

"WHEN IT RAINS (Saints)"

"Babe!"

Looking at the clock, Liz can't really think of where her boyfriend might be. After all, it is Sunday and his beloved Saints have a 4:25 pm start time for their game against the Jets.

After living together for a little over a year, she finally understood...or better yet, accepted...her man's one true addiction. Any and everything having to deal with his hometown black and gold-clad football squad.

Reece, a former athlete in both high school and college, is all-in-all a good guy. In terms of relationships, he is a lot more diplomatic than the stereotypical male. Anything is up for discussion. And more importantly, he is always willing and open to listen to Liz, if and when she has a problem. Often times adjusting on the fly in any realistic way possible to achieve her happiness. Everything is on the table that is, except for one thing. Time conflicts with the Saints.

At Tulane University, Maurice "Reece" Roberts, was a broadcast journalism major when he wasn't playing football for the Green Wave. One of his closest friends was Kim Anderson. Kim was a telecommunications major who served as one of the producers of the campus news show that he co-hosted.

During their junior years, at a mid-year mixer, Reece couldn't stop staring at a girl walking around the party with Kim. That very girl ended up being Elizabeth Anderson, Kim's younger sister who was then a freshman.

"Babe?" Liz calls again as she heads down the steps of their shared townhome.

It would be another three years after the day that they first met before Reece and Liz crossed paths again. And then another two years before they entertained the idea of an exclusive relationship. After a solid year of dating however, they decided to try the cohabitation thing. It seemed like a logical move to them both as the next step in their relationship, especially when considering Liz needed a place to stay while she started work on her masters.

For the most part, they seemed to flourish while living under the same roof. As long as she did not try to get him to go to regular eleven o'clock church service whenever the Saints were scheduled to play at one EST. Then there was the time that Reece refused to go to the birthday party of Kim and Liz's cousin, who had a happy hour event, at the same time that New Orleans was playing on Thursday Night Football.

A complete non-starter as a football fan, Liz never really "faked the funk" in terms of liking or wanting to learn the game. And given that Reece was a very attentive man in every other facet, she grew to give him his space on Saints football Sundays, Mondays, and Thursdays. Which is why the fact that he was not home now, baffled her.

"Maybe he went out to grab a snack or something before game time", she thinks aloud.

Grabbing a bottle of water out of the fridge, she decides to head back up to their room to do some more reading for one of her classes.

No less than seven minutes later...

"Hey, hey, grab a seat. Sit down and shut the hell up unless it's about the game. The kitchen is right around here, help yourself. Stay away from everything on the left side of the fridge, on the top two shelves. That's baby's stuff. I'll be right back." Reece hustles up the steps to his room, taking the stairs two at a time.

Once on the third level, he jogs into his bedroom where Liz is on the bed. She's sitting with one leg tucked under her and one hanging off the side, concentrating hard on the book open in front of her.

"Sup babe?" he says, leaning in and kissing her on the forehead.

"Hey Reece," she replies looking at the clock. "Cutting it a little close aren't you?"

"Hell yeah! Rob called me like two hours ago. He and his girl are going through something. So he's been moping around since Thursday. Jay had the big idea to get him out of the house."

"Got it," she says. Wait..."

"Right. Guess who drew the short straw for hosting this cheer up fest? We stopped at BW3's and grabbed some wings and wedges and here we are. Come down and grab whatever you want. There's plenty. I promise we won't disturb you though."

"I might do that because I am hung—"

"A'ight babe!" he says, running out of the room.

With a screwed up face, she just stares at the door in disbelief. Looking over at the clock however, her frown fades with the quickness. It is 4:27, two minutes past tip-off. She grabs the remote, flips the game on, and sees that they've had to delay the game a few minutes due to too much smoke from the pre-game pyrotechnics. *Why in the hell would you shoot off pyro in a domed stadium*, she thinks to herself. Turning the TV back off, she goes back to her studies on data mining.

On the pillow beside her, her tablet lights up, showing a notification. With it being a Sunday, she totally ignores it for almost twenty minutes before looking over at it again. Having totally forgotten about the notification, she picks up the device to look at her Twitter and Facebook feeds. Hoping to reset her brain after failing to process the concepts that she just read through. At the light press of the power button, the mini-computer comes alive, revealing a string of lit-up icons across the top.

She drags her finger down on the screen from top to bottom. Revealing a few likes and comments on her last couple of Instagram posts, some retweets and comments from a video that she shared on Twitter and FB from an episode of *Ellen*, a few emails, a notice to play the next round in a game of *Ruzzle*, and an app update or two.

Just as she's preparing to click on her IG feed, a Facebook direct message pops up at the top of the screen. Curious, she taps the notification and the screen goes black before showing a spinning illuminated wheel in the center, then an image.

"What the fuck!" she yells, dropping her tablet on the bed.

At first, she's nervous about Reece or his friends hearing her from downstairs, but they're too busy yelling at the TV. She picks the tablet back up and looks into the face of a little girl she hasn't seen in what seems like forever.

Liz is five foot six, with a honey roasted almond complexion and the body of a distance runner. With big hair that seems to bounce even when she doesn't move and round eyes full of life that command your attention. The girl looking back at her on the screen is small, frail with a hard to fathom sadness about her. She's seen this little girl before, it has just...been a while.

