

Haunted  
Ruby G.

For twelve years, Hunter had lived a normal life. As normal of a life a single father could. He worked three jobs in order to pay for his son's schooling as well as keep food on the table. There were days in the beginning where Hunter didn't eat, but as long as his son had food he was alright. Once Noah was old enough, he immediately went out and got a job of his own. They were able to get by. Both Noah and Hunter agreed on the importance of academics. But when it came to college decisions, they couldn't seem to agree.

"I'm going to community college, dad," Noah said.

"Noah I know this is your decision but you were accepted into every single college you applied to. Including Oxford and Kyoto!"

"I only applied there because you wanted me to."

"You've always wanted to go out of the states," Hunter said. "Why would you choose to go to a community college when you could go anywhere you wanted to?"

"I want to go to the community college."

"But why?"

"You know exactly why dad!" Noah said, his voice unintentionally rising. "I want to stay for the same reason you want me to go!"

There was a heavy silence between them. Despite himself, Hunter's hand went to the back of his neck, the memory of that horrific day flashed before his very eyes.

~

He had worked in a construction company for five years. It was not the job he had always wanted but it was the job he needed. It put food on the table and that was all he could hope for. On the weekdays he got up in the morning, ate breakfast, read the newspaper, and then took the bus to work from four a.m. to ten p.m.. Once his shift was done, he took the bus home, had

dinner, and watched an episode of The Office, then went to bed. The next day he'd do it all over again.

He waited patiently at the bus station, people-watching to pass the time. People had always interested him, the way they interacted with the world as well as each other was fascinating. He always wanted to study people for a living, and use those skills to keep them safe.

Hunter dreamed of becoming a detective growing up. He loved anything with police officers in it. He thought they were the real superheroes. When cops started getting a bad reputation in the media he aspired to be the cop that ended them. Show the world that there are still good police officers out there. He wanted to prove to the world that he wouldn't end up in jail like his father, but be putting people like him in jail. But, life had other plans.

The city bus pulling up was old and rickety, nearly thirty years old. As it neared the stop, the exhaust pipe spurted out fumes with a loud pop.

~

Ten years before, Hunter had stood behind James, his rival, as James had pointed a loaded gun toward the Axel's carbon monoxide-filled house.

"James..." Hunter had said. "James put the gun down."

James stood stoically with his arm outstretched. He slowly shook his head. "Get out of here, Hunter."

"Think about what you're doing."

"I have thought about it, thoroughly. He's abused Marcia her whole life, the scars, the bruises. You can't tell me you don't see them on her!"

Hunter clenched his jaw. "Of course I do."

"Then you should want him dead just as much as I do." James stared through the window at a wasted Victor on the couch. His gloved finger pulled back the safety.

Hunter took a step toward him. “That doesn’t make it okay to take matters into your own hands. Let the authorities...”

James turned around and pointed the gun at Hunter, fiery anger blazing in his eyes. Hunter’s heart raced as he put his hand up. “The authorities have done nothing but keep her trapped under his thumb!” James shouted. “You and your precious cops can go screw yourselves! As for me...”

He turned back toward the house, his hand shaking.

“I’m going to do what needs to be done.”

James had pulled the trigger. There was a pop, then a loud bang, and the world had exploded in a bright white light.

~

Hunter got on the bus and rode it to the stop nearest his home. He made it to his doorstep fifteen minutes later. He opened the door and hung his coat up on the rack as he closed the door behind him. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, work was eating him alive. He was always exhausted and it didn’t pay all that well. It was hard to make ends meet on his salary, but he was thankful he was even able to get a job. He leaned on the door, his head throbbed uncontrollably. He went over to the vanity in the hallway and opened the drawer, looking for aspirin. Inside it lay several miscellaneous items. He found the aspirin in the back, he wasn’t sure how long it had been there but he figured it was better than nothing. As he grabbed the bottle he noticed closer to the back, under a pile of paperclips was a dust covered photo of his mother.

~

Hunter’s eyes had slowly fluttered open. His whole body had ached as he regained consciousness. A sharp pain had shot through his chest as he tried to breathe, at least two ribs were broken. His swollen eyes scanned his surroundings. White walls, separating curtain, IV bag and a full body picture of an X-Ray. After a moment, everything that had happened came rushing back to him.

