

h17 excerpt

By Sarah Woodruff Carter

“Nope, nope. Not thinking about death today. Not gonna.”

Sal went back over to the bed and plopped down next to the guitar. His fingers ached on instinct. He had changed his mind. The B minor A minor E minor E minor could wait. He should have gone with Wally. He was bored out of his mind, and the thought process that kept heading towards death was not the pleasant alternative. Speaking of which, Cal had been awfully quiet recently.

Sal sat up. Yeah. He has been really quiet recently, hadn't he? No Mr. Hyde I-am-the-darkness-that-sleeps-inside-of-you kind of stuff. Seemed like Cal had given up, honestly. Maybe he just thought that Sal wasn't a fun toy anymore and had moved on to absolutely traumatize someone else. Good riddance to bad trash. It would be amazing to never see hide nor hair of him ever again.

What was it Maxie always said? “Dramatic irony dictates whatever?” To not say anything, lest the opposite happen, or something all eloquent like that. Classic Maxie. What time period was she even from, anyway? She was always talking about how much older she was. Scoff. Maxie.

On second or third thought, he really should have gone down.

So why not?

He swung his feet off the bed and jumped off, exiting his room. He looked out into the living room. One of Maxie's odd volumes was lying bookmarked and full of post-it notes on the couch. Sal turned it over so he could see the cover. *Invitation to a Beheading*, by some Russian guy who's name

looked like someone had taken a keyboard and thrown it down a flight of stairs. He was probably one of those existentialism guys she's always reading.

Sal walked out of the room, closing and locking the door behind him, checking to make sure it really was locked and not doing that thing where you didn't turn it far enough so it looks like it's locked but it really isn't. He went in the direction of the stairs. He wasn't really in an elevator mood. He went down to floor G, and then F, and then E, and then the elevator seemed like a good idea after all.

He walked in, and the doors closed behind him. Pressing the button to go to the ground floor, Sal was reminded of that night that seemed so long ago in the alleyway with Cal. The beginning of a bloody era that had ended, hopefully. Maybe Cal was still hanging around there somewhere, and that's why all the thoughts kept heading in that direction. Or maybe it was the depression. He didn't really know. The elevator had stopped, along with that line of thought.

He walked out, and was greeted by noises of happy conversation and laughter down the hallway of the floor. Loud noises. It was very rare to hear loud noises with Spencer around, although he couldn't be everywhere at once and laughing isn't illegal. A new tenant had probably arrived and didn't know about the new changes. Poor soul. They were probably going to incur the Wrath Of Spencer.

As Sal got closer, he realized that there were three voices, two of which were very familiar. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but it wasn't in a muted way, more like when someone's speaking a language that you've never heard before and your brain keeps trying to pull syllables and words out of it that don't belong. Two of them were speaking in a softer, more flowing tone, while the

other's tone was more harsh. He recognized Wally as one of the soft speakers and Maxie as the harsh one, but he didn't know the third.

And then he turned the corner and saw Wally being hug-lifted by a strange man who was grinning like a kid during Christmas while Maxie seemed to be trying to make him stop, although no one could be sure. The new man was the one who was laughing, speaking the odd language with a full voice. Wally was also laughing and talking happily, a rare sight. Maxie was also talking to them, although she seemed to be disapproving of the interaction that was happening.

The odd man put Wally down and turned to Maxie, and the three of them started having a conversation. It was an odd, seemingly disjointed conversation, because there would always be a distinct pause between Maxie speaking and Wally or the man replying. Sal walked up to the three of them.

"Hon. Hon, I can't understand a thing with that dialect of yours", the odd man said, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Funny, I can understand yours easily enough-" Maxie noticed Sal out of the corner of her eye and stopped talking. Wally turned around and went over to Sal.

"So you did decide to come down!! Will was wondering when you were gonna turn up." He gestured towards the odd man who almost ran over to where Sal was standing.

"You must be the Sal I've heard so much about!! It's amazing to finally meet you!"

"Uh-"

"Granny just *loved* you, said you were one of her favorite tenants. Said you were a,' here he inserted a word from that language, "which is lovely, just lovely, and-*oh no I haven't introduced myself yet!!*" He thrust out his right hand.

“I’m William Themble, pleased as the metaphorical punch to meet ya!!”

“I’d introduce myself too, but I think you already know me.” Sal reached out and shook Will’s hand.

The instant their hands touched, there was a zap.

“Ack!”, said Sal, who jumped back a little. He felt the lingering pain in his palm.

“Sorry about that! I guess I’m more staticy than I thought, eheheh. I am really sorry, though.”

“Dude, it’s fine. It was just a bit of static electricity.”

It was not just a bit of static electricity. It is never just a bit of static electricity. An experienced person of those types knows this. It is never just a bit of static electricity. Never.

“Hey, so, Maxie, is this guy new?”

“Apparently, he’s our new landlord.”

There was an odd pause.

“But isn’t Spencer-”

“Yes, the theory of the hour is that he and Will here are co-landlords. Don’t look at me like that, Sal, I wasn’t the one who came up with it.” She started to walk further down the hallway and everyone followed.

“Couldn’t he be lying though?”

“Spencer doesn’t lie.”

“But couldn’t-” Maxie stopped suddenly and turned around to face Sal.

“Spencer. Doesn’t. Lie.”