart and left a phone number. The radiators hissed and creaked as he made his way upstairs in the dark. Too exhausted to remove his clothes, he plugged in his phone, laid on his bed, drew the comforter around his body and fell asleep.

### **The First Visitor**

A snuffling high-pitched whine and a metered thumping-the-floor sound awakened Francis. He opened one eye to blinding sunlight and the panting of a large animal, close enough to his bedside that he smelled the animal’s breath. Francis rolled away and stood, using the bed as a barrier.

“Yah,” he shouted and backed against the side table as a massive brindle mastiff launched onto his bed. The dog whined and harrumphed, then rolled over on its back like it expected a tummy rub.

“Where did you come from?” Trying to escape, Francis crept around the bed and repeatedly cajoled, “That’s a good girl.”

The dog sensed his movement and jumped to the floor blocking the exit. Wagging her tail, the dog barked and pawed the floor. Francis raised his hands in anticipation of an attack, even though she behaved as though she was happy to see him.

When she crouched, as if to play, Francis shouted, “Sit.”

Immediately, the dog obeyed, her wagging tail thumping the carpet.

“I don’t know where you came from, but you look and act just like my old dog, Gertie.” At the mention of the name, the dog chuffed. She dropped her massive head on her bear-like paws, then rolled over again.

Francis’s heart raced as he tentatively scratched the large animal. The dog wriggled, obviously enjoying the attention. When he saw a white spot on her chest, Francis dropped to his knees.

“It can’t be?” His Gertie had an identical marking. Chilled by a cold sweat, he made his way to the bathroom, keeping one eye on the dog as it followed him. He splashed water onto his face and stared into the mirror.

“You’re not Gertie.” On the rug behind him, the dog chuffed again, then flipped onto her back, exposing the question mark shaped spot, like a beacon.

Francis felt light-headed. *I need air.*

Trying to make sense of the last twelve hours, Francis dressed and headed downstairs. He marveled at the déjà vu when the dog ambled ahead of him, like she knew this house, skillfully maneuvering between the furniture despite being the size of a small horse. When he put on his hiking boots and his coat, the dog spun around knowing they were headed for a walk.

The air crisp, a light frost covered everything. Francis kept to the road, but the dog ran back and forth, chasing squirrels and surprising a group of deer. A chugging sound came up behind them. Francis moved to the side of the road, as a late model pick-up truck appeared. The driver slowed and lowered the window. A sweet smell of applewood pipe smoke assailed Francis.

“Frankie Barrett? Well, I’ll be. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Yessir. You and Gertie look just like you did when you two walked to school.” The old man pointed at the dog as she panted. “You thirsty, girl? Here, I always carry a spare.” He threw a water bottle at Francis.

“Thanks, but this isn’t Gertie,” Francis racked his brain trying to remember the man’s name.

“Showing my age.” The man tapped his forehead with the pipe. “Of course, that’s not Gertie. Your old man buried her between our properties near the Civil War cemetery. Gave away the

pups as I remember, because he offered us a pick. Couple people in town might still have some of the bloodline, course none nearly the size of the original. Yessir, good sized mastiff there.”

Francis opened his mouth to speak, but the man motored on without taking a breath.

“Me and Mrs. Atkins are very sorry for your losses, young man. Tough decision about your boy. Who’s to judge? Certainly not me. Your conscience. Yessir, in the end it’s nobody’s business but yours.” Mr. Atkins smiled, exposing a grin stained from tobacco. “Fresh air’s good for you. Clears the head. Gotta motor, the missus has me running all morning.” He raised the pipe and drove away.

Francis poured water in his hand and the mastiff lapped until she’d had enough. He knew this dog wasn’t his childhood pet, but he enjoyed the sentimental feelings she invoked.

“Let’s get back, girl.”

They remained on the road and when they reached the edge of his property, the dog veered off the path and took off toward the woods. Francis’s stomach tightened with dread as she vanished into the gray trunks and sunless density. He trudged onward, ignoring the dog’s disappearance. But as her barks got closer, the sound took on a scolding tone. Herding him, she nudged the back of Francis’s legs urging him toward the trees from where she came.

“No. I’m going home.” His voice sounded like a petulant child.

When she growled, a low rumbling disagreement, she startled him. His Gertie never growled unless she was threatened. The mastiff blocked his path. The clouds of her breath matched the beating of Francis’s heart.

“Fine. Lead away.”

Seemingly happy to win the argument, the dog raced up the hill. Francis climbed the path behind her. When he entered the wood, he could see her waiting, leading him to a place he didn’t want to go.

The burial site was identified by a pile of rocks. Behind it, a wooden cross stood askew. He knelt and wrapped an arm around the mastiff’s massive shoulder.

“Our Gertie is buried here.”

The dog howled, a long mournful sound that faded into silence. Francis shivered from the chill down his spine. He reached to straighten the cross and the moment he grasped the object a shock propelled him onto his back. Francis experienced a vision.

Ten-year-old Francis flanked by his parents. Gertie lay pregnant on a rug in the laundry room.

“When Gertie has her puppies, you can’t get near her,” his mother warned. “She’ll think you want to hurt them, and she might get aggressive. But that’s what good mother’s do, they protect their babies.”

“I’ll take her for walks when I get home from work. You and your mother can tend to the puppies while we’re gone.” His father hugged him.

Five puppies came, and Francis watched his younger self snuggle each delicately soft creature. As the puppies grew, young Francis giggled as they chased him in the yard, nipping him when he let them catch him.

When Gertie died, Francis never knew the true story because he’d been at a friend’s house. The vision revealed the horrible details.