The gun

The explosion

James

*James*

Hunter tried to get up when he felt resistance on his wrists. He looked and saw he was handcuffed to the bed.

“Wh-What?”

The doctor walked into the room, he was followed by a policeman and a detective.

“You’re finally awake Mr. Jones.”

Hunter looked between the three men frantically. He pulled against the restraints. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“You are at the hospital. There was an incident, and you were badly injured,” the doctor said. He looked down at Hunter’s wrists. “The restraints are...precaution.”

“Precaution...for what?”

“Well you see-”

“You are the prime suspect of Victor Axel’s apparent murder,” the police officer said.

Hunter’s heart skipped a beat. “*What?!*”

“Victor Axel was found dead in the rubble of his destroyed home. His body was mangled and charred. Around the scene forensics found a remnant of carbon monoxide in the air.” The officer clasped his hands behind his back. “Along with your unconscious body, as well as Mr. James Rentas gasping for breath a few feet away from the crime scene. Rentas gave his testimony a few hours ago once he was stabilized. He said that you were the one who caused the explosion.”

Hunter's pupils dilated and his jaw went slack.

"N-no! That's not true! It wasn't me, it was him! He's the one who killed Victor, I was trying to stop him!"

"The evidence says otherwise." The Detective opened a file. "Records show that you have been dating miss Marcia Axel, the deceased's daughter, for the past year and-a-half. Is this correct?"

"Yes," Hunter said.

"And records show that the deceased had a history of abusing miss Axel. Now, a devoted boyfriend such as you would probably not take kindly to his significant other being hurt I presume?"

"Of course not! But I wouldn't kill him, that'd make me worse than him!"

"Indeed it would," The detective said. "Perhaps as bad as your father once was?"

Hunter went silent.

"Your father, Carter Jones, was convicted of brutally murdering his abusive father twelve years ago. Now I'm not the one for stereotypes, but 'The apple tends not to fall far from the tree.'"

"I'm not my father!" Hunter hoarsely yelled, launching himself forward in anger against his restraints. "I didn't do this! It was James!"

"James. The partially-deaf boy who has never been exposed to violence in his life?"

"Yes!"

"Then why did the gun we found at the scene have your prints on it?"

Hunter's breath hitched. "What? That's not possible...I didn't touch-"

Realization hit him. James was wearing gloves. James didn't get knocked unconscious by the blast. James was 'gasping for breath' but he could move...

The world began to slow as everything began to make sense in Hunter's mind.

He was snapped out of his trance as a middle aged woman walked into the room with a woman in her twenties right behind her.

"Mom! Marcia! I didn't do it, it was James!"

Marcia stormed up to him and smacked him hard in the face.

"How could you do this! No matter what he did, he was my father, that was my home. And you took that away from me."

"Marcia I-"

She cut him off by spitting in his face, then stormed out of the room. Hunter's gaze met his mother's. Her eyes were weary and heartbroken. Hunter's heart began to sink at the sight, hope slowly fading the longer he held her gaze.

"Mom... Mom please...you have to believe me. I didn't do this. I'm not like him."

Tears welled up in his mother's eyes as she shook her head. "I thought you were better than this...better than him...." A single tear fell down her cheek.

"But I was wrong."

As she turned and walked away, the detective closed the file.

"Hunter Jones, you are charged with the first Degree murder of Victor Axel."

~

Hunter shut the drawer and sighed. He contemplated calling his mom everyday, yet he never did. He went over to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. His muscles ached, and his

head spun. He took a deep breath as he lowered his gaze. From the corner of his eye, he saw the scars that marked his forearm peeking out from under his sleeve.

~

Six years before, Hunter had stared up at the ceiling above his bed on a stormy evening. The cracks in the plaster were barely visible in the darkness of the night. All he wanted was a few hours of sleep, but his restless thoughts kept him awake. Words that others said about him had plagued his mind.