A second direct message window pops up beside the first that reads, "*about to call you*". Noting the sender she grins weakly and picks up her phone, minimizing the tablet screen and putting it to sleep. The image of the haunting little girl emblazoned across her frontal lobe.

"Hey Jeffrey."

"What's going on Liz? Can you talk? Is this a good time?"

She can't help but laugh at the statement. "Jeffrey, I told you Reece isn't that kind of guy. Besides, he likes you."

"I know what I've heard you say before. But that's a big man. I need him to understand fully..."

"Shut up. What are you up to?"

"Studying. Or trying to. It's really hard to concentrate with this headache. I just popped four ibuprofen though so I should be good soon. You?"

"I just got another picture."

"On Facebook? From the same account as before?"

"Yeah. I really thought I was done with this. The last time was almost a year ago."

"Liz, when are you going to tell someone? You really need to cover yourself on this. It's clear it isn't going away."

"It did the first time."

"Right. And here we go again, what, eight, nine months later? Have you at least told Kim?"

"No."

"What are you wai----..."

The split-second muting of sound from her phone, causes her to pull it away from her ear to see who is texting her.

"C'mon Mark, damn!" Reece says aloud, throwing himself backward in exasperation from where he has been sitting on the edge of the couch. He and his boy Jay are the only Saints fans in the group. And Mark is having too good of a time ribbing them at the squad's slow start in the game.

"Y'all hear that?" Rob who is sitting on a stool at the bar, reading his girl's Facebook newsfeed says to no one in particular.

No one hears him over Jay's yelling and Mark's laughing. Reece who has his hand over his face takes it down and catches Rob looking up at the ceiling.

"Ey, you alright bruh?"

"I heard something upstairs. Is anybody else here?" Rob asks.

"Yeah. I said Liz was home when we came in. Why?"

"Yo, I swear I just heard something upstairs. Sounded like a scream, she watching a movie or something?"

Reece pushes up off the couch and takes the stairs two at a time. After passing the second level, he slows his pace when he doesn't hear a TV, crying or talking, as he doesn't want to disturb her studies. *Rob's ol sucker for love, simpin' ass is hearing shit*, he thinks to himself.

Pushing the door open, he sees Liz sitting pressed up against the headboard, hugging her knees. He immediately glances around the room to make sure there is no one else present.

"Baby, what's going on?" he asks hurrying over to the bed.

When she doesn't answer he pulls her close to him and wraps his arms around her, asking again in a whisper. This time when she fails to answer he looks around the room again and notices her cellphone is across the room, face down.

Flipping over her tablet, he sees a number of apps up and running, but nothing appears out of the ordinary. He gently starts to slide his arm from around her to go get her cell, but she grabs onto him tightly, with a strength that would have impressed him under other circumstances. But right now it only makes him more determined to know what is wrong. Liz is a fairly strong woman, despite her wiry frame. But this kind of increased strength is rooted in nothing short of intense fear.

"Baby you have to tell me what's wrong, please!" he implores.

With her face buried in his chest, she starts to sob while begging him not to leave her.

This sends his mind racing all over the place, in an attempt to figure out what could be the problem. Every inch of his six-foot, two hundred and fifteen pound frame wants to throw her to the side and get to that phone. He knows in his heart of hearts that he'll find his answers there. But at this very moment, she needs him right where he is. So he doesn't move.

Downstairs, the game is making its way to the end of the first half. And everyone had finally noticed that the man of the house had left the room, but was not sure how long he'd been gone. Rob finally puts his phone down long enough to go re-up on some wings in the kitchen. When he does, Jay motions for Mark to go grab his phone off the bar.

"Ey, Reece getting sloppy," Jay says looking down at Reece's phone. Laying on the opposite end of the couch where Reece was seated earlier.

"What you talking about?" Mark asks. Slipping Rob's phone in his pocket.

"This chick calling his phone right now is tough. He just got his phone all out in the open. Doesn't Liz live here now?"

"Now you know choir boy ain't into no dirt. But me on the other hand. Let me see," Mark shoots back. He heads in the direction of the couch and grabs Reece's phone before sitting back down on the recliner and hiding Rob's phone behind the pillows.

"What y'all talking about?" Rob asks with a paper plate in one hand and a wing in the other.

"Don't even worry about it bruh. You wouldn't know how to handle this," Mark jokes. "Dammit Jay," he says after looking at the picture of the woman on Reece's phone. "This is Liz's sister Kim, fool. Told you choir boy wasn't doing no dirt."

"Well shit, I ain't know. She still bad as shit though."

"Let me see. I ain't seen her since, hell. Since I visited Reece junior year" Rob says.

"Was that before or after you gave your nuts to Rita?" Mark shoots out.

"Damn Mark, ease up a little bit. You are over-the-top counterproductive right now", Jay says while the most reckless of the group hands Reece's phone to Rob. He gives a knowing look to Mark to remind him of why they're all at Reece's house in the first place.

The phone stops ringing as soon as Rob grabs it and the picture goes away. Causing him to curse under his breath before waking Reece's phone back up and being hit with the key unlock screen. Defeated, he puts the phone back to sleep and sets it down on the bar, sucking his teeth in exasperation.

Upstairs, the muffled hum of Liz's phone cannot be heard face down on the carpeted floor. After ringing with no answer, Reece's phone comes alive again downstairs. When Rob looks over again, he sees the picture of the woman he missed earlier and smiles in approval.