A delivery truck roared up the driveway. The driver set a package on the front porch, rang the doorbell, and as he turned to leave, Gertie bounded around the house. Threatened, the delivery man clubbed her with his handheld device and ran to his truck. Momentarily stunned, Gertie regained her faculties and chased the truck, her bark loud and insistent. Intent on getting away, the delivery man callously ran over her when she stumbled.

Gertie’s strong voice switched to blood-curdling yelps of pain. Her spine and hips fractured beyond repair.

When the commotion happened, Rob came running from the fields and Nana hurried outside. Out on a neighbor visit, his parents were called home. By the time they returned, Gertie frothed from her suffering and her yelps had stifled to whimpers. Francis’s father retrieved his shotgun from the safe, and he put Gertie down. Rob and his father silently cried over Gertie’s body.

Inside the house, his mother and Nana grasped each other’s hands. At the sound of the shot, they flinched, tears flowing down their faces as they sobbed.

Rob and his father buried Gertie. Afterwards, they tipped a bottle of whiskey while sitting on the porch.

“What will you tell the boy?” Rob asked.

“He’s too young to know the truth. I’ll say Gertie ran away,” his father said. On her collar, he rubbed his finger over the metal plate engraved with Gertie’s name and phone number.

“She was his best friend,” Rob shook his head.

“There won’t be another dog like her.” His father said.

“And the pups?” Rob asked.

“I can’t handle another pet death.”

Rob nodded in agreement.

Ten-year old Francis cried for a week hoping for Gertie’s return. When his father gave away the puppies, Francis never forgave him.

The vision changed to a moment during Poppy’s pregnancy and Francis moaned as it unfolded.

Poppy’s head rested against his shoulder. She held Francis’s palm against her pregnant belly.

“Feel him kicking?” she said. Her sharp intake of breath made Francis retract his hand. She giggled. “It’s ok. He’s strong.”

“When the baby comes, what do you think about getting a dog?” Francis asked. “I’d feel safer when I’m gone, if I knew you had more protection than just a couple of geezers.”

She answered, “I’ve already asked around. There’s a mastiff litter at the far end of the county. They’ll be ready for adoption in a few weeks.”

He tipped her face up. “Another reason to love you.” He kissed her forehead.

“A dog would complete our family. Besides, I want you to be happy.”

“I’m perfect just with you,” he said.

Persistent barking awakened Francis from the visions. His back and neck muscles ached from lying on the ground, his stomach growled from hunger.

The dog let him use her for balance, as it took him a few minutes to stand. Francis ruffled behind her ears and stroked her neck. Where her skull began, he palpated a large hole beneath her skin and recoiled in the realization that this dog was really Gertie.

“I’ve missed you, Gertie.” She nuzzled his hand.

When they got to the house, Francis started a fire and threw two of Nana’s frozen meals in the oven. He filled a salad bowl with fresh water and smiled as the dog slopped half of it on the floor.

After a hot bath, he relaxed on the sofa sipping a hefty glass of scotch, TV on mute. Gertie sprawled in front of the fire and gnawed on a soup bone he'd found in the freezer. Warm and cozy, he hadn't been this content in a while. He slept on the couch, and sometime later Gertie stretched out beside him on the floor and snored.

### **The Second Visitor**

The next morning, Gertie leapt across Francis's chest startling him. At the kitchen door, the dog scratched and whined to go outside. He heard a sports car engine, thrumming and loud one moment, a low rumble the next. Throwing on a jacket, he padded outside in his slippers. Inside the garage, a man examined the rear engine of a sleek navy-blue Porsche 911 that didn't belong to Francis. Exhaust steam billowed in the morning cold.

"Hello?" Francis said.

"Ow," the man banged his head on the edge of the trunk. Rubbing the spot, he smiled as Gertie approached, her tail wagging in anticipation. "Good morning, Gertie ole girl, and good morning, Frankie." The dog rolled on her back near the man's feet. He scratched her belly and asked, "How was yesterday? Eye-opening?"

"Uncle Wallace?" With his mouth agape, Francis worried he was having a nervous breakdown. His favorite uncle scurried around the car with the energy of a squirrel.

"Close your mouth, dear. You look like an air-starved catfish," Uncle Wallace said. "Of course it's I."

"But you're dead."

"Yes, well, now I'm not." He slammed the trunk of the car and patted it lovingly. "Look, I brought the car with me and this time, I opted not to bring the hose. But I am never giving these up. Never, ever, ever." Balanced between the man's two fingers was a half-smoked Winston.

Professor Wallace Baxter, or Uncle Wallace to Francis, stood about 5'9" and weighed maybe a buck-fifty. A handsome man with a full head of hair and graying temples, he wore perfectly pressed gray gabardine slacks coordinated with a blue wool sweater over a white button-down shirt. With both sleeves rolled up, on his right wrist gleamed a Speidelwatch with a Twist-O-Flex band.

*I'm definitely losing it.* Uncle Wallace committed suicide years ago. Francis leaned against the car for support. The hood vibrated under his hands. Professor Wallace chaired the music department at a southern university and happened to be gay. Accused of having inappropriate relationships with his male students, the university's board encouraged him to resign or be

publicly dismissed. Disgraced by the condemnations, he killed himself by carbon monoxide poisoning.

“Why are you here?”

“I’m here to help.” The man answered, his southern drawl coarsened by years of smoking, “You’ve had a rough go with Poppy’s death and your decision regarding Duncan.”

“She was the love of my life,” Francis said.

“Boo-hoo. You’re not the first husband to lose a wife.”

Like white heat, his anger flared. Francis clutched the smaller man’s sweater. “Suicide. You couldn’t help *yourself*. How are you supposed to help me?”

“Unhand me.” Uncle Wallace slapped Francis’s cheek, “Stop being a hot head.”