*That poor boy.*

*Did you hear what he did?*

*He's a Monster.*

*Crazy.*

*Just like his father.*

Knowing his hope for rest was unfruitful, he got up from his bed and walked into the kitchen. It was the middle of the night, the only light came from the window. He was alone. His thoughts hadn't ceased since the incident, they were a nuisance but he was always able to push them to the back of his mind. This time however, they wouldn't go away. No matter how hard he tried, they kept coming back, starting as whispers, then screaming endlessly. The questions and gossip about him repeating itself, pounding against his skull.

*Did you hear what happened?*

*It couldn't have been him could it?*

*Who else could it've been?*

*Certainly not James.*

*Never James.*

He grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it up with water from the sink. His heart began racing as his thoughts grew louder and louder, they were no longer just talking, they were screaming. Tears fell down his face, his body shook violently as the jeers and mocking statements continuously flooded his mind.

*Look who it is!*

*It's the psycho!*

*He'll kill you if you get too close!*

*Hahahahahahaha!*

Hunter put the glass to his lips. The water jumping out of the cup and onto the floor. His throat was sore from holding back the continuous scream and the tears that welled up inside his chest night and day for the past three weeks. But he couldn't anymore. The moment the water touched his lips, the memories of his family believing a lie came crashing back like an uncontrolled storm.

*How could you do this?*

*We thought you'd be better!*

*Better than him!*

*But we were wrong.*

*We were wrong.*

A blood-curdling scream escaped Hunter's lips as he slammed the glass down on the counter, accidentally shattering it on impact. A large shard lodged itself deep into his forearm. Hunter let

out a cry of pain as he instinctively pulled it out, accidentally nicking an artery. The wound bled uncontrollably.

His legs gave out from under him and he fell on the ground with a thud. Silent tears fell from Hunter's eyes as he stared down at his bleeding arm. No longer having the strength to even help himself, he watched the crimson blood flow from his arm in a continuous stream and pool onto the floor.

After several minutes, Hunter's body began to feel numb. He didn't have the strength or the will to even stand up. He just sat there on the cold tile floor, watching as his life slowly seeped away.

His vision began to blur. He was no longer able to feel anything at all. For the first time in weeks, he felt at peace.

He closed his eyes and weakly smiled.

~

Hunter rolled down his sleeve. How things had changed. When he woke up next after his near death experience, he found out he was a free man. James had confessed after years of hiding. His mother, though she rarely called, acknowledged him as her son again, and after a few months, Marcia came back and apologized, asking to start over. Hunter agreed, and over the years there have been many times where Hunter regretted that decision. He should have moved on, instead of holding on to his life before. But he didn't, and he paid for that almost every day. Sometimes, he wondered how he made it through each day, how he kept going. He knew that peace the absence of life brought, and even if it was only a few minutes before they resuscitated him, he had felt the sweet serendipity of death.

The thought of embracing it once more came across his mind occasionally, but it was the pitter patter of small feet running toward him as he got home each day that kept him from taking action on those thoughts.

"Daddy!" Noah said as he ran toward him.

Hunter scooped him up in his arms, a tired but joyful smile on his face. This little boy, was his reason to live.

“How’s my little trooper?” Hunter asked.

“Good!” Noah said.

“Held down the fort while I was gone?”

“Yes Sir!”

Hunter laughed as he set his son down on the ground. “How’s your mother?”

Noah’s face softened slightly. “The usual, she’s in her study.” He clasped his little hands together. “She’s in a really bad mood today.”

Hunter rustled Noah’s hair. “I’ll go talk to her. You go on and play outside, I’ll join you in a bit.”

“Okay!” Noah saluted his father before running toward the door.

Hunter watched as his son ran off, making sure he was outside before heading upstairs. If Marcia was as upset as Noah said she was, Hunter didn’t want him witnessing what he knew was about to take place.

He knocked on the door of her study. “Marcia?”

“What do you want?” She said through the door.

Hunter sighed. “Just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“I’m fine.”

“Can I come in?”

“I can’t stop you.”

Hunter opened the door and walked in on Marcia typing away on her computer. One hand on the keyboard, the other hand on her swelling stomach.

“How was your day?” Hunter asked.

“Normal day, nothing to report.”