"Yeah she's real nice. Better than I remember actually."

Jay who's been listening to the halftime show on TV and looking at his fantasy team's numbers on his phone looks over at the bar.

"Who's that Rob?"

"Kim's sexy ass."

Jay pauses for a moment, before getting up, grabbing the phone and answering.

"What's going on Kim? This is Reece's boy Jay. Is everything okay? Uh huh. Yeah, he's upstairs with Liz."

On the other end of the line, Kim is looking at the phone in a very confused manner. "Uh...okay. Jay, I think I remember meeting you. Is my sister okay?"

"To my knowledge she is. I haven't seen her since we got here. But Reece went upstairs about fifteen minutes ago. I'll run the phone up there. Hold on."

Rob and Mark look over at him curiously as he jogs up the steps. After he disappears they both go back to what they were doing. Halfway to the room, Jay listens for any sign that he should turn back around-- crying, arguing, moans and squeaky springs. Hearing none, he continues upwards, walking up the last four steps to the top floor.

With the door open, he slowly peeks around the corner to find Liz's face buried in Reece's chest. His friend looks up at his presence in the doorway and mouths *what's up* in his direction. Jay, in turn, holds up the phone and mouths, *Kim*. Reece slowly pantomimes for him to tell her that he'll call her right back. He nods in kind and turns to head back downstairs but stops as a pillow lands at his feet.

He turns around to see Reece pointing to a phone on the floor on the other side of the room. Confused over what he's walked in on, he lightly creeps over to the phone, retrieves it, and walks over to the bed with it. Instead of taking the phone, Reece holds his fingers up in a sequence of numbers for

his friend to use. Jay punches in the digits as they were silently given to him, and looks confused at what's now on the screen.

As he turns the phone around, Reece braces himself for the worst as he looks at it. The frail little black girl looking back at him totally catches him off guard. He tries to figure out why this made Liz so upset. Motioning for Jay to put it down, his friend does just that then heads out of the room and back down the stairs. Maurice drags his finger from right to left on the screen and sees another picture of what looks like the same little girl but a little younger.

"Hey Kim, sorry about th...hello?" Jay looks at Reece's phone and sees that Liz's sister has already hung up. Just as he is preparing to walk outside onto the patio on the second level, the phone vibrates in his hand. When he looks down and sees that it's a text from a number not stored in his boy's phone, he disregards it. Changing his mind about going outside, he locks the plantation style doors instead and opts to head back downstairs when the phone comes alive again.

"Hey Kim. I'm sor--..."

"Jay, I don't know what's going on but I need to talk to Maurice or Elizabeth this instant!"

"Sorry we got cut off before Kim. But Ree--Maurice said he would call you right back."

"What's wrong with my sister Jay? Why isn't she answering her phone? We're really close to a situation arising over there," the woman on the other end says curtly.

He would have heard the intensified seriousness in her tone had he not been currently distracted by the string of rapid-fire texts arriving on the phone from the same no-name number as moments before. Against his usual restraint, he taps on the text notification.

What you have in her is not real.

She will forever mine and is close to realizing this now.

Her past, our missed opportunity, is due to be my present. And I'm going to take my time opening her up.

"What the fuck?" Jay said aloud, staring at the phone like an alien has just come through the screen.

"Who are you talking to motherfucker? I don't care whose boy you are."

"Kim, what area code is 904?"

"What?" she yells into the phone.

By this time Mark and Rob have come up from the first level after hearing his outburst. They both look on with intense intrigue but choose not to butt in.

"Do you know what city that area code is in? Reece just got a real cryptic string of texts from there. And I think it's about--"

"What the hell is going on down here? I just got Liz to lay down and drift off. Now ain't the time for no dumb shit." Reece says in a frustrated whisper.

"Jacksonville," Mark chimed.

"What?" Reece replies as everyone turns to face him.

"Jacksonville. Jay was asking what area code is 904."

Jay lets his friend know that Kim is on the phone again, as he hands it over, making sure to scroll up to and point out the weird texts from the unknown number. Reece looks at his friend with a look normally reserved for reality TV pre-fights. That is until he reads the first text. Looking up at the unavailable sender, he reads through the next, then down through the entire string.

"Kim", Reece says into the phone, "who does your sister know in Jacksonville?"

It is now everyone in the house's turn, to turn and look at the owner. Kim, remiss at the ambiguous line of questioning, asks in a flustered tone for an explanation. He waves off his friends as he sits on the steps, and runs down the course of events involving her sister. To the best of his abilities that is. But it's not until he sends Kim the pictures from Liz's phone, that the fog of confusion tries to lift.

Downstairs, someone is suddenly knocking at the door. Mark and Rob sit in silence with only Jay having any semblance of understanding what has just happened on the second floor. The knock at the door comes again but with more urgency this time, grabbing their attention. Rob gets up, subconsciously checking his pocket for his phone and heads to the door.

"Who is it?"

Mark, on edge from the uncertainty of the past hour, peeks through the blinds.

"It's Jeff. Is Liz okay?" The voice from the other side of the door replies.

Rob starts to turn the doorknob, before Jay steps in front of him. He has little to zero real knowledge of what is really going on. However, he knows that Liz is upset, that Maurice is on edge and that Liz's sister Kim, is on one thousand. And that someone with a 904 area code is at least partly to blame for all of it.