Francis released his grasp and said, “Don’t treat me like a child.” His words sounded weak, and he felt shame for his violent reaction. Gertie slipped her head under his hand.

Uncle Wallace scoffed, “Go clean up and get dressed. We’re taking this baby for a ride.”

Francis started toward the house, Gertie by his side.

Uncle Wallace added, “But first, I need food and a cup of coffee. I’ll help myself.”

In a stupor, Francis climbed the stairs. He craved a shower, icy cold, to push blood to his confused brain. He heard Uncle Wallace singing show tunes in the kitchen. Gertie lay on the bathroom rug, much like she did when he was a child getting ready for school.

Uncle Wallace subscribed to gentlemen doing things with class and carrying on with dignity. If he was going for a drive, Uncle Wallace would expect him to be presentable. Francis chose a pair of nicer jeans and a black cashmere sweater over a gray tee, then spritzed on cologne. He put on the watch Poppy gifted him for Christmas the previous year.

Slipping on his loafers, Gertie dropped beside him to scratch her massive back on the rug in the closet. With his finger, Francis traced the question mark on her chest.

“Time to go,” Uncle Wallace called from the bottom of the stairs.

Francis met him in the garage, and they got in the car. “What’s the plan?”

“We’re going to the shore for a late lunch. I brought water bottles.” Uncle Wallace pointed toward the passenger dashboard. “Cup-holders hidden in there. Since it’s a long drive, let’s discuss book ideas.” He palmed the back of Francis’s neck, then ruffled his hair, like he’d done when Francis was a child.

As they backed out of the garage, Gertie waited. Seconds later, her ears lifted, and she tore down the driveway and across the lawn.

“Where’s she going?” Francis tracked the dog’s path.

“She’s got work to do,” Uncle Wallace said. “She’ll be back.”

A few hours later, they arrived in front of a beautiful hotel, the sounds of crashing waves and seagull shrieks nearby.

Tossing the keys to a valet, the two entered the main lobby and headed straight to a dining room overlooking the beach. Sitting at a table for four were Nana and Rob. The couple stood when they recognized Francis.

“My goodness, is everything OK at home?” Nana’s flushed look of surprise equaled Rob’s.

“I’m fine. I’m out for a drive with,” he paused, “you remember Uncle Wallace? He arrived for a visit this morning.”

“Oh my, and I didn’t dust up the guest room,” Nana said. “Please forgive me.”

“I assure you, I’ll be fine,” Uncle Wallace said. “I’m thrilled to be here.”

“You’re Francis’s uncle?” Rob asked. “The professor?”

Francis panicked as he saw the realization settling in on Nana’s face.

“But I thought,” Nana began.

“I was dead?” Uncle Wallace laughed. “No. Very much alive.”

“Francis’s mother was very distraught, when she heard about you and your...”

“Suicide attempt? Or did you mean my scandalous dalliances?”

Nana blushed, but her eyes remained hard and focused on the little man.

“I’ll admit I was terribly selfish. Actions do have consequences. My greatest regret was not being here when my sister passed. Also, I missed all 73 episodes of Game of Thrones, and the death of Karl Lagerfeld.” Uncle Wallace’s voice lowered, “I’m here to make amends.”

“Of course you are.” Rob pumped Uncle Wallace’s hand as he slapped him on the shoulder. To Nana, he said, “Let it go, hon.”

Nana seemed to accept Uncle Wallace’s mea culpa and touched his sleeve. “Join us for lunch. What do you say?”

Over wine and a delicious meal, Francis enjoyed the afternoon entertained by humorous anecdotes. After Nana and Rob retired to their room, a pang of guilt bloomed inside of Francis. Having a good time seemed inappropriate. He hadn’t really laughed since Poppy died.

Uncle Wallace held the wine bottle above Francis’s glass.

Francis shook his finger, “I’ve had too much.”

“Too much fun?”

“Maybe.” Avoiding the subject, Francis said, “They’re such a wonderful couple.”

“Who love you like a son.” Uncle Wallace swirled his wine.

“I wonder why they never had children?”

“Nana’s been with your family since before you were born. You don’t know?”

“Should I?”

“You could have asked.”

“It never occurred to me,” Francis said.

Uncle Wallace rolled his eyes. “You’re very self-absorbed.”

Francis shrugged, “So everyone says.”

“According to your mother, Nana had a doozy of a childhood. I’ll tell you in the car,” Uncle Wallace said. “Finish the wine then meet me outside. I’m going for a smoke.”

In the car, Francis listened to his uncle’s account: Nana’s parents originated in the Eastern Bloc. Hardworking and uneducated, they managed to escape their communist country and arrived in

America. Nana and her siblings were born on free soil. Despite having opportunities, an older relative raped Nana when she was twelve years old. She didn't get pregnant, but her mother blamed her for attracting the assault.

As a young woman, Nana fell into one bad relationship after another. Her last boyfriend beat her so ruthlessly the internal bleeding required extensive abdominal surgery. She'd never be able to have children.

Nana moved in with a distant aunt who taught her to cook and clean. When Francis's father hired her to help with his pregnant wife, Nana found a purpose. She met Rob, the caretaker, a gentle caring soul. They fell in love and soon married.

"Nana must think I'm a monster for what I've done," Francis said.

"She understands the pain of loss," Uncle Wallace said. "Part of a person's growth is the struggle."

As they turned onto his driveway, Francis welcomed the comforting sight of his home, the inside lights glowed. Gertie greeted them with slobbering kisses. Uncle Wallace pulled an overnight bag from the front trunk and followed him inside.