Hunter leaned on the doorframe. “Noah said you were upset.”

“Of course he did,” Marcia said.

Hunter was getting tired of this, he cut to the chase. “What’s the matter?”

“You know exactly what’s the matter,” Marcia said, standing up and turning toward him. “The bills are piling up, Noah’s going to start elementary school soon and the house is on the brink of foreclosure. And you’re barely bringing in any money!”

“I can’t help that they pay me below minimum wage,” Hunter said. “At least I’m getting something.”

“You need to be looking for another one.”

“You don’t think I’ve tried?” Hunter said, straightening his posture. “It’s not my fault *your* best friend decided to frame me for a crime I didn’t commit and now no one will hire me because of it.”

“Do not bring James into this.”

“I won’t bring him into it if you get off my back over something I can’t control.”

“What the hell are we going to do!” Marcia shouted. “We’ve got a six-year-old to take care of and another on the way! You need to pick up your slack.”

Hunter’s gaze fell to the floor, his lips pursed. “If you didn’t go paying people to sleep with you we wouldn’t be in this situation right now,” Hunter mumbled under his breath.

“Excuse me?” Marcia said.

“I saw the receipts. Next time you go spend money on sex, pay in cash. I also know the baby you’re carrying isn’t mine.”

Marcia’s cheeks went beet red. She shoved him back. “You went through my stuff?!”

“It’s our shared bank account.”

“How dare you!” She hit him, over and over, in the chest, in the shoulder. She hit him hard in her fit of rage.

“Leave Daddy alone!” Noah yelled. He ran up to Marcia and pushed her in an effort to make her stop.

Hunter’s eyes widened at the sight of his son. “Noah what are you doing in here?!”

“Leave Daddy alone!” Noah yelled again, ignoring Hunter’s question.

Marcia’s gaze shot toward Noah, eyes blazing with fury. “Did you just push me?”

She backhanded Noah, the sound of her hand connecting with his little face reverberating across the room. “Don’t you ever push your mother!”

“Marcia, Stop!” Hunter yelled reaching out to his wife as she stormed closer to their six-year old son.

Noah backed into the corner, tears in his eyes, his demeanor completely changed. “I’m sorry Mama... I didn’t mean it.”

“Yes you did,” Marcia said. “Own up to your faults like a man! Unlike your father.”

“He did nothing wrong,” Hunter said. “Marcia you need to stop this, now!”

“Momma please!” Noah sobbed. “Don’t hurt me again, not again!”

Hunter’s eyebrows furrowed. He turned toward Marcia.

“...Again?” Hunter grabbed her arm. “Marcia, have you hit him before?!”

“On occasion,” Marcia said as she yanked her arm from his grasp and continued toward her son, her anger rising with each step she took. “And it looks like I’m going to have to do it again.”

Hunter watched, aghast, as Marcia raised her hand and hit Noah hard once more in the face.

~

Hunter was eight when he had felt the sting of his grandfather Joseph’s hand connecting with his face. He felt the drops of blood dripping down his broken nose. Hunter had accidentally dropped Grandpa’s favorite mug, shattering it on the hard tile floor. This was not the first time Grandpa had hurt him, but it was the first time Hunter’s dad, Carter, was there to see it.

“Dad, what did you do?!” Carter yelled.

“You need to teach your son to be more careful, and less of a clutz! He’s turning into his mother,” Joseph said, scowling at him.

“You broke his nose!” Carter said.

“Should’ve broken some other things too!”

Joseph stomped toward Hunter, cracking his knuckles. “Maybe I still might... it’ll teach him to be more of a man.”

Hunter recoiled as he saw his grandfather’s fist wind up for another swing, when there was suddenly a loud sickening crack that resonated across the room. Joseph fell face forward, blood seeping out from the back of his head onto the floor. As his body collapsed, Carter stood over him, a metal lamp in his hand and a ferocious look in his eyes.

*“Don’t touch my son!”*

~

Hunter watched as Marcia’s hand raised up once more, this time in a fist. Mid swing, Hunter grabbed her wrist tightly, a ferocious look in his eyes.