"Who are you to Liz, Jeff? And I strongly advise you to not answer incorrectly", Jay asks through the door.

Of the four, Jay is the most level headed out of the group, right after Reece. It is Rob and Mark who are the most likely to follow through with any threats of physical harm. Jay takes solace in knowing that they'd back his play without question if necessary.

"I'm a friend of Liz from school. We're in the same Master's program at Tech. We were talking earlier before she disappeared suddenly."

"Hold on."

Jay jogs up the steps to where he finds Reece, looking out of the office window across from the living room of the townhome. He is still on the phone with who he assumes is Kim, trying to get to the bottom of whatever *this* is. Clearing his throat, he steals his boy's attention.

"You know a Jeff? He just knocked on the door, saying he was friends with Liz."

"Jeff, nah. Friends from where?"

Beyond agitated at all of the unknowns in this current situation, Reece noticeably begins to tense up at the mentioning of the newest one. A visitor. He furrows his brow in anticipation of the answer.

"Said he was her friend from school. They are supposedly in the same program."

"Jeff? Jeff...did he sound like a little dude?"

"I don't know. I mean kinda."

"Must be Jeffrey. Yeah, he's cool. Let him in and tell him to come upstairs to the second level. I'll be outside on the patio" Reece replies, walking outside.

Jeffrey is let in and almost pisses on himself from the thickness of the tension in the air, provided by the three men in the den downstairs. All of whom are twice as big as he. Once upstairs, he walks through the living space and out onto the patio where he finds Reece on the phone with Kim. Shaking his hand, Jeffrey can tell that something is definitely wrong. *Did he find out about the messages? What did I just walk into?* He thinks to himself.

For the next twenty-plus minutes, Liz's classmate fills both her boyfriend and sister in on what he knows. He explains how Liz was earlier in the day and then how quickly her mood changed. A frighteningly confused Kim sits on the phone in silence, trying to better understand everything. Meanwhile, Reece starts to pace the patio. The nervous energy coursing through his veins, manipulates him like a remote control, as he too listens intently.

After Reece shares the scene he walked in on earlier, Jeffrey shakes his head and sighs heavily.

"That's why I told her she should have said something sooner."

"What do you mean?" Kim asks over speakerphone.

Reece stops pacing and looks in Jeffrey's direction. They have never formally met in person but spoke briefly via Skype once. He seems like a good enough guy from what Reece can tell. But in his mind, he could be Dick Cheney in hunter's garb, with a loaded rifle as long as he provides something to help get to the bottom of this burgeoning nightmare.

Jeffrey resumes his explanation. "Earlier this year, Liz told me she got a weird direct message on Twitter. Some guy saying hello, and asking how she'd been. She said she ignored it but he got gradually more aggressive."

"Fuck that mean?" Reece asks with pure rage in his voice.

"Reece, sit down and drop whatever is in your hand," Kim says over the speakerphone. "Jeffrey, please continue."

"Ummm, well, she told me she finally responded. Told him she didn't know who he was. Then she blocked him and made her account private.

"Is that all?"

"No ma'am."

"Don't call me ma'am Jeff. I'm her older sister, not her mother."

"Right, um, sorry. That was that. Then around March, she got a message on Facebook, with a picture of a little girl."

Jeffrey scrolls back through his messenger on Facebook, finds Kim's name on Liz's page and forwards the old message to her that Liz sent to him months ago.

"Kim, I just forwarded the message. Liz sent it to me when she received it."

Now on Facebook, Kim's fingers furiously type in her login information. Clicking on the message icon, she sees one of the pictures Reece forwarded earlier, but locks in on the accompanying message:

Remember her?

Kim looks at the name of the person that sent the message and frowns in thought. No matter how hard she tries, however, nothing clicks in her brain. The picture looks faintly familiar, but she still can't place it. Clicking on the name itself yields zero insight. The account is extra secure from public view.

"Kim, anything?" Reece asks.

"No. Nothing, not yet."

She pulls up the other picture that Reece had sent her already and stares at them both side by side. Just as she prepares to throw her phone in exasperation, she looks over at the framed picture of she and Liz, on the mantle over her fireplace.

Elizabeth, the perpetual optimist. So trusting, so caring, a walking ball of light. *The opposite of me* she thinks. Kim the realist. Often times misidentified as a pessimist. She believes in allowing others to show their true selves before putting her faith and belief into them. *What or who have you gotten yourself involved with?* She asks quietly to herself, looking at her sister's digitally captured countenance.

"Fuck!" she yells suddenly.

Both men snap out of their haze-filled trances at Kim's outburst over the phone.

"Reece, take me off speaker."

Maurice runs over to the cell phone sitting on the table, does as Kim has instructed and puts the phone to his ear. Jeffrey watches, a chill running up his spine as Reece stares at him stoically. As if she is physically there watching this scene play out, Kim tells Reece to stop looking at the man like that and assures him that Jeffrey is who he said he is. A friend, who is genuinely concerned.

Kim proceeds to tell the abridged version of her and Liz's past, to Reece. He already knew that they were adopted as children, but what he didn't know before now, is that they aren't blood sisters. And more importantly, about the tumultuous events that led up to their coming into each other's lives.