Francis led his uncle upstairs. He opened a door and turned on the overhead lights. With a jolt, he realized he'd entered Duncan's room by accident. He pulled the door closed, but Uncle Wallace pushed past him.

Again, Francis noticed the crackling energy of the man, as Uncle Wallace spun in the center of the large nursery taking in the details. Two silver framed photos of Francis's parents and Poppy's parents perched on a shelf beside a stack of baby books. A matching frame lay on its side waiting to be filled with a photo of Francis and Poppy. The dull cardboard under the glass, ugly and bare.

"What kind of father do you think you'd have been?"

"Shit question," Francis gestured for Uncle Wallace to return to the hall.

"I'm full of them. Can you answer? Thoughts have power."

Francis pointed him to the correct guest room and a few seconds later brought in a stack of towels. He sat on a tufted chair while Uncle Wallace perched on the bed. "That boy being here would remind me every moment of Poppy."

"Is that so bad?"

“He’s what killed her.”

“He’s your child, too.”

Francis scoffed. “It doesn’t matter. He’s better off without me.”

“Has Nana’s story not taught you anything?”

“Everything happens for a reason. She’s fine now.”

“You’ve an answer for everything.”

“Don’t you understand? I can’t raise a child by myself,” Francis slapped his thighs and stood.

Uncle Wallace spoke calmly, “You’re not alone.”

“Besides, according to the law, it’s too late. Yesterday was the last day.” Francis pulled on his hair. “It’s better for me to let the boy go.”

“Always thinking about yourself and your happiness.”

“I’m miserable.”

“Yes, that’s obvious.” Uncle Wallace yawned. “End of discussion. Time for bed. Run downstairs and fetch me a glass of ice water. My throat is dry from all this jibber-jabber.”

In his room, Francis left his curtains opened; the stars were magnificently bright. He tried to make sense of the unbelievable circumstances that since occurred. Dr. Lucas said to expect three visitors. He wondered who would appear tomorrow.

Surely, Gertie and Uncle Wallace couldn’t stay with him forever. As Gertie snored beside him and Uncle Wallace laughed with the TV on in his room, Francis breathed a deep sigh of gratitude for the dog’s warm body nearby, and for Uncle Wallace’s humor chasing away the quiet. However, the underlying guilt from what he’d done to his own flesh and blood gnawed at him. “*Selfish,*” Poppy said in his dream. Francis closed his eyes and drifted off.

### **The Final Visitor**

A flash and then a thunderous boom ripped Francis from sleep and his heart raced as he oriented. The house was eerily still from lack of power. He glanced at his phone and realized it was close to dawn. Gertie was a rare dog that was unaffected by storms. She wagged her tail and snuffled out into the hall, presumably to check on Uncle Wallace.

Rain drummed on the roof and when the lightning flashed, the water drops illuminated like speeding crystal shards. Francis did his best to get dressed in the near darkness. The frozen ground and the warm rain created a misty, ominous effect outside.

Lightning struck a skeletal sycamore far out in the yard. An orange flash, the crack of splitting wood, Francis heard the whooshing *whump* as half the tree fell. A figure appeared between the halves. Francis moved closer to the window and squinted to make out who it was.

A female stepped over the white flaking tree branches and continued toward the house. The rain pelted, but she moved in a narrow column of nothingness, unaffected, her dark chin-length hair bone dry. Under a black leather jacket revealed a black t-shirt, and she wore a necklace that glinted when lightning scored the sky. He jumped when Uncle Wallace appeared beside him. Gertie leaned against his other side.

“Unbelievable. She loves drama,” Uncle Wallace said.

“What is she?” Francis couldn’t take his gaze off the girl as she strode through the yard. Her boots were higher than her knees and he could see a knife handle at the top of her waist as the jacket flapped open.

“You created her. She’s a minor character you murdered.”

“What’s her name?”

“In your book, you didn’t give her one. Although here she does. FYI, she’s pissed you killed her.”

“She’s scary *and* angry?”

“And don’t forget, hot,” Uncle Wallace chuckled.

“I don’t want to meet her.”

“Too late, she’s here. Maybe after all this, you could set things right by writing her into one of those terrible prequels that are so popular.”

They heard pounding on the front door.

“Shall we head down? Better hurry. She’s very impatient,” Uncle Wallace said.

As soon as Francis unlocked it, the door burst opened from a gust of wind. The girl’s stance was like a pose: knee bent, hand on one hip, head cocked sideways and a dramatically bored face, complete with a heavy sigh of annoyance.

“Hello, Shakespeare.” She crossed the threshold and stroked Francis’s face.

Francis blushed.

Pointing at Gertie, she said, “Wassup girl?” Then she fist-bumped Uncle Wallace. “My man, the Poof-tastic Professor Baxter.” Concluding her entrance, lightning flashed, and thunder boomed. The storm dissipated in the distance.

With a non-verbal “Go” from his uncle, Francis took a deep breath, and extended his hand, “Welcome to my home. Wallace reminded me I had you killed. I’m sorry I don’t remember, and because of that, I have no idea your name.”

With a hair toss, the girl said, “No biggie. I’m over it.” Then in a German accent, she said, “Brunhilde Esmeralda Nicht. My peeps call me Benny.”

Suddenly, the power to the house returned. Benny took off her jacket and hung it on her finger. Her tee ripped at the sleeves showed her muscular arms, the left one complete with multiple tattoos. She strode toward the kitchen and pointed to the basement door. “Fetch a bottle of bubbly from your fancy pants wine cellar. I’m ready for a mimosa and I’m starving. How ‘bout omelets?”

Gertie growled and barked

Benny stopped and spun on her heel. “You’re right Gertie-girl.” “May I *please* have some breakfast, and can we *please* have cocktails?”