*“Don’t touch my son.”*

Hunter shoved Marcia. She landed on the ground with a thud. Her hand moved to her stomach protectively, her eyes wide in shock at what her husband had just done.

Hunter picked Noah up. “You’re gonna be okay. We’re getting out of here.”

“Don’t think about it Hunter!” Marcia yelled, standing up. “Don’t you dare walk out that door! Hunter Jones, if you step out that door, I will find you and I will kill you one day!” She threw a vase from the table at him. “I swear it!”

Hunter shielded Noah from the vase. The vase shattered on impact, cutting deep into Hunter’s back and neck. Despite her threats, with Noah’s arms wrapped tightly around him, Hunter left, and never looked back.

~

Now, Hunter stared at his dutiful son as Noah sat down at the kitchen table and buried his face in his hands.

Hunter slowly walked toward him and put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “She can’t hurt you in Japan or Europe. You’ll be safe there. Don’t let me stop you from doing the great things I know you’re bound to do.”

Noah shook his head. “I’m not leaving you here alone. I won’t do it. If she comes knocking on this door and I’m not here...”

“I’ll be okay, son.”

Tears welled up in Noah's eyes. Hunter pulled his son into an embrace, letting him cry on his shoulder.

"You're all I have Dad...I can't lose you."

There was a harsh knock at the door.

Noah and Hunter froze. They stayed silent for several moments as the pounding resumed.

Noah stared up at his father with fear in his eyes, as if he was a little boy once again. Hunter grabbed his son's arms reassuringly and gave him a small nod. Noah headed toward the door but Hunter held him back.

"Let me."

Hunter walked to the door, and as the pounding continued, Hunter slowly grabbed the knob and opened the door.

The light shone in Hunter's eyes. For a moment all he could see was a silhouette of a person with a gun in their hip holster. His heart skipped a beat, until he heard the deep voice of a man.

"Are you Hunter Jones?"

"Hunter held up his hand to shield his eyes from the sun's rays. "Yes...I am."

"I have news that your wife, Marcia Axel-Jones has passed away last week from a drug overdose. We were told to contact family and you and your son are the only living relatives she had left."

Hunter's jaw went slack. "She's...dead?"

"We are very sorry for your loss. We will get in contact with you at a later date as to how to proceed with the burial procedure."

"Th-thank you."

The cop nodded and went on his way as Hunter closed the door behind him. He turned around and saw a wide-eyed Noah staring back at him.

“She’s...gone?”

Hunter took a sharp intake of breath. “She’s gone.”

The world stood incredibly still for one moment, before they both collapsed into each other’s arms sobbing. Their tears were tears of pain, as well as relief. Noah had lost his mother, and Hunter the only woman he ever truly loved. Yet at the same time, they felt a weight lifted off their shoulders. Their past could haunt them no longer.

~

Three months later, Hunter and Noah flew to California to move Noah into his dorm room at Stanford University.

“So...” Hunter said picking up a box of knick-knacks from the taxi. “You wanted to go to community college huh?”

Noah rolled his eyes then reached for the box. Hunter pulled away. “No no, I can take it. I might be aging, but I haven’t lost all function in my arms just yet.”

Noah laughed. “Alright, but don’t expect me to come running after your ragdolling body when you fall down those seven flights of stairs.”

“Pfft, I’m hard-headed not a fool. I’m taking the elevator.”

“Smart man.”

They looked at each other with bright smiles on their faces as they moved him into his dorm room. Once they set up his room they took a moment to look at their finished work. Hunter looked on in pride at their job well-done.

“Well son, this is your home now.”

Noah shook his head. "It's where I'll be staying for awhile, but it'll never be home. My home's with you."

Hunter wrapped his arm around his son's shoulders. "I'm so proud of you, Noah. I know you're gonna love it here."

At that moment two girls walked passed the open door, talking amongst themselves. Hunter watched as Noah's eyes followed the two girls as they passed. Hunter grinned and tightened his embrace. "You're gonna really love it here."

As they said their goodbyes and Hunter headed back to the airport, he turned around one last time to look at the college and smiled. He was ecstatic for his son's future, as well as the one he himself had ahead of him.