Liz's mother, Teresa, a drug addict, was best friends with Kim's mom growing up in St. Roch. A parish in New Orleans' eighth ward. One night after a very bad bender, the *friend* of her dealer approached her in a dope house. Waiting until she seemed to be at her most desperate, to proposition her about squaring her debts...by giving up her daughter. Far too high to be thinking close to clear, she agreed. Liz was taken from a small apartment she lived in with her mother before the sun rose.

The man that abducted Liz, worked for a man known only as *Sergio*.

A supplier of underage girls to the highest bidder throughout Central and South America, Sergio worked the slums of select port cities in the south. Making arrangements with dealers who ran dope houses was one of his primary tactics. It increased the pool he pulled from with minimal risk, due to his gaining access to anyone who copped or used there.

A few days after Liz was taken, Kim's father Darryl, a self-employed maintenance man that serviced all of the major hotel properties in the French Quarter was driving home from work one evening. Seeing a little black girl with a man, who looked distinctly out of place in the close knit neighborhood, he rolled through the next intersection and pulled over to the curb.

Rummaging through the glove box of his old Delta 88, he desperately searched for what he knew was there. Finally putting his hand on a flyer that was passed out at church three weeks prior, he looked it over and felt pretty confident that he was looking at the man described on it. Luckily they were still in view when he looked back over the broad dash of the worn Oldsmobile. He looked on as the pair walked passed a liquor store a block up.

Still, with no real plan, Darryl slowly got out of his car with his mind racing a hundred miles a minute. Opting to not lose sight of them over a nonexistent course of action, when they entered *Nap's* convenience store, he hustled to his trunk and grabbed a socket wrench out of his trunk before heading across the street. About fifty feet from the store, he happened upon a bus stop where a woman and a wall of a man were sitting.

Drawing closer, he found that the man large enough to be a lineman for LSU, was in fact, a massive teenager, due to his acne and baby face. He quickly explained the situation to the woman who turned out to be the man child's mother and offered her and him a ride home if he could borrow her son's imposing size. Thinking about her young daughter at home with her grandmother, she okayed it after making her son promise to be careful repeatedly.

Peeking into the liquor store behind the bus stand, Darryl saw one of the local barbers at the counter, buying lottery tickets. He stepped in, held up the flyer and pointed outside with a look of determination. When the barber looked down and saw the wrench, he ran towards the door with only two of his five purchased scratch-offs. Muscles tensed and nerves on edge, he hit the sidewalk and froze at the size of the teenager. After being told he was back up, he nodded and fell in line.

The threesome walked past the barbershop and into the convenience store. Not seeing the pair at first, the teen tapped Darryl on the shoulder, pointing his attention to the cashier. She apparently had been suspicious ever since the man and young girl entered, keeping her eye on them. She mimicked drinking something and pointed to the back of the store.

Before Darryl could turn in that direction, the man child had headed down one of the aisles toward the refrigerated drinks. Reaching the back of the store, he pretended to be reaching for a soda, when he glanced over and saw the small, poorly dressed child shaking beside the man. Just as he turned

the glass coke bottle he had picked up upside down and held it by the neck, Tony the barber, coughed loudly from three aisles over.

Liz and her captor headed to the front of the store, leaving Tony and the young man looking at each other. The older man shook his head slowly and waved the teen towards the register. Standing by the chips as the little girl walked by, Darryl caught a good look at her large round eyes and a lump formed in his throat. As fear began to grab hold of him, he pictured his daughter, safe, at home with his wife and became enraged at the thought of his baby girl going missing.

"Pardon me sir. Are you and the little lady okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, we're fine, thanks."

The wave of apprehension that rolled across the cashier's face stoked the stranger's sneaking suspicion. He subconsciously shifted his weight to his left foot, turning his body diagonally towards Darryl. Seeing the tense look on the rugged face of the man questioning him caused him to pause slightly. The glint of silver peeking out from under his jacket sleeve sent him into a minor panic. And out of the corner of his eye he could see a large figure, but could not discern if it was friend or foe.

The strange man reached into his inside jacket pocket so fast that Darryl had zero time to blink. As a switchblade left a three inch trail of crimson across his cheek, just below his left eye. The next few moments happened just as abruptly as the one prior, but with much more life-altering consequences.

Two devastating blows, one from a six-four, two hundred eighty-five pound sixteen year old, and a violently blind upward swing of a large socket wrench put the man to sleep. After the police arrived and received statements from all present, they silently agreed on what would transpire next. This was after all, an extremely close knit neighborhood that still clung steadfastly to the ways of that time.

At the station, after what would become the official statement was taken, the police let the barber Tony leave. The two young officers on desk duty that night were tasked with driving the young wall of a teenager and his mother home, while Detective Clementine Landry, the longest tenured officer at the precinct was briefed over the phone and called in to interrogate the suspect.

The detective, upon arriving at the station, shook Darryl's hand with the same powerful grip he'd been known for, for decades.

"The girl?" Detective Landry bellowed in a tone so deep that it seemed to make the old metal desks vibrate against the floor.

"We cleaned her up sir" a younger officer replied. "Got her something to eat, and had Anderson talk to her briefly. Asked her about the discussed arrangement and she was fine by it sir. After she spoke to Mr. Thomas' wife over the phone that is."

The Detective nodded subtly then repeated, "The girl."