Francis whispered to Uncle Wallace, “Is she old enough to drink?”

Benny put her hand on the knife handle, “I can hear you and I’m not saying ‘please’ again.”

After breakfast, Benny ordered Francis to change into something less middle-aged-man and more cool-guy-street, “Oh, and bring a weapon, if you have one.”

Francis felt his face warming, and he looked toward Uncle Wallace for help.

“Look up ‘street wear’ on your phone and do the best you can,” Benny chuckled and snapped her fingers. “Get moving. Mach schnell.”

Minutes later, Francis found them in the garage, smoking and arguing.

“You can drive it, but no smoking inside the car.” Uncle Wallace crossed his arms, “and only premium unleaded.”

“No thanks, U-dubs. We need something faster.” Benny was smaller than Uncle Wallace, but just as tall. Nose to nose, she said, “I’m not one of your choir boys. I’ll fuck you up for giving me orders.” Benny exhaled in his face. “But you probably like it rough.”

“Fuck you.” Uncle Wallace said.

“No thank you. I’m not your type.”

Francis wore black joggers, running shoes, and a long-sleeved tee-shirt under a black jacket. Even though Benny seemed impatient to get going, he shaved his facial hair into a goatee and mustache.

Benny looked up and down at Francis. “Not bad, Frankie, the scruff is sexy.”

Francis felt his face get warm from embarrassment.

“Where’s your weapon?”

Francis patted his pants pocket, “I found my TASER.”

“Good. You follow directions.”

A distant *whop-whop* sound, closing in fast, caught their attention.

Suddenly, a sleek, black, Airbus helicopter circled the sky and landed in the back field. The pilot cut the engine.

“Ready for a field trip Frank?” Benny squashed the cigarette butt with her toe and smiled, her teeth white and feral, her green eyes challenging him.

He nodded, but the voice in his head screamed, “No.” Admitting he was ready was total bull shit. The stone in Francis’s stomach dropped. He’d never ridden in a helicopter, which escalated the fear-factor, and Benny’s existence potentiated violence. Plus, her coarse language and innate sexiness unnerved him.

“Is it safe?” He asked Uncle Wallace.

Uncle Wallace shrugged. “She’s in charge of this go-around. My advice, do what she says.” Again, the small man laid a hand on the back Francis’s neck and then mussed his hair. “You’ll be fine, Frankie.”

Gertie licked his hand in support.

Francis should have taken a Dramamine. He marveled at the views, but flying made him dizzy. He leaned against the cool metal wall and fell asleep.

Benny slapped his shoulder and awakened him. They hovered over a neighborhood of tightly clustered houses. When the helicopter dipped and turned, he groaned and covered his eyes to stifle the nausea. Once they landed, he quickly got out and puked his breakfast.

"I'm dying," Francis said. "Give me a minute."

"Please. This is more fun than you've had in years." Benny handed him a water bottle.

*Does everyone carry extra water?* He rinsed his mouth and splashed some on his face.

Parked nearby for their use was a black SUV. Benny knew where she was going and stopped in front of a plain, white vinyl-sided house in a neighborhood where every other yard needed tending, and cars parked on the grass instead of in the driveways. Plastic chairs sat sentry on the front porch that was devoid of decorations or flowers.

"Here, put these on." She handed him sunglasses. "They help hide our identity, and you look cooler."

"Where are we?"

"Foster home. But that's not the correct question, Frankie," Benny laughed. "You should ask, *'When are we?'*"

"I don't get it," he said.

They got out of the car and Benny elbowed Francis in his side. "Keep your mouth shut and stop slouching."

"Is this a good idea?" Francis followed her. "Why are we here?"

"Don't you want to take a gander at your son's new digs?" She knocked on the door.

Francis grabbed her arm, and she ripped out of his grasp and slapped him.

"Don't touch me, unless I give you permission."

In slow motion he saw the handle turn. When the door opened, a thin, young woman appeared wearing baggy sweatpants and a tee shirt. Her feet were bare; she wore no makeup and her auburn hair pulled back in a ponytail. She held a baby boy in one arm. The child wore a disposable diaper and no clothes. The strong smell of cigarette smoke emanated from inside.

“Great. Cops. If you’re looking for John, he’s not here and I don’t know when he’s coming back.”

Benny shook her head, but didn’t correct the woman’s assumption, “You’re the foster? We’re here to see Duncan.”

“What did he do now?”

“May we come inside?” Benny stepped her booted foot inside to prevent the woman from closing the door.

“He’s not here either.” The woman glanced away.

“You’re lying.”

Francis said, “Wait a second, who’s that?” He pointed to the baby.

The woman tried to close the door. Benny forced it opened. In the sparse living room, a fake Christmas tree with colored lights stood in the corner. A teenage boy wearing headphones sat in a recliner playing a shooting and killing video game on a giant screen television.

“You saw him. Now get out,” the woman said.

Benny stepped in front the boy and blocked the TV. To Francis, she smiled and said, “Ta da.”

“Get the fuck outta the way,” the boy scooted forward and craned his neck.

Francis stared at the teenager. Even though the kid was sitting, he appeared tall and lanky. His hair, the color of a blazing sunrise, curled around the headphones like a mop. There was a distinctive smell of sweaty socks in the room. An opened bag of chips lay on the floor and soda cans littered the windowsill nearest the chair.

The kid jumped up and slid the headphones back from his ears. “I said, move.”

Benny snatched the game controller and paused the game. “How about, No?”

“What the fuck?” Scowling, the kid stepped toward her.

“Down boy,” Benny exposed the handle of her blade tucked into her waist holster. “We don’t want trouble.”

“Duncan?” Francis gawked at the teenager. “You’re Duncan?” Francis felt disoriented.

“Who’s asking?” the kid said.

Francis noticed the gauges in both the boy’s earlobes. Despite being peppered with acne, the teenager’s resemblance to Poppy engendered uncanny: her blue eyes, her hair color, her mouth, now twisted into a snarl.

*I’m your father.* Francis couldn’t believe his eyes.

“They’re police,” the woman interjected, “looking for John.” The baby fussed in her arms, and she rocked to quiet it. “Shh, Tristan. Are you hungry?”

When the woman sat on the other recliner and whipped up her shirt to breast feed the child, Francis spotted dark purple contusions on her chest and rib cage, and the obvious imprints of fingers around her upper arm.

“You live here?” Francis asked the teen.

Duncan said, “Until her dipshit boyfriend kicks me out.”

“Does he beat you, too?” Benny asked, noticing the bruises on the woman.

The woman said, “Keep your mouth shut, Duncan.”

“John’s not my dad, he’s his,” Duncan pointed at the baby. “You know he wants me gone now that you have Tristan.”

“You’re wrong. He thinks this house is too crowded when he’s here. He’ll be fine once he gets another job.”

“The dipshit needs to go,” Duncan said, “you’ve said it yourself.”

“If you’d listen, he wouldn’t get so angry.”

“Where is he now?” Benny asked.

Duncan’s expression changed from annoyance to fear. “He goes to Paddy’s for lunch. Probably a few drinks deep by now. He’ll be back later.”

“Give him a call. Tell him he’s got visitors.”

“I need to talk to you,” Francis whispered in Benny’s ear.

“Spill.”

“What are we doing?”

“We’re here to help but it might get messy.” Walking to the kitchen, Benny said to Duncan, “Got any sodas left?”

Francis followed her. “Duncan went to an adoption agency. A family wanted him. Why is he in a foster home?”

“Short answer. He fucked up.” She swirled her index finger near her head. “Sometimes, it doesn’t work out.”

Thankfully, they didn’t wait long. A small, SUV parked near the side door of the house. Duncan’s foster mom retreated to the bedroom with the baby.

Francis shrieked when Benny pulled the knife from her waist holster. “What the hell are you doing with that thing?”

“Best defense is a prepared offense.”

Wearing sweatpants and a football jersey that hugged his large belly, John stomped into the kitchen. He rubbed his beard; his face flushed from drinking. “Who are you?”

“We’re friends of Duncan.” Benny’s voice calm, “We want you to stop beating him up for no reason. Oh, and the foster mom, too.”

“I make the rules. Get the fuck out.”

“They’re cops,” Duncan said. “You gotta do what they say.”

“They’re not dressed like pigs,” John said. “Show me your badges.”

“Actually, we aren’t,” Francis explained.

“Shut up,” Benny jabbed Francis with her elbow.

“You’re trespassers then,” John scoffed. He grasped the handle of an iron skillet that was on the stove top. “I guess I’m defending myself.” He launched the heavy metal at Francis hitting him in the chest.

“Ow, fuck,” Francis doubled over from the sharp blow.

John shoved the kitchen table and pinned Benny between it and the window. He clutched her jacket and slapped her face. Blood poured from her nose.

Benny sliced the knife through the thick fabric of John's football jersey sleeve.

"You cut me, you bitch." John maintained the advantage. He grappled with Benny's knife hand while he choked her with his other.

Benny dropped her blade and struggled to breathe, her face turned beet red. "Help," she croaked.

Duncan froze, too afraid to move. He was conditioned to do nothing when John punched his foster mom. If he helped this woman, John would make him pay later with a beating.

Francis fumbled for the TASER in his pants pocket. He hoped it still worked. Hands shaking, he raised the weapon in position.

"Shoot him, shoot him now," Duncan yelled.

Firing the TASER, Francis cheered as the probe buried into the man's chest.

The shock immobilized the large man and as he fell, John struck the back of his head against the kitchen counter. His body twitched uncontrollably, and blood pooled under him on the floor.

"No, no, no." Francis palpated the man's neck for a pulse. He started chest compressions, then leaned closer to check for breathing. The smell of alcohol permeated, but there was no inhalation or exhalation.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Duncan said.

"As a door nail," Benny said.

Francis turned toward the teen. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Duncan said, his eyes steely, his jaw clenched. "You did me a solid."

The piercing wail of Duncan's foster mother startled them. Duncan intercepted her and she sobbed in his arms.

"We've got to motor," Benny snapped at Francis.

"Shouldn't we call an ambulance?" Francis said.

Benny said to Duncan, "Call 911." She pointed to the body on the floor. "Here's the story. Drunk guy comes home, threatens the baby, starts throwing punches, you defended yourself, tased him, and he hit his head on the counter. You cool with that, kid?"

Duncan nodded.

“What about her?” Francis nodded toward the foster mother.

Benny grabbed the crying woman’s ponytail and wrenched her around to look in her eyes.

“You’ll back up Duncan’s story. Got it?”

The woman whimpered, “Yes.”

“Don’t you ever bring an asshole like that into this house ever again.”

Francis bear-hugged Duncan before he left, “You’re a good kid.”

Driving away, Benny and Francis passed the ambulance.

“I killed a man,” Francis’s stomach roiled and he groaned in pain, “and my chest hurts.”

“It was self-defense. Plus, you saved me.” Benny punched his shoulder and shouted, “Wow. That was fun.”

“Duncan will be OK?”

“Well, no, not really. He’s kind of a loser.”

“He won’t be a murderer. We prevented that, right?”

Benny ignored Francis’s question and rolled her eyes. “We have one more stop. But first, we need food, and I need to wash my face.”