Understanding his mistake, the arresting officer went to the nearest office and escorted the young girl to the front of the station.

"Remy, this is Detective Landry. He heard what happened and how brave you were, and wanted to meet you."

Pulling a chair from the wall, he lowered his large frame into it in order to see eye to eye. She held her head down at first until he coaxed her to look up. Once she did, his countenance softened, becoming almost grandfather-like. He reached into his wallet and handed her five crisp one dollar bills and two dollars in quarters.

"Mr. Darryl over there is gonna take good care of you, you hear? I used to work with his uncle a long time ago. And I've known him since he was almost your age. He has a very nice wife who makes the best beignets in the parish. And a daughter pretty close to your age. Now, this'll only be for a few days. But if you don't feel comfortable or the beignets aren't as good as I say, run to the nearest payphone and call me. Okay chère?"

As the man with features carved out of granite and the bear trap grip stood, the young girl hugged him tightly.

"Thank you, Mr. Landry," she said, "I promise I'll be good." Her voice screamed genuine sweetness, mixed with the exhaustion she had to be experiencing from the late hour.

Then she walked over to Darryl, who was finishing up his conversation with his wife on the phone.

"Thank you, Mr. Thomas. I promise I'll be good. I won't be bad or do anything wrong sir."

The sound of pure innocence cut through the soul of every man and woman in the room, save for one. Clementine Landry who had smiled momentarily when the young frail child with the large sad eyes thanked him-- suddenly remembered his purpose for being called in. The steely eyed glare returned instantly as he picked up the phone and dialed three different numbers, having convos that could not have lasted more than fifteen seconds each time.

The younger officers present, had no clue what had just happened with those calls. But a couple of the older staff in the room had an idea. Even Darryl who was not an officer understood what had just transpired. Detective Landry was the current iteration of the *Captain*. The leader of a clandestine group known by a very select few, as the *Black Umbrella*.

Since the early 1940s, this outfit operated in the shadows, righting the wrongs of the most heinous of criminal events in New Orleans. Yet it wasn't until 1951, when an officer by the name of Darryl Thomas Sr. was recruited, that it became a viable force to be reckoned with. For he brought along the police presence which legitimized and strengthened their reach...even if no one knew they existed.

Senior was Darryl's grandfather and namesake. His father Robert, was an officer for the New Orleans Police Department but had no interest in carrying on in his father's footsteps outside of the force. The exact opposite could be said for Senior's second son Patrick, Darryl Jr's uncle. He was not only invited into the group but also was ultimately responsible for recruiting Clementine Landry many moons ago.

Whenever the absolute worst of the worst cases went unsolved, they were never completely swept under the rug down on the Bayou. The elders in every ward knew, however, that if and when someone got away with an unspeakable crime, and that person or *persons* seemed to disappear— somewhere, a *funeral procession* had taken place. This is why as soon as Darryl saw Detective Landry walk in, he knew that the girl's captor only had a few more days at best of God's air to breathe.

Once the detective walked off, Darryl took his cue to head home. When he looked down the young girl had fallen asleep leaned up against the desk that he was standing at. He wrapped his jacket around her and picked her up, carrying her to his car. Fifteen minutes later, the girl stirred when he pulled into his driveway and cut the engine.

As the pair walked up the steps to his home, his wife Constance opened the door with a warm smile, one of their daughter's old robes and a cup of chamomile tea. As Darryl went to introduce the child to his wife, they stepped into the light on the porch and it caused her to drop the robe as she grabbed the door frame to keep from falling. The little girl's eyes were so bold, so striking, so reminiscent of someone she'd known all her life. Her appearance shook the woman to her core, causing her loving husband to reach out to support his wife, dumbfounded by what was happening. Once she assured him that she was fine, she turned her attention to the small child.

By now their daughter Kimberly had bounded into the front room, fueled by a raging curiosity, awakened by her father's car door closing. At first, she was concerned by the way her father was holding her mother. But his features calmed her nerves despite the bandage on his face. When Constance asked the small child where she lived and what her mother's name was, her fears were confirmed. This was Remy, her wayward former best friend Teresa's daughter. She immediately began to cry into his chest at the wave of emotions and thoughts that flew through her mind.

Kimberly stepped forward, took Remy's small hand and ushered her inside. She could see that the little girl could barely keep her eyes open. So she put her arm around her and took her to her room, laying her on the bed and covering her up. She then went and grabbed a pillow and spare blanket from the linen closet and laid on the floor beside her.

Constance and Darryl would not go to sleep at all that night, due to some very intense discussions, prayer and the sharing of true emotions about their family. But before he left for work in the morning, he assured her that they all would be fine and that he would speak to the necessary people to make everything right. Remy subsequently had the best sleep of her young life that night, which was ironic, because she died as soon as she closed her eyes.

Thanks to a number of factors...chief among them being Detective Landry...Remy's life changed forever three weeks after she was temporarily placed with Darryl, Constance, and Kimberly. Constance had a new name picked out for her the very next day, but held it close to the vest until the particulars were taken care of and the inevitable became reality. When she first laid eyes on the girl, she had a bad feeling that her former friend who always dabbled in drugs, had finally reached a point of no return. The call confirming her fears came a few days after Remy's first night with the family.