The second helicopter ride proved much better, and Francis managed not to puke. Landing in a field, a black SUV waited for their use. Benny drove him to a hospital.

“Why are we here?” Francis’s heart rate elevated.

“You need to see this.” Benny led him inside and walked down a long hallway. At the end was a sign for the Emergency Department, but they turned the corner and kept going until she stopped at a heavy door.

“Here,” she pointed to the small rectangular sign: MORGUE.

“No thank you,” Francis said.

Before he could back away, Benny grabbed him by the chin. Her green eyes flashed in anger, “Quit being such a pussy.” Pushing the button for the automatic door, she led the way after it opened.

Despite the frigid temperature, sweat rolled down Francis’s back, his mouth dry. “I’m dreaming, aren’t I?” Francis slapped himself on the face. “Wake up, wake up.”

Benny ignored him and skimmed the wall of massive metal cabinets. “Voila,” with a tug, the drawer slid, and a body covered with a clean white sheet lay on the steel. Her demeanor somber, she said, “He’s here because of a car accident. Alcohol and a high rate of speed, then he hit a guardrail, and ka-boom.”

“Is it Duncan?” Francis whispered.

“Good, you’re curious,” Benny giggled. “Have you ever seen a victim of a car crash?” She gripped the top of the sheet.

“Stop. Why are you showing me this?” Francis screamed. “I don’t want to see him.”

Like a magician, she pulled the sheet down with a flourish and exposed the body.

Francis chilled as he took in the man’s beaten face and the blunt trauma of the chest cavity from the airbag. Bruises scattered over the body. The hairs shriveled and crinkled from fire, and the most horrifying burnt skin hung in melted patches on the body’s lower extremities. Tears ran down Francis’s face.

Benny pointed to the wristband identifying the body: Francis Barrett.

Francis reeled from the shock, he gasped. “This is my fate? It can’t be.”

“We never know what will happen. The outcome are shadows of what can be or what may be.”

“I don’t want to die,” Francis shouted.

“You possessed the means and the potential to love. You chose isolation and abandonment for preservation,” Benny said.

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did, and you know it,” she said.

“I can change.” Francis yelled at the corpse, “I’ve learned my lesson.”

“It’s too late,” Benny said.

Feeling defeated, Francis sobbed into Benny’s shoulder. She stroked his hair.

When they returned to the helicopter, Francis hauled himself inside and slumped in his seat like a zombie.

“Take a nap, we’ll be back to the present soon enough,” Benny said.

Sleep eluded him. Francis’s spirit broken, he held his pounding head and tried to make sense of what he’d done.

The copter zoomed across the sky heading east away from the setting sun. Heavy rain clouds loomed in the distance. Benny appeared unfazed, though she strapped on her seat belt and her knuckles whitened as she gripped the armrests. The nose of the helicopter sharply dipped.

“We’re experiencing some turbulence,” the pilot said.

“Do your best,” Benny yelled then turned to Francis, “How you doing Frankie?”

He groaned. Taking deep breaths, his ‘so-so’ hand gesture got the point across.

The helicopter lurched right, then left. Into a headwind, it suddenly lifted thrusting Benny and Francis hard against their seats.

“Gotta land this thing, it’s too rough,” the pilot reported. “Hold on.”

Francis shouted in fear when he felt the weightless drop because of the uncontrolled descent. *We’re gonna die*. The thought horrified him. He pleaded into the headset’s microphone, “Help me, Benny. I don’t want to die. I DON’T WANT TO DIE. I know you can fix this.”

The pilot shouted, “Brace yourselves. We’re going down.”

Francis screamed, tears streamed down the sides of his face.

Benny’s eyes were closed, her face in repose. She smiled, “Enjoy the ride. Gute Nacht.”

## **A Friend Returns**

Francis awakened in his bed. Morning sunlight blinded him. He lay still listening for the sound of the others, but he only heard the registers blowing hot air. He remembered he and Benny going down in the helicopter. The feeling of dropping out of the sky still fresh in his mind.

Sitting up, he called, "Gertie. Where are you?"

There was no whine, no snuffle, no tail thumping.

"Uncle Wallace?" Francis hurried to the bedroom his uncle occupied these last couple days. The room was empty and the bed was made. His heart dropped. Running down the stairs, he called, "Gertie, Uncle Wallace?" He made his way to the kitchen, "Benny?"

The house answered with silence. Wearing only his pajama pants and a t-shirt, Francis headed to the garage. There was no car parked inside other than his own. Coming back into the kitchen he realized Gertie's food and water bowls were gone from the floor. He checked the cupboards and found them stacked neatly among the other dishes. Pulling open the garbage bin, the trash bag had been replaced with a fresh one. Francis ran to the nearest mirror. His goatee and mustache were still there.

Someone knocked on the front door. In a state of perplexity, Francis opened it. Standing outside with a big smile on his face was Dr. Lucas. Francis threw himself against the older man and hugged him. "Dr. Lucas, come in. I'm so happy to see you. What's going on? Am I crazier than I thought?"

"Son, you have not lost your mind," Dr. Lucas said.

Francis led the man to his study. He lit a fire, then with Dr. Lucas's permission, ran upstairs to get dressed and left the older man thumbing through one of his books. Minutes later, Francis returned.

"You've got questions," Dr. Lucas said.

"Where is everyone?" Francis asked.

"They've returned to where they were before. They finished their jobs."

"I didn't get to say goodbye."

"Do you feel their touch?"

Francis flexed his hand remembering Gertie's encouraging licks. Uncle Wallace wasn't a hugger, but his warm hand on the back of Francis's neck combined with the mussing of his hair meant he cared. He remembered Benny slapping him. With her green eyes, she looked into his soul. When he was wracked with guilt and sorrow, she comforted him. Her contact made him tense, but she focused his attention when he needed it.