Clementine came to the house to deliver the news himself and spoke to the small child in a surface level way, that she understood. Again giving her five crisp, one dollar bills and two dollars in quarters, to call him if she didn't like her new living arrangement. Her hug and tearful thank you's, almost breaking his resolve this time.

"Junior, Miss Constance would..."

"Yes," the pair answered in tandem. Cutting off his question before he even got a chance to get it out.

The detective merely nodded as he stood to his feet. "Ça c'est bon! Someone will be in touch." Still holding the child in his arms, he rubbed her back and kissed her on the temple. "You are living and breathing light, chère. You gonna be just fine here?" Placing her on the balls of her bare feet, he rubbed the number seven on her forehead with the pad of his right thumb. Finger combed her hair once and saw himself out.

"So just one of you is adopted. I always thought it was both of you. I mean, not that it matters in any way," Reece says.

"Right. But that's my sister, from the mud. We share the same blood even though we don't share the same blood."

"Kim, I understand. Absolutely zero explanation needed."

Jeffrey who has gone inside is standing near an opposite window when he sees Liz come down the stairs. He can tell that she has been crying at some point, and all-in-all she appears drained. He walks over to her to check on her and notices that she has a tablet in her hand. As he draws nearer to her, he notices that she is shaking slightly. Grabbing the device from her, he looks at the screen and his eyes widen in a cartoonish manner.

"Liz!"

He grabs her by the elbow and forcefully guides her across the room to the patio door.

"Maurice! Maurice!"

Reece abruptly turns to the door, looks at the two of them and then at Jeffrey's outstretched hand. He races over and hugs his fiancée tightly while looking at the message on the tablet.

"THE FUCK!"

Knocking the tablet onto the floor, he pushes Liz over to Jeffrey and runs back inside their shared townhome. Taking the steps two at a time, he runs to his closet and grabs a black aluminum bat, then jumps back down the steps...seemingly an entire flight at a time. Hitting the bottom level, he

snatches his front door open before any of his boys have even realized that he's run by. Derrick, Jay, and Rob all jump up from seated positions and head outside after him.

"Insecure much? This is like taking candy from a baby. Send my girl out here please, so we can leave."

Reece's three friends are behind him in front of the entrance to his house, staring at the stranger in pure disbelief. Derrick immediately notices something familiar about her, but there is so much going through his mind that he can't yet put a finger on it.

Reece, however, sees nothing but red as he gazes furiously at the woman. "Nope, don't see that happening. But you may want to get off my property before I wrap this bat around your head."

"What kind of a man would dare attack a woman? No wonder it was so easy to get to *my girl*."

Derrick, Rob, and Jay all look at each other incessantly, trying to figure out who this woman is that Reece is threatening to blast off on.

As this all takes place outside, Kim's voice can be heard screaming through the phone. "Jeffrey! JEFFREY!!!"

Jeffrey sits Liz down on a nearby chair on the deck and picks up the cell, "Yes, yes ma'am!"

"What's going on? What happened? Where's Reece?"

"Liz got another message from that anonymous person. They are apparently out front. What the hell is going on here Kim?"

"Go find Reece now and tell him not to do anything stupid! I figured out what's going on. Too complicated to explain now. Jeffrey, don't let my friend do anything stupid. Hurry! Give the phone to Liz. GO!"

Jeffrey does as he is told and runs down the steps, unsure of what he will find once there. When he gets to the open door and sees a woman standing on the grass in front of Maurice, his brain locks up. Derrick, Rob, and Jay turn around on guard at Jeffrey's approach. Seeing that it's just him, they relax.

"Maurice, Maurice! Don't do this, please! I just talked to Kim, she said everything is okay. She figured everything out. But she distinctly said, for you not to do anything stupid. Not now!"

Ignoring all of this commotion, the woman begins to call Liz's name repeatedly. From her style of dress and her vocal inflection, it is beyond obvious that she is not from the States. Unfortunately for the others, she is also the only person outside right now who has any clue as to what is going on. Jay steps towards Reece cautiously. Knowing what could happen next if this stranger steps in the wrong direction. Woman or not.

"Reece, listen to Jeff" Jay attempts to reason with him. "If Kim says whatever this is is good, we have to trust her. No need to risk a case just because. Let me get that bat from you. Please!"

The older woman indignantly continues to call for Liz with a smug grin on her face. Then she stops and laughs to herself.

"I'm sorry. Remmm-myyyy," she sings with an accent.

Everyone but Reece, freezes. He instead begins to visually tense up like it is the bottom of the ninth inning in the World Series. In the distance, sirens can be heard approaching. But no one moves until Liz walks through the front door some ten minutes later and in-between Rob and Derrick. The latter grabs her by her arm, but the look she gives him would make M. Night Shyamalan nervous.

"There's my sweet Remy. Long time never seen. At least in person that is," the woman says.

"Babe. Go back inside, please. Everything about this is weird and unsafe. Please." Reece pleads in a tone drenched with confusion and fear.

"Here, this is for you," Liz says, extending the phone to the woman. Ignoring her fiance's pleas.

In response the woman smiles slyly, licking her lips, making sure to graze the side of Liz's hand as she steps forward and takes the phone. Liz wipes her hand off on her shorts and steps back behind Reece, pulling him backward by his shirt. Jay seeing this, assists in pulling them both back a few steps

and stands in front of them both. He then takes the bat from Reece just as the police are coming up the hill to the townhome.

"Hello?" she said into the phone.

"Good afternoon, Esmerelda."

The woman's entire mood shifts suddenly and everyone notices. Three police cars roar around the corner, followed shortly thereafter by three black SUVs and two matching sedans.

Jay extends the bat past Reece and Liz to Derrick. Who passes it back to Rob, who passes it to Jeffrey who in turn, slides it into the front closet right beside the door before easing coolly back into the doorway. The officers jump out of the car with guns drawn before a woman steps out of the second black sedan with an FBI windbreaker on and waves them off. Bracketed on either side of her are a short white woman with fire engine red hair, freckles and a square jaw and an Asian man, with his hair coiffed like Anderson Cooper, wearing a gray t-shirt, black FBI emblazoned vest and dark jeans.

The woman who is clearly the point person on this call, quickly assesses the scene, pointing out the license plate of the car parked in the street to one of the officers.

"Who is this?" the no longer calm nor collected woman asks into the phone.

"Esmerelda Valentino, do you remember a man by the name of Philippe LeCroix? In case you don't, he was one of your chief *inventory specialists* on the gulf about twenty years ago. His replacement after he was captured, Juan Cesar, was released from prison on a possession charge about thirteen months ago. Did you let him breathe freedom a few weeks before you put him on the hunt for Elizabeth?"

The woman is so flustered by the little she has heard thus far, that she cannot respond.

"Let me speed this up for you. You are a god damned paradox, you know that? Your disgusting acts gave me a sister, so I guess I should be grateful. But your ego and greed are what is about to bring all of this down on your head," Kim said venomously.

"You have nothing. Until today, I've never even been seen in the states. I've done nothing wrong here today. These officers have nothing to detain me for. Your posturing is baseless, though you sound like you may have been cute when you were younger. Pity," the woman replies. Arrogantly ignoring the presence of the federal officers, keeping her gaze on Liz the entire time.

"Okay. How's this *Sergio*. Philippe, was captured, but he did not die in prison of listeria. When you heard he was captured, he had already been dead for two weeks. He was captured, tortured and flipped, which led to the arrest of his replacement Juan a couple of months after. Now Juan was good, which is why we could only get him on simple possession initially. However, while in prison he wasn't able to keep up with the finest practices in covered electronic surveillance."

The woman's mouth drops open and she appears to stagger briefly.

"Your business didn't just slow down over the last fifteen plus years due to the market *Sergio*. The FBI just quietly continued chipping away at all levels of it. All thanks to Philippe and Juan. And for your information, Mr. LeCroix was murdered, quartered and dumped into the Florida everglades all those years ago. *Pauvre ti bête* (poor little thing). And Juan was picked up in Laredo, Texas less than an hour ago. Geotagging and cookies, something that would not have been an issue, had you acted more like the woman you are and not the impulsive man, you framed yourself as for decades ago. After seeing some pictures of what happened to Philippe, he handed over all of his records and travel logs, along with all correspondence between you and him regarding my sister, since his release last year. Seems as though Juan was a touch paranoid when it came to working for you of late."

"I...I don't understand" the flustered woman replies.

"You literally fucked yourself, bitch. All because of your need to get your hands on the one that got away. Quite frankly, I'm disgusted by your lack of self-control. We as women are supposed to be better than this."

"I..."

“Say hello to Agent Schweinke for me. I needed this extra time to comb through the communications and financials Juan provided. Looking at this ledger, they’re going to be able to pick and choose where to try you. By the way, I just hit send. The agents are probably approaching you now. How is it you picked both the right and wrong girl to snatch then stalk, after all this time?”

“Come with us Ms. Valentino,” one of the two FBI vested agents order while cuffing her and leading her to one of the SUVs.

“Ms. Thomas, good afternoon, I’m Agent Schweinke,” the female agent says as she steps forward. “I was read-in on a case involving the woman we just took away. I will spare you the details, but I can say definitively that you will never be contacted by this person ever again.”

“Thank you Agent Schweinke,” Reece replied.

“I’m sorry, dumb question. But would you happen to be related to ADA Thomas? I think she works out of Charlotte now,” the agent asks Liz.

“Yes ma’am. She’s my sister.”

“Hmmm...I see. We worked together a couple of times when we were both in Jacksonville. She’s incredibly sharp and not the kind of person you want on your bad side. Let her know we’ll take care of everything from here.”

The agent shakes both Liz and Reece’s hands and walks off to one of the waiting black sedans. Once she gets in, they all pull off from the curb and drive away.

“So what was that all abo--?” Rob starts to ask but is immediately cut off.

“Nope! We’ll find out if we’re meant to” Jeffrey replies.

“What he said,” Derrick agrees, tapping his boy on the shoulder on his way back into the house.

Jeffrey walks up to Reece and shakes his hand, then waves at Liz. Before he can walk away she pulls him in and hugs him extra tight. He looks the slightest bit unnerved by the display in front of Reece but has his concerns soothed by the man’s grin. The man of the house thanks him profusely for coming over when he did, and with the information that he had. In his eyes, Jeffrey is welcome whenever he wants to stop by after today. But at this very moment, he can’t do anything but think about holding Liz until she goes to sleep, wakes up and goes to sleep again.

Liz apologizes for his missing the game today and all he can do is shake his head. “Baby, please don’t apologize for being you, ever again.”