"Do you hear their voices?"

Francis closed his eyes and heard Gertie's happy barks, her snoring while she slept. Francis recalled Uncle Wallace's sarcastic witticisms, and he laughed remembering the time they shared. Benny's orders brought chills down his spine. She provided the most frightening visions he knew he'd never forget.

"They will always be with you." Dr. Lucas touched Francis's shirt above his heart. "Those who are no longer with us are always here and here." He moved his hand onto Francis's head.

Francis nodded.

"You hold those who impacted your life in your heart. The experiences, whether negative or positive, help you grow."

"But what about Duncan? I can't get him back. It's too late."

"Is it? What day is it today?" Dr. Lucas chuckled.

His cellphone forgotten upstairs, Francis booted his laptop on his desk. On the lock screen appeared the word, 'Friday'. "It's still Friday? I just saw you and Max last night? The realization energized him. "I have the entire day to do the right thing?"

"And all the days afterwards to try," Dr. Lucas said.

"Thank you, thank you." Francis hugged the giant man and ran upstairs for his phone. When Francis returned, Dr. Lucas had disappeared. The depression on the sofa where he sat remained. Realizing he had a second chance, Francis was too excited to feel saddened by Dr. Lucas's quick departure.

During the flurry of phone calls and emails, Francis didn't hear Nana and Rob come inside.

"Good morning. We saw the lights on as we were leaving. You're up early, and you're working?" Nana's tone was incredulous.

"I'm getting Duncan back," Francis said. "I've had a change of heart,"

“That’s terrific news,” Rob put his arm around his wife, “Isn’t it?”

Nana’s skepticism continued, “What’s changed? Are you sure?”

Francis hugged his housekeeper. “Thank you for being here, Nana. I’m sorry I’ve been so selfish. I can’t imagine what you went through as a young girl. I realize what I did with Duncan must be a horrible reminder for you.”

“How do you know?” Nana glared at Rob, who vigorously shook his head. “Your mother was the only other person I told.”

“Uncle Wallace told me,” Francis said. “I’m not bringing up the past to hurt you, and I’ll tell you an amazing story when you get back. I want you to know how much you mean to me and I can’t thank you enough.” Francis pointed to his laptop. “Please accept my apology. I’ve upgraded your reservations at the beach, and I’ll gladly take care of your meals.”

“Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it hon?” Rob said.

“When will Duncan arrive?” Nana asked. “You’ll need help. We should be here.”

“Next week, but I’ve got this. I can take care of my son. You two have a wonderful vacation,” Francis said.

Still looking distraught, Nana said, “We should do something?”

Rob had an idea. “I’ll go to the edge of the wood and bring back a tree. We can at least string some lights on it before we go. A first Christmas tree for Duncan. How about it?”

### **First Christmas**

For the next two days, Francis retrieved decorations from the attic, trimmed the tree, and made the house as festive as he could. When Duncan arrived with the social worker, she bounced him on her knee, “Say hello to your son.”

“Not sure what to do,” Francis said. “I’m afraid to touch him.”

“Just sit back and relax.” The woman placed the child on Francis’s lap. “He’s a strong boy.”

He marveled how much Duncan had grown in the couple of months he was gone. A pang of sadness came over Francis. The child’s features and mop of red hair reminded him of Poppy. The surreal moment overwhelmed him. Welling up with tears, he hugged his son tighter to his chest.

Over the next few days, he got to know Duncan and managed to write during the times the child slept in a bassinet by his side. Pleased with himself, Francis began a story involving Dr. Jerome Lucas, that included a female colleague and love interest.

The same morning, Francis had a voicemail from an unknown number. The message was from the breeder across the county inquiring whether Francis and his wife were still interested in the mastiff puppies.

“Even if you don’t want one, I’d like you to stop by. I’ve got something that might be of interest to you,” said the man on the message.

The next day, taking Duncan with him, Francis went to the breeder’s home. The man brought out the puppies, and they bounded around Francis’s ankles.

“They’re a good bunch, this litter.” The man scratched his head and continued, “Had an odd thing happen the other day. A big, female mastiff showed up. Stood outside the puppy pen keen on watching them. Normally my older dogs go wild when another comes around, but they ignored her and the puppies greeted her at the fence.”

Francis’s heart thumped. “That was it?”

“I went out with a treat to see if she’d come to me.” He reached into his pocket, “I grabbed her by the collar, and it just unhooked and fell into my hand. The dog took off.” He held it out for Francis. “I called the number and it’s out of service, but when I punched it into one of those searches on the computer, your name came up.” He snapped his fingers. “Reminded me to give you and your wife a call.”

“That belongs to my dog, Gertie,” Francis said.

“Good looking dog.” The man handed Francis the collar, “I thought your wife said you didn’t have one. Never mind, I can’t remember much of anything, especially during the holidays.”

Francis took a deep breath as he put the collar in his coat pocket. “Just so you know, my wife passed away a couple months ago.” He kissed Duncan’s forehead and swallowed the lump in his throat. “She died soon after she had our son.”

“Oh jeez. I’m very sorry for your loss,” the man said. “When she came by to ask about the puppies, I could tell she was kindhearted.”

Francis said, “Poppy always knew what was best. I grew up with a dog, now my son needs one.”

“Let me hold Junior, and you can get a better look at them,” the man stretched out his arms.

Squatting to examine the puppies, Francis held them up to his face. When he flipped each over onto their back, one of the females had a white spot on her chest—a tiny question mark. Francis smiled, “I believe this is the one for us,” he said.

